

Draupadi through the Eyes of Revisionist Writers: A Study

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ABSTRACT

Veda Vyāsais a milestone creator of thrilling themes, interesting plots, variety of characters, appropriate atmosphere, epigrammatic dialogues, supernatural style, appealing appearances, lucid lifestyle etc. in his well-versed epic the *Mahābhārata*. As a male writer and poet, Veda Vyāsa could not empathize with the anguishes of any of the woman characters in his creation and he is also unable to touch the sentiments of female characters, especially Yajnaseni. He has portrayed vast scenarios of illogical stories and painted them with unheard painful voices of female characters. There is no doubt that the great epic *Mahābhārata* has been written from spiritual perspective and to maintain the spiritual wisdom in the society, but he has ignored the feelings of a woman. Vyāsa has donated a very prosperous asset to Indian mythology that, day by day, is thriving with great interest through revisionist works. The attraction of many great writers for this mythological richness, presents them with lots of resources to create their own world of views and opinions.

The purport of this paper is to set a paradigm of feminist attitude towards Pāṇchālī, also known as Yajnaseni or Draupadi, the prominent heroine of the epic *Mahābhārata* through the revisionist texts. These modern revisionist writers have expressed their own feelings and perceptions of feminism, suffocation and anger through Draupadi in their works.

The revisionist writers have created a very profound feminist perspective in their works. This paper is based on the following revisionist works—*Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Stri: Feminine Power in the Mahābhārata* by Kevin McGrath, and *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* by Devdutt Pattanaik.

Keywords: Draupadi, *Mahābhārata*, identity, mythology, Dwāparyug, Pāṇdavas, feminism

It said that the epic *Mahābhārata*, was written when the *DwāparYug*(epoch) was on its lame-duck. Actually, the epic *Mahābhārata* is full of incidents and stories of excitement and enthusiasm, anguishes and torments, harassments and humiliations, frustrations and depressions, revenges and blessings, curses and boons, ideals and sanctimony, dreads and deeds, greed and sacrifice, lies and truth, righteous and unrighteous, cruelty and amnesty, lust and love etc. Sage Vyāsa has openly discussed about the human nature, political behavior, social attitudes, moral values, spiritual status, economic conditions, and supernatural conditions of the era. Each character has its own fate and foundation, ups and downs, qualities and peccadillo, journey of life, and especially, birth and death. But some characters have faced only torture – either mentally, physically, or both –from birth till death. Draupadi’s character is the one of them.

Revisionist writers like Pratibha Ray, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane and many more writers have tendered their voice and speech to the unvoiced and unheard characters of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*. Pratibha Ray has expressed Draupadi’s sensuous sentiments, womanly feelings, affection, hearty happiness, secret suffocation, and extensive wounds in her famous feminist book, *Yajnaseni*. Pratibha Ray has portrayed her character from every corner, every aspect of her life. Her Draupadi is as natural a human, as air in the atmosphere. She points out all the gloom and inner insult of Draupadi in a very obvious manner. From the very beginning Draupadi expresses herself, “What agonies did I not suffer for preserving dharma?” (Ray 2)

Draupadi was a supernatural girl because she had a supernatural birth from sacrificial fire, yajna performed by Drupada – King of *Pāñchāla*. She was an obedient daughter of an eminent King Drupada; very caring sister of a great warrior Dhrishtadyumna; obedient and faithful wife of five distinguished strongmen and warriors of their own epoch, the Pāndavas; mother of five impregnable sons; and a devoted friend of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The destiny of Yajnaseni is created by the great sage Veda Vyāsa, not by the hands of Supreme God. According to Vyāsa, Draupadi’s birth was for a reason – to set the *Dharma* (righteousness) over *Adharma* (unrighteousness) in the society, or for that era.

But she is the scapegoat of patriarchal society and the male oriented rules and regulations. From the times of *Rāmāyana* or *Mahābhārata*, the glimpses of patriarchal society are very clear. Some revisionists are happy with a healthy relationship between daughter (Draupadi) and her father (Drupada), but some have their different opinion for the gender

biased temperament of a father at that time. In this context, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes how Draupadi feels for her father –

“I didn’t forget that hesitation, even though the years that followed King Drupad was careful to fulfill his fatherly duty and provide me with everything he believed a princess should have. Sometimes, when I pressed him, he even allowed me privileges he kept from his other daughters. In his own harsh and obsessive way, he was generous, may be even indulgent. But I couldn’t forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn’t trust him completely.” (Divakaruni 6)

To relate this theme, a very well-known psychoanalyst and a great author on Indian culture, Sudhir Kakar has penned in his very popular book *The Inner World* –

“Where and when tradition governs, an Indian woman does not stand alone; her identity is wholly defined by her relationships to others. For although in most societies, a woman (more than a man) defines herself in relation and connection to other intimate people, this is singularly true of Indian women. The dominant psycho-social realities of her life can be condensed into three stages:

First, she is a daughter to her parents.

Second, she is a wife to her husband (and daughter-in-law to his parents).

Third, she is mother to her sons (and daughters).” (Kakar 66)

Draupadi is an unconventional female character with extraordinary mind and beauty and all feminine attitudes. As eulogized by Pratibha Ray, Draupadi was the proprietress of ‘Dark beauty, *Shyama!*’ ... ‘like a blue-coloured gem – Yajnaseni! Thick hair like the waves of the ocean, and large, entrancing blue lotus-like eyes radiant with intelligence! The lotus-fragrance of the body deluded even bees.’ The poets of King Drupada’s court were also mesmerized with her beauty and expressed their views for her – ‘Krishnaa is herself her own simile’! (Ray 7)

But her rotten luck was waiting after her *Swaymvar* through the words of Kunti (Pāndava’s mother), who advised them, knowingly or unknowingly, to share the alms (Draupadi) among themselves; God knows why, but after knowing the truth she didn’t change her words and she ordered her sons to keep her words and dignity in the society. It was a flinty trick of Kunti to keep her sons united and she didn’t care about Draupadi and her feelings. As Irawati Karve writes in her book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, “the eyes of the five brothers were fastened on her with unconcealed desire, which did not escape the shrewd

observation of Kunti.” (Karve78) So much so, that King Drupada (Draupadi’s father) was also not ready to accept that his daughter would marry with five brothers. Here, Yudhishtir, the eldest brother, exposes his inner knowledge saying that nothing is wrong in the polyandry system and that Draupadi should follow the words of his mother. C. Rajagopalachari writes in his work on *Mahabharata*, “How unrighteous! How did this idea get into your head, this immoral idea that goes against the traditional usage? But Yudhishtir answered: “O King, ...in a time of great peril we vowed that we would share all things in common and we cannot break that pledge. Our mother has commanded us so,” (73) The cruelty of man-made society is that no one gave the respect and honour to Draupadi that she needed to decide her own fate and life: if it was really her *Swaymvar*?

Well, she was married to the five Pāndavas, but she loved only Arjun from the core of her heart. Most of the prominent female characters of Indian epics, are full of suffocations and humiliations, and most of the sufferings have started after their marriage; Draupadi is the most ill-treated female character among them, especially after marriage, her fate lugs her into the hellish circumstances. The responsible delinquents to force her in this hellish life are Kunti (her mother-in-law), Yudhishtir (her eldest husband) and definitely Arjun (the third Pāndava who won her in the *Swaymvar*). Devdutt Pattanaik writes in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata*, “She (Kunti) insists they marry the same woman because she fears if Draupadi marries only Arjuna, sexual jealousy will cause a rift between the brothers.” (92)

Draupadi married first to Yudhishtir without any feeling and desire. Here, Ray expressed her views through Draupadi about her discussion with Yudhishtir –

“In a calm and soft voice, he said – ‘I hope there is no sorrow in your mind, daughter of Drupad? In a fashion you have been forced into this marriage. Do you think ill of me? Are you depressed?’ With bowed head I thought – ‘Why this question now? Even if I am depressed, what can be done about it?’” (69)

Yudhishtir further expressed his thoughts – “Who does not desire You? And he states his fear also saying, “but it is not easy to satisfy all five of us.” He was fond of playing dice-game and accepts this weakness in front of Draupadi, “I can restrain myself in every sphere except dicing” (Ray 70) though he knew that the dice-game is the source of destruction in anybody’s life.

Yudhishtir was the master of righteousness; time and again, he taught the rules and regulations of the life to everyone, but his character was designed to torture mostly his wife,

may be intentionally. He was the scholar of human nature, social behavior, political patterns, materialistic matters and strictly followed the terms of truth throughout his life. He could understand the inner suffocation and struggle of his mother and therefore always supported her in every situation to fulfill his duty as a son. But he was unable to understand the duty of a husband for his wife, or the duty of a king for his queen. Maybe he was jealous of Arjun, that Draupadi only loved Arjun throughout her life and that was the reason when he fobbed off Bheema to help her when she slipped on the golden dust. Pratibha Ray has pointed out the bitter mental pain of Draupadi when Yudhishtir ordered Bheema not to turn back to help Draupadi, at that moment she asked herself, "Those very words of his shattered my heart. I mused: how false is this bond between husband and wife! Affection, love, sacrifice and surrender! If man suffers the consequences of his own deeds, then offering myself at the feet of five husbands for the sake of preserving Yudhishtir's dharma, why did I have to bear the burden of the whole world's mockery, sneers, innuendos, abuse, scorn and slander?" (Ray 3)

It is indeed a fact that Yudhishtir was much more responsible for Draupadi's life-long humiliations, insults and inner wounds which she wore to her life forever and never protested against her husbands. She even authenticated her husbands, always, and in all situations – mentally, physically, socially, politically, and spiritually. Yudhishtir staked her in the Dice game in the assembly of dignitaries, kings and learned people, either to console his frustration or to give her punishment for not loving him like Arjun. Even after this disgraceful incident, she asked to make her husbands free and return their weapons, when King Dhritarashtra asked her for three boons to cover up the ill treatment of his sons; she asked only two.

There is another very well-known incident, when Keechak asked Draupadi to stay one night with him and she ignored him and his request. He tried to rape her. Keechak brutally kicked her and treated her worse than an animal in front of Yudhishtir. She asked for her defense, but here also, he showed only his indifferent and acidulous behavior and left her in the hands of that cruel beast saying that, "Return to the women's quarters and stop weeping like an actress!" (Divakaruni 230) This is too heartless and shameless behavior for a person who was known as *Dharmarāja*, who can't save her own faithful wife from a devil. Neither he displayed his *Kshatriya Dharma* nor any characteristic of a scholar. Divakaruni writes about Yudhishtir, "Rules were always more important to Yudhishtira than human pain – or human love". (346) Here the views of Nivedita Menon are quite pertinent – "The feminist understanding of rape proceeds on completely different premises. While recognizing rape as a serious crime, its harm is seen to lie in the attack on woman's autonomy and bodily

integrity. Feminists reject the idea that it's a fate worse than death." (115) Kevin McGrath remarks at this situation which is more painful and disrespectful than Draupadi's *Vastraharana* episode. He writes, "This scene full of pathos is reminiscent of the earlier *sabhā*, thirteen years previous, which opened the period of clandestine exile for the Pāṇḍavas. It is as if there is a dramatic framing taking place – marking the onset and the closure of exile – by virtue of this repetition." (142)

She always maintained her husbands' honour and domination. She fulfilled all the duties of a faithful wife. When they went to exile for thirteen years, she behaved as a king to fulfill the requirements of her progeny and tried to keep all the tribes satisfied. She kept fast for the full day to fulfill others' stomach and ate in the last from that inexhaustible vessel (given by Sun God to her, when Pāṇḍavas lost everything in the dice game and went to exile for thirteen years). Draupadi explains –

"Therefore, until everyone had eaten in the morning, at noon and at night I had to remain fasting faithfully, waiting for unexpected guests till midnight. I was not sorry at all for that. If by one person remaining hungry, hundreds get fed then it is better for that person to fast." (Ray 268)

At the end of her life, it was Yudhishtir who taunted with acrocephalic words, on her fall on the golden snow dust at the Himālayas, that "She married us all. But she loved one man (Arjuna) more than everyone else" (Divakaruni 347). It showed his frustration and depression that Draupadi, the legend, never loved him, like she loved Arjun. There are many incidents to prove that Yudhishtir was a hollow character as well as a failed husband in the epic and represented an idol of a depressed husband who never cared for Pāṇchālī.

Bheema, her second husband who was fond of eating delicious food, cared for her more than her other husbands. Draupadi's observation for Bheema becomes clear when she explains: "In appearance, qualities, personality, habits, behavior and conversation he is distinct. He wants only delicious food, and her company when he required." Yes, he tried to fulfill his commitment as a husband more than his other brothers. In the assembly disrobing-act, he roared against his boss-like big brother Yudhishtir and said, "Nowhere in history will an instance be found of any man having staked his mistress, slave or even a prostitute to lose in a dice game.....For what offence will Draupadi suffer this insult". (Ray 239) Only he was mad and furious to take the revenge on the Kauravas for her disrespect, and he did take it indeed, in the Kurukshetra war. He became very angry when Draupadi told about the incident that his wife was being touched by the lout. He gave punishment to Keechak for ill-treating

Pāṇchāli. Devdutt Pattanaik in *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata* writes, “Within a few minutes, Keechak’s bones were broken, his flesh smashed, and skull cracked”. (204)

Irawati Karve (the writer of *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*) is an anthropologist and her works are a critical and natural analysis of the *Mahābhārata*. She also appreciated Bheema for his caring, loving attitude, and for having the emotional touch as a good husband. It was only Bheema who cried when Draupadi fell down on the Himālayan foothills. He didn’t stop himself and disobeyed his elder brother; he came near Draupadi and asked her, “What can I do for you?” and Draupadi replied with smile and with her last breath that “In our next birth be the eldest, Bhima; under your shelter we can all live in safety and joy.” (Karve 95) Bheema also couldn’t control her pathetic fate but he tried his best to make her life joyful and interesting. He fought with Kuber (God of wealth) to get the golden lotus for Draupadi.

Actually, Arjun (third husband) was the main culprit for her humiliation and insults. He won Draupadi as a prestigious trophy in her *Swaymvar* (marriage hall). For whom? Arjun knew that in the Hindu tradition, younger brother could not marry if his elder brother is a bachelor. Then why did he win Yajnaseni in her *Swaymvar*? Maybe, to show only his talent to the people of Pāṇchāla present there, or to save Draupadi for being single forever in her life. The custom was that if no one is able to fulfill the terms and conditions of the *Swaymvar*, then the girl would not get married to anyone. Arjun won her in the disguise of a *Brāhman* but Draupadi was still happy that she was married to a handsome and talented man with whom she will spend her life happily; even she knew the poor condition and lifestyle of the *Brāhman*s in those times. After winning her in the *Swaymvar*, why did he so easily distributed his wife among his brothers and saying shamelessly that for the sake of establishment of *Dharma*, he is ready to share his wife among his brothers. Draupadi was shattered to hear this and felt –

“I flared up. I wished I could turn into a searing flame of the sacrificial fire and destroy the world and in it these five brothers too. If my husband were to turn into a fistful of ashes, I would not be sorry. He, who with undisturbed heart, could hand over his wife to another man for fear of his own dharma being destroyed, might be the most virtuous soul in the world, but he could never be a proper husband for any woman of discrimination.” (Ray 57)

Draupadi’s first and last love was Arjun. She always waited her turn to spend her life with him as a wife. But he never cared about her love and faith. He married many women

(Chitrāngadā, Ulupi and Subhadrā) in his life, and he loved Subhadrā (Krishna's sister) more than Pāṇchālī. Ray has painted the feelings and true love of Draupadi, that how eagerly she was waiting for him, "I decked myself like a virgin bride. Let not Phalguni (another name for Arjun) feel that twelve years have gone by and that I have grown older by twelve years. The drums were announcing the entrance of Phalguni into the kingdom. My heart too was dancing, throbbing to the beat of the drums." (Ray 197) But her happiness collapsed when Arjun entered in the palace with Subhadrā as his bride. No one can imagine the inner asphyxiation of Draupadi, but she welcomed her favourite husband's new wife with grace and love. She sacrificed her emotions for his happiness. She prayed to God for her husband's long and prosperous life. Though her favorite husband-cum-lover, and the great warrior of his era, cannot stop the humiliation and abasement of his wife in the crowded assembly when Kauravas treated her as a playful object and abused her openly as a whore and spilled many perverted words for her. He even stopped Bheema to not to go against big brother and speaks very unblushingly that, "Bhim! Have you lost your senses? Yudhishtir is the eldest. He is like our father. In a game, victory and defeat do occur. What is the use of blaming anyone for that?" And Draupadi thought, "Well! What respect for tradition and culture! So much respect! Elders must not be spoken ill of ... Arjun is advising Bhim while petty persons are insulting and outraging his wife. He is bearing it all. Is this the evidence of the great Bharat and civilization and tradition? Is this the heritage of the Aryans?" (Ray 239)

Arjun only won her as a contest trophy and treated her in the same manner throughout her life. He cared for his mother and his brother, especially Yudhishtir, but he never loved and cared for Draupadi the way she loved him. He married Subhadrā, and had a son with her Abhimanyu, and his grandson Parikshit was crowned as the king of Hastināpur. But with Pāṇchālī, neither he loved her unconditionally nor he gave her respect and honour till her death.

There is not much, or clear, written document about the relationship of Draupadi with Nakul and Sahadev (sons of Mādrē) by revisionist writers. They were the blind followers of their big brothers. They never utilized their common sense and expressions for any act or incidents. Yes, they took part in the War of Mahābhārata as simple soldiers. There is nothing meaningful written or conversed about them, by them, or from them. Their relationship with Draupadi was normal, natural and inconsequential.

Draupadi is one of the most creative characters conceived by sage Veda Vyāsa, who openly discussed the human nature and the society of ancient Bhārat through queen Pāṇchālī.

He gave her a very prominent place in his epic to serve the tradition and culture of Bhārat. He has portrayed her as the victim of patriarchal society, but one who followed her duty as a faithful wife, obedient daughter-in-law and a caring mother. She lost all her five sons in the great war of Kurukshetra, but she forgave the killer Ashvathāmā (son of Guru Dronāchārya). She achieved nothing in her life. Neither physical attention and security by her five husbands nor inner love and peace. No character in any literature has undergone so much physical molestation and mental oppressions like her. She was tormented at each step of her life. She was harassed by her own husbands and humiliated by her own family members, very frequently. Before marrying the five brothers how much mental preparation she would have done, as Ray expressed her inner struggle –

“I, Yajnaseni, born of the sacrificial altar for the preservation of dharma! If, impelled by greed for this mortal body, heroes like the Pāndavs have bound themselves by a vow to their mother, then in their dharma-yajna let this body become an oblation! In reality what was this body? From where did it come and where will it go? What did I know? For I was not that body. My hands, feet, limbs were not Krishnaa. No one part of my body was Krishnaa. So, let everyone be happy getting this body. Let them be united. Why should I be an obstacle? This body made up of five elements – fire, water, earth, air, ether – after offering it to five husbands would I be able to remain a *sati*? What was the definition of *sati*? I knew that remaining faithful to one’s husband was chastity. So, I would have to remain faithful to five husbands....a Sati.”(Ray 63)

In conclusion, the ill-fated Draupadi has left a wide range of feminist perspectives for the revisionist writers. Irawati Karve expressed Draupadi’s mental grief and physical torture—“Draupadi’s troubles were human, brought on by people of this world and particularly by her own husbands....In almost every episode, insult is piled upon insult, constantly adding fuel to the hatred in her heart. Two words keep recurring in reference to Draupadi – *nathavati* *nathvat*, “having husbands, but like a widow.”(Karve83) Kevin McGrath has described the relation between Draupadi and her husbands – “... how Draupadi manages her five men, of how in control of her affections she is, and of how she modulates her dealings with the husbands: moving from one to another, always varying, tacitly shifting, sustaining a certain coquetry and yet always being without duplicity.” (136) Yajnaseni might have tolerated so much physical harassments and tortures, mental humiliations and insults only to preserve *Dharma* on this Earth. She was an angel who set an example for enduring boundless pain for a bright future and honourable life, especially for women. In the last moments of her

life, she attained bliss, as Divakaruni writes, “I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable – but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego.” (360) And, as a matter of fact, this is the real aim of life. In the words of Sudhir Kakar, “The term moksha has been variously taken to mean self-realization, transcendence, salvation, a release from worldly involvement, from ‘coming’ and ‘going’. Yet in Hindu philosophy it is also described as the state in which all distinctions between subject and object have been transcended, a direct experience of the fundamental unity of a human being with the infinite.” (19) Yajnaseni established peace and prosperity in the society and blew out her Fire of *Yajna* in the snow of the Himālayas. She became a great and scrupulous Queen, even though she could not receive the attention, affection and appreciation due to a wife from her five husbands.

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