

Dr. Sabita Mishra

Lecturer-in-English

K. M. Degree College, Tukla

Sambalpur University

Odisha, India

sabita0@gmail.com

Draupadi and 'Satitva': A Study of Pratibha Ray's novel *Yajnaseni*

Abstract

In Pratibha Ray's novel *Yajnaseni* (1995), Draupadi is an intense character from the epic, Mahabharata written in the form of a letter to Lord Krishna. The woman's perspective has given it the sensibility that only a woman feels for the sufferings of other women. Ray tries to highlight Draupadi's identity as a 'sati' in her novel *Yajnaseni*, a former practice in India whereby a widow threw herself on to her husband's funeral pyre, which has generated much controversy through the ages. Ray has kept intact the notion of 'satitva' and Draupadi's claim to it. Although traditionally, her name is counted among the five satis, Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari, Satavati and Draupadi, still she is condemned for infidelity. Ray thinks that marrying five husbands is a challenge to the whole community of womanhood and asserts that even after marrying many men, the sexual purity of a woman could be maintained. Through Draupadi Ray has criticized a society that judges a woman's chastity by the number of husbands. Ray has focused on the fact that chastity should not depend on such social assumptions. While rewriting the "complexity" of Draupadi's character, Ray incorporates the

‘elastic notion’ by stretching the mythical Draupdi to an ordinary woman fitting the various situations of modern time basically emphasizing on her ‘satitva’.

Key words: Draupadi, modern, Ray, satitva, woman

In Pratibha Ray’s novel *Yajnaseni* (1995), Draupadi has been represented as an intense character from the epic written in the form of a letter to Lord Krishna. The woman’s perspective has given it the sensibility that only a woman feels for the sufferings of other women. Ray’s Draupadi has nourished an anti-idealistic and realistic value of life. In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi’s scope is both narrow and broad, giving room to the author to intervene every now and then.

Ray tries to highlight Draupadi’s identity as a ‘sati in her novel *Yajnaseni*, a former practice in India whereby a widow threw herself on to her husband's funeral pyre, which has generated much controversy through the ages. In Dvaparyuga Draupadi was considered sati by characters like Ved Vyasa, Krishna, Kunti, Dhritarastra, Drupad, Dhristadyamn, and even by her five husbands; but not so by Duryodhan, Dusashana, Karna, Keechaka and others.

Similarly, even in Kaliyuga Draupadi continues to be in controversy:

Dvaparyuga was about to end. The day Abhimanyu’s son Parikshit was anointed king on the throne of Hastinapur from that very day the Kaliyuga commenced. It is said that my name will be counted as one of the five Satis, renowned for Chastity. Men and women of Kaliyuga will laugh scornfully saying, “If with five husbands Draupadi could be a sati, then what is the need for fidelity to one husband?” With many husbands why can’t the women of Kaliyuga be satis? ... (3)

These concept of satitva remains an ambiguity for Draupadi whether its Dvpariyuga or Kaliyuga. It creates a sense of doubt even on its meaning when Ray's Draupadi questions its very existence:

...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...(63)

Nevertheless, Ray's Draupadi declares in the novel that her ideal is Sita, wife of Lord Ram, in the Indian epic, the Ramayana. Sita is the glory of the Raghu dynasty. She has been visualized and portrayed as woman's pride. In spite of being a 'chaste' woman, and wife to only one husband she has not been included in the list of Satis- Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari, Satavati and Draupadi. Whereas Draupadi is considered a sati even with her five husbands. Through Draupadi, Ray has kept intact the notion of 'satitva' and Draupadi's claim to it:

Most of the world's women would be called unchaste, if not physically then at least mentally. Even while giving their bodies, they fantasized, enjoying sweet pleasures in bed with some other men. But no such thing happened within me. While being with Yudhishtir I never desired Bhim. While living with Bhim, I never thought of Arjun. The efforts I had to make for a disciplined and controlled life were not very slight. To bring the mind under the control of one's will is the most difficult task in the world.(206)

Through her will power Draupadi becomes a "chaste and faithful" (368) wife to her five husbands. After all "the mind of the chaste woman is pure like the sunlight. On the mirror of the chaste wife's mind not even the shadow of any man other than her husband is reflected" (368). Although Ray's Draupadi's ideal is Sita, she disagrees to Sita's silent acceptance of her husband's verdict. Sita had not protested when her husband had doubted

her chastity and abandoned her. Draupadi on the other hand, is the opposite of Sita, in voicing her protest against injustice. But Sally J. Sutherland remarks in her article “Sita and Draupadi-Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-Models in Sanskrit Epics” (1989) that “it is the conduct and character of Sita, not Draupadi, that is regarded as normative in Hindu Society” (63). Further, Ray’s Draupadi continues to elaborate that she wouldn’t compare herself to Sita in all matters: “But why compare myself with her? Would I be able to live like her, silently bearing the agony, burning up within ... and I was just Panchal princess Yajnaseni – not even knowing this little, whether I had any husband at all. Why should every incident of her life be repeated in mine?” (36)

Ray thinks that marrying five husbands is a challenge to the whole community of womanhood and asserts that even after marrying many men, the sexual purity of a woman could be maintained. She remarks: “if a woman confined to the inner chambers, having no opportunity to see the face of a man other than her husband, was faithful, some possibility of her chastity being in doubt remained. But even after having married many men if she could remain faithful to them then she could be called sati” (93). Ray’s Draupadi says in a challenging tone, “if the need should arise, I too, accepting more than one husband can show that despite having more than one husband a woman can be trustworthy, obedient and chaste” (98). Sarala Das was of the opinion that no woman was worthy of trust. Through Draupadi, Ray criticizes the society of the past, and the present as well, that judges a woman’s chastity with the number of husbands she marries. Ray believes that chastity should not depend on such social assumptions. If a woman with one husband happens to imagine being with another man even in her imagination, cannot be considered chaste. The fictitious character Maya, a friend of Draupadi in Ray’s narrative advises her :

... playing the role of the wife of many husbands at one time is extremely painful and shameful. Therefore, adopt the role of being the wife of each

Pandav by turn for a year at a time. A woman is mother, wife and sister. Discharge the duties of a mother and a sister all the time with all the Pandavas. But as a wife, stay with each Pandav a year at a time. The five Pandav a brothers are each of a different nature. In the course of a year you will get the opportunity for preparing yourself mentally and emotionally for moving in harmony with the nature of one. (102)

Further, Ray points out that in Kaliyuga Draupadi will rather be insulted more for having five husbands. To safeguard her dignity she relies only on Lord Krishna. Being in Dvaparyuga she could sense the abuse and mockery she would face in Kaliyuga and calls Krishna to share her praise and blame as she believed that her plight revolved around his supreme wish. She holds Krishna responsible for her joy and sorrow:

... Draupadi will be food for mockery and jest amid the perverted sexuality of Kaliyuga's debauched men and women. How will these people appreciate that five-husbanded Draupadi had to burn inch by inch in the cause of chastity? Then the heroine of Hastinapur, Draupadi, will become a condemned soul, the heroine of calumny. O Krishna! O Vasudev, you are omnipotent! It is by your wish that Draupadi has made this journey from birth till now. By your wish Draupadi's eyes have opened and shut, her breath has come and gone. Then, have you no share in her praise and blame? (3)

Ray has deconstructed the great epic, Mahabharata and given to it a new form in her novel, by making Draupadi a mouthpiece for female justice. Ray's Draupadi has adequately represented the chastity of a modern woman. Although traditionally, her name is counted among the five satis, still she is condemned for infidelity. In her "Afterword" Ray has mentioned about a personal acquaintance named 'Krishnaa' whose first marriage was miserable due to "her debauched drunkard of a husband" (400). So, she left him and married

another man. “Her conjugal life is comfortable” (401). But “people who were at one time sympathetic towards Krishna, said after the second marriage” (401) that, “Well! When her very name is Krishna, she could be happy only after taking a second husband. Arre! That Krishna of the Mahabharata took five husbands, and still not being satisfied, was attracted to Karna and Krishna” (401).

Even the swayamvaraa and marriage episodes of Draupadi brought to light how Yajnaseni, the new Draupadi ‘writes back’ in the form of a letter, or resentfully vocalizes the wrongs done against her by patriarchal culture. Culture as a concept has been defined veritably in its multiple dimensions. For Ray, dharma which equals duty and morality cannot be a synonym for rules. In her anxiety at having to play the role of the mediator in her father’s design to avenge his insult by slaying Drona, Draupadi becomes a subject in the discourse of hegemony and domination.

Though Draupadi’s ideal was Sita, she also like most modern women questions Sita’s silent acceptance of her husband’s verdict. Sita had not protested when her husband had doubted her chastity and abandoned her. Draupadi on the other hand, as the opposite of Sita, has become the ideal for modern women in their protest against any kind of injustice. Though Ray’s Draupadi has been trapped by circumstances, she comes out as an early feminist of the Dvaparyug. She has broken set rules of the times consistently. The novel has treated her as a human being with human flaws.

While rewriting the “complexity” of Draupadi’s character, Ray incorporates the ‘elastic notion’ by stretching the mythical Draupdi to an ordinary woman fitting the various situations of modern times. As Karve puts in her views about mythical Draupadi: “[h]er sensitive pride, her willingness to sacrifice herself, and her faithfulness to her husbands were qualities appropriate to her country, time, and clan. She was extraordinary, but this very extraordinariness was born out of the ordinary values of her time” (97). Time has changed but

not the plight of women as the mythical Draupadi is quite similar to an ordinary woman of our time. Ray's Draupadi would get angry, "Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way why don't the scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men's hearts made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them? Have the scriptures prescribed lists of sins only for women?" (94), and "raises numerous questions about the tradition of women: also raises questions about the traditions of men" (Spender, 23).

Through Draupadi Ray has criticized a society that judges a woman's chastity by the number of husbands. Ray has focused on the fact that chastity should not depend on such social assumptions. Although Draupadi has often been insulted for her five husbands and insinuating remarks are made about her loose moral character, Ray's narrative has given her the honor of holding the Pandavas together and being an agent of change during her time. Ray's novel has given Draupadi a space for self-expression in order to emphasize on her satitva which has been controversial in our society.

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