

From Subjugation to Power: A Feminist Analysis of Draupadi in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*

Dr. Suchi Chauhan

Assistant Professor
Sir Chhotu Ram Institute of Engineering Technology
CCS University Meerut

Abstract:

This paper explores the transformation of Draupadi, the main character of Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, from a subjugated figure to a symbol of female power from a feminist perspective. Draupadi, an important character in the Mahabharata, is reimagined in Ray's novel as a deeply introspective and empowered woman who transcends the patriarchal structures of ancient India. Despite being bound by the expectations of her roles as wife, daughter-in-law and queen, Draupadi's voice emerges as a testament to resilience and agency. The analysis researches deep into her nuanced portrayal, highlighting her internal conflicts, struggle against objectification and her assertion of autonomy within the constraints of a male-dominated world. By examining key moments such as the dice game and her unwavering commitment to dharma, the study underlines Draupadi's evolution from victim to symbol of power. Through Ray's vivid characterization, Draupadi's becomes a feminist icon who challenges social norms and redefines womanhood in the epic tale. This paper argues that *Yajnaseni* offers a reinterpretation of Draupadi's story that resonates with contemporary feminist ideals, establishing her as a timeless figure of empowerment and rebellion against oppression.

Keywords: Empowerment, Reimagined, Mythology, Patriarchy, Resilience and Autonomy.

Pratibha Ray is an acclaimed Indian writer, known for her profound contributions to Odia literature. Born on January 21, 1943 in Odisha, she has written novels, short stories, and essays that explore themes of social justice, gender equality, and human values. Her works often draw inspiration from Indian mythology, culture, and history, and merge them with contemporary social issues. Ray's notable works include *Yajnaseni*, which reimagines the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. She has received prestigious awards including the Jnanpith Award and the Padma Shri for her literary excellence. Ray's writings continue to inspire readers with their depth, empathy, and cultural resonance. This title traces the complex transformation of Draupadi, a central character in the Mahabharata, from a feminist perspective. The novel *Yajnaseni* retraces Draupadi's journey from a symbol of suffering and subordination to a woman asserting her independence and power.

Through Ray's narrative, Draupadi's emotional and spiritual growth becomes a powerful commentary on gender, patriarchy and women's empowerment. The analysis highlights how Draupadi challenges social norms, embraces her sexuality and confronts male-dominated structures, ultimately establishing her as a symbol of resistance and power in a patriarchal world. Pratibha Ray traces the complexities of patriarchal structures and the remarkable resilience of women in the face of adversity. Ray's feminist perspective offers a critical analysis of Draupadi's life, exposing the layers of patriarchal subordination woven into her narrative. Born of fire and destined for greatness, Draupadi remains trapped in a web of social expectations and the whims of powerful men. Her swayamvara, in which she is viewed as an object and won as a prize by Arjuna, exemplifies the objectification of women in ancient Indian society. Ray emphasizes Draupadi's forced polyandrous marriage with the Pandavas, highlighting the absence of autonomy in choosing her

partner. Despite her personal objections, Draupadi becomes a pawn in the power struggle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, symbolizing the control exercised by the male characters throughout her life. Yet, Ray's portrayal of Draupadi goes beyond being a mere victim, celebrating her agency and resilience in the face of patriarchal oppression. Draupadi emerges as a fiercely independent and outspoken woman, unafraid to challenge social norms. She confronts the male characters with sharp wit and scathing criticism, constantly raising her voice in a male-dominated world. Ray also underlines Draupadi's unwavering courage during the infamous dice game, where she is humiliated in front of the court and stripped of her clothes. Instead of succumbing to embarrassment, Draupadi boldly questions the legitimacy of the game and denounces the moral integrity of the men responsible for her public humiliation. Her defiance in the face of such humiliation becomes a powerful symbol of female empowerment and resistance against oppression. Through her interpretation of Draupadi's journey, Ray contributes to a broader feminist discourse aimed at reclaiming women's agency in mythology and literature. By highlighting Draupadi's struggles within a patriarchal framework, Ray encourages readers to critically examine gender dynamics and power structures that still influence society today.

Ray's reimagining of Draupadi's legend challenges conventional portrayals, presenting her as a multifaceted and empowered woman who navigates complex social and political landscapes with courage and resilience. In doing so, Ray not only honors Draupadi's legacy, but also emphasizes the enduring relevance of her story in challenging prevailing notions of gender and power. Pratibha Ray's feminist interpretation of Draupadi's journey provides a nuanced and empowering portrayal of a woman who challenges patriarchal norms and asserts her agency despite enormous adversity. Through this in-depth analysis, Ray invites readers to reconsider traditional narratives and acknowledge the resilience and strength of female characters in Indian mythology. By celebrating Draupadi's journey, Ray inspires women to reclaim their voices and rewrite their own stories, in a world that still grapples with gender inequality. Her father, King Drupad, demands that she uphold the dharma, regardless of her own emotions. "Your birth is for the preservation of dharma, he tells her. You must honor your father's vow, just as Ramachandra did when he went into exile to protect dharma. The best warrior in Aryavart, chosen by King Drupad for his daughter's suitor, now stands before you. Honor your father's promise and fulfill your duty as a daughter" (*Yajnaseni* 14)

Draupadi, though deeply pained, must comply. She is forced to marry the Brahmin, not for herself, but to fulfill her father's desires. Her emotions are dismissed. In this arrangement, Draupadi is nothing more than an instrument to carry out a vow her own desires and wishes disregarded. The stories of Draupadi's life illustrate the struggles, exploitation, and suffering that women often face. She is required to marry the Brahmin to honor her father's wishes, even though her heart belongs to Arjun. The Brahmin refuses Drupad's offer of a chariot to transport Draupadi to his home, instead insisting that they walk on foot. He demands that she honor her new husband's dharma, further stripping her of her agency. Despite her brother's objections, Draupadi commits to her role, following the principles of dharma that have been forced upon her. She has spent her life honoring the promises of her father and brother, and now, even in her marriage, she must respect the duty she has been taught. She says to her brother, "Now, Brother, let me practice my dharma. This is the way of all women. I must follow suit, just as Janak's daughter did, living in exile for fourteen years to uphold dharma. This is not a forced exile but a journey to my husband's house. Let us part with joy" (*Yajnaseni* 23) Yet, Draupadi is stunned that the wise men around her, including priests, teachers, and elders, do not understand her sorrow. She wonders how a woman, so knowledgeable and capable, can be used as a mere pawn by her father and brother. Though forced to comply, a rebellious spirit stirs within her—she refuses to fully accept the roles society has imposed on her. In modern interpretations, such as in *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi's persona is examined through a psychoanalytic lens, revealing the deep emotional conflicts she endures. When Draupadi finally learns that Arjun, her heart's choice, is indeed her husband, her pain begins to dissolve. She feels a surge of happiness. "I am married to the greatest warrior of my time," she thinks. "He will become one of my father's staunchest

allies." She is proud not only for herself but for her father and brother. She believes that Arjun will protect her brother in the Great War, helping him fulfill his destiny. However, even in this moment of happiness, Draupadi is keenly aware of the societal expectations that shape her life. She acknowledges her own agency, but she knows she is bound by the rules set by the men around her. She must obey her father's and brother's wishes, and later, she must serve her husband's dharma. When she is treated as "this woman," a nameless servant, she seethes with anger, her individuality lost in the patriarchal system that defines her. Her disgust deepens when the Pandavas, including Arjun, consent to her marriage to five men. The humiliation is overwhelming, and Draupadi imagines herself as a fiery sacrifice, wishing she could burn the entire world and those who have treated her so unjustly. "The most virtuous man may give his wife to another without feeling conflicted, but he will never be a true husband if he allows his wife to be treated as an object," (*Yajnaseni* 52) she reflects bitterly. When Draupadi's mother-in-law instructs her sons, "My sons, whatever you have brought, divide it among the five of you equally," she is devastated and horrified (*Yajnaseni* 55). Even when she realizes that Draupadi is "the priceless object" they have brought, Kunti still demands that her word be upheld. "Sons, you must now honor my promise if you respect what I did for you," she insists. "This woman must be revered by all five of you" (*The Palace of Illusions* 108). A woman placed in the extraordinary position of marrying five men a situation known as polyandry—can certainly empathize with Draupadi's plight. Only a woman can fully understand the emotional turbulence she must endure. Upon hearing this arrangement, readers recoil with fear, and a powerful question stirs within them: How could anyone impose such an impossible scenario on another person? The thought of such a situation makes them shudder, deeply questioning how anyone could force such an unnatural condition on a woman. Most women would instinctively believe that treating Draupadi so unjustly, under the guise of adhering to dharma, is simply wrong. Vyasa, the great sage, is called upon to address the issue. After much deliberation, he decides that Draupadi will marry each of the five Pandava brothers. He assures her that her dignity will remain intact. To preserve Draupadi's virginity and foster peace, Vyasa lays down a specific code of marital conduct. According to the Pandavas' birth order, Draupadi will spend one year with each brother as his wife. The other brothers are instructed to respect her and avoid eye contact during the year spent with her. If they disturb Draupadi and her husband during their private moments, they will be exiled for a year. Each time Draupadi switches husbands, Vyasa bestows upon her the boon of regaining her virginity. However, Draupadi is disheartened by this boon, as it seems designed solely for the benefit of her husbands. Her statement, "I am not delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husband's benefit than mine" (*The Palace of Illusions* 120), reveals her dissatisfaction. She may have even longed for a different boon one of forgetting, as she expresses, "If the Sage had cared to inquire, I would have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother, I was not burdened by the memory of the previous one" (*The Palace of Illusions* 120).

Draupadi falls into deep distress when neither her father nor her husband's take her feelings into account. "I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and potential husbands discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit or harm them," she cruelly reflects (*The Palace of Illusions* 118). She comes to a painful conclusion: she does not need to "awe" all five brothers. She asks herself numerous difficult questions but finds no answers. She wonders, "Why should I accept the husbands of the other brothers? Why should I remain silent and accept this insult? Should I tolerate that these brothers, driven by lust for my beauty and lacking in reason and judgment, think they can impose their illogical will upon me?" (*Yajnaseni* 56) It is against Draupadi's will to accept this polyandrous situation. She feels no obligation to accept any of the other four men as her husbands, since Arjuna alone had won her heart. She soon realizes that the eldest brother's vague statements were purposefully ambiguous, meant to signal their arrival to their mother. She wonders if his words were part of a secret plan. "Perhaps, like the others, he too had been enamored by my beauty and conspired to obtain me in this way, Draupadi questions. The other brothers must have been drawn to me as well. Why, then, would they let such an opportunity pass them by?" (*Yajnaseni* 58–59)

The Mahabharata portrays Draupadi as exceptionally beautiful, one of the most stunning women of her time. Her beauty was unparalleled, captivating the attention of all who beheld her. As Bhawalkar notes in *Eminent Women in the Mahabharata* (Bhawalkar 141), “The very sight of her was magnetic due to her irresistible beauty and fragrance.” While her physical beauty is widely acknowledged, Draupadi is equally celebrated for her remarkable character and virtues that define her as an ideal wife. Bhawalkar emphasizes that Draupadi's praise stems more from her moral qualities than from her outward appearance. Yudhishthira, for instance, affirmed that she was a woman whom any man would desire, and she had never sinned. Bhima likened her to the legendary women of antiquity, and her mother-in-law, Kunti, “lauded her noble conduct and admirable treatment of her husbands” (Bhawalkar 141).

Draupadi's intelligence and education, far from making her arrogant or haughty, were coupled with a deep devotion to her role as a wife. Bhawalkar describes her as a woman of exceptional integrity and loyalty, “one who meticulously cared for her husbands and even their co-wives, ensuring their well-being” (Bhawalkar 142). Despite her graceful and gentle nature, Draupadi was neither meek nor passive. When necessary, she spoke with courage and assertiveness. She openly challenged her husbands in the court and boldly criticized the Kuru elders—an act that set her apart as the only woman of her time to do so. Draupadi's resolve hardened when her husband Yudhishthira lost everything, including his kingdom, palace, brothers, and even her, to Shakuni and Duryodhana. When instructed by Duryodhana's servant to appear in the court, Draupadi refused to comply, taking a firm stand in the face of injustice. Draupadi, with fiery intensity, unleashes a torrent of scorching words, demanding to know how those who claim to be morally educated could stand by in silence as she is humiliated. “Are my elders here in this assembly?” she asks, her voice ringing out loud. “These are men of honor from Aryavart, wise and courageous, yet none of them seem to think it improper to drag me by the hair into this packed hall, in the condition I am in. Why this silence? Will no one answer my question?” (*Yajnaseni* 238)

In *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*, Emily T. Hudson describes Draupadi as “unprotected amongst her protectors” (Hudson 98). She underscores the profound injustice that if a queen like Draupadi can be reduced to such a state, the suffering of an ordinary woman is unfathomable. Emily Hudson warns that this grim reality reveals an alarming truth: “If Draupadi can be treated in this manner amongst these people, then absolutely no human being is immune from a reversal of fortunes so extreme that even a queen may be reduced to the status of a slave” (Hudson 98).

Draupadi's character is fully realized, not reduced to a mere stereotype. She is a strong feminist figure who stands up for her rights, especially when her husbands, bound by fate, lose her in a game of chance. She possesses the courage to speak out boldly against the injustice being perpetrated by men, and not just for her own sake but also for the well-being of her husbands. In a tone filled with fury, she accuses the Kauravas of deception. As Gurucharan Das writes in *The Difficulty of Being Good*, Draupadi contends that Yudhishthira did not lose in a fair contest, for he willingly entered the game, staked his wife, and failed to report Shakuni's dishonesty. Draupadi argues, “Her husband was compelled to answer a challenge made by cheaters” (Das 44).

Shakuni, known for his deceit, had been warned by Yudhishthira not to beat them unfairly or dishonestly at the start of the game. Draupadi is acutely aware that the game was not just a contest of chance, but a political maneuver orchestrated by Duryodhana and Shakuni, with the passive support of Dhritarashtra. The Pandavas' half of the kingdom was seized in a political power play, and Yudhishthira was the victim of what could be described as “a vast right-wing conspiracy”—one that served the vested interests of the reigning monarch, King Dhritarashtra. The male-dominated society holds the belief that women should remain ignorant and submissive, forever begging for forgiveness from the dominant male. Shakuni, a representative

of this chauvinistic worldview, claims that the greatest sin a woman commits is to seek knowledge. Draupadi, however, is a woman of wisdom and intelligence. Her situation, he argues, would have been different if she had knelt at their feet and pleaded. In the patriarchal worldview, just as strength and knowledge enhance a man's allure, ignorance and helplessness are seen as traits that make a woman more desirable. But Draupadi, like a blazing flame, is empowered by her pride in her knowledge and wisdom. Despite the scorn she faces, she remains steadfast. "Can anyone truly pity her?" she asks, defying the societal norms that seek to diminish her" (*Yajnaseni* 238).

Since Draupadi is "a visible recipient of divine grace in the form of endless descends sarees," as Hiltebeitel writes in *The Cult of Draupadi*, she is miraculously preserved through divine intervention. S.R. Themozhiyar describes a poignant scene from Hiltebeitel's work in which Draupadi's suffering transforms her, "The 'Kvint, Kvint' emanates from her trembling, screaming heart, cooling her tongue and releasing nectar that softens and melts her body. This divine force vanquishes the stubborn hardness of Dussasana, transforming her from an image of vulnerability into the embodiment of unbreakable Shakti, the personification of power" (Hiltebeitel 280). In contrast to the typical expectations of Indian women, who are not allowed to question authority in public, Draupadi challenges these norms boldly, even in front of the court's elders. Her questions are not mere demands—they are legitimate calls for justice. When the elders fail to answer her, they bow their heads in shame. In a moment of intense rage, Draupadi declares, "I'll tie my loose hair only when I'm bathed in the blood of the villain who dared to pull it," her eyes burning with fury, like a volcano on the verge of eruption. She makes a solemn vow in front of the assembled lords, kings, priests, and others, her anger, agony, and thirst for vengeance palpable: "Till I wet my hair with the blood of Dussasana's breast, I will leave it unbound thus" (*Yajnaseni* 244).

Draupadi's fate is marked by confusion, solitude, and ineffectual protest. Despite this, Draupadi is a woman who upholds respect and self-respect. When Dhritarashtra offers her a third boon, she rejects it, signaling her independence. Instead, she accepts two favors as a peace offering: the release of her husbands and the return of their weapons. Draupadi refuses the third boon, as she no longer seeks anyone's favor. Her only motivation is to fulfill her vow of vengeance, seeking justice for the wrongs committed against her. The fulfillment of her desire for vengeance is symbolized by the blood of her enemies flowing through her hair. In the face of this, she pleads for mercy, yet her unwavering resolve remains. The scriptures, she says, permit a Kshatriya woman to request only two boons. With the release of her courageous husbands, she no longer needs any further favors. "There will be no need to ask for any boon for their happiness and prosperity as long as they can bear arms" (*Yajnaseni* 244).

Every time Yudhishtir advocates for forgiving others, Draupadi challenges him, emphasizing that retaliation and battle are essential. When Yudhishtir vows to protect her, she counters, saying, "But how does dharma protect the burning moment of my insult, our forest, and exile?" (*Yajnaseni* 283) She laments, "He (Yudhishtir) doesn't even consider any remedy for that injustice, leaving the valiant Arjun, Bhim, Nakul, Sahadev, and me, the daughter of Drupad, to live in exile in the forest because of his shortsightedness." While God resides in a heart filled with mercy, Draupadi insists that forgiving enemies and sinners is not in line with the Kshatriya code. "A true man is not one who simply embodies either timidity or rage, but one who demonstrates both gentleness and anger when the situation demands it" (*Yajnaseni* 282) If Krishna preaches the necessity of war to Arjun on the battlefield through the Bhagavad Gita, Draupadi plays a vital role in kindling and preserving the flame of vengeance in the hearts of the Pandavas during their exile in the forest. She ensures that the memory of the injustice they endured, as well as the deep humiliation and disgrace they suffered never fades. Draupadi firmly believes that upholding dharma requires decisive action and conflict. She conveys to Yudhishtir: "Without action, neither transient happiness nor lasting joy can be attained. It is through action that fate is shaped. How can we alter our destiny if no one dares to act? How could we guarantee the safety of the Pandavas if we don't take steps to

restore our lost honor now?” (*Yajnaseni* 282) According to Anu Simlote, as quoted in the article, *Among Friends: Marriage, Women, and Some Little Birds*,

“Draupadi from the Hindu epic Mahabharata embodies both femininity and feminism. The valiant princess is depicted as a woman of great complexity and strength. Despite her fragility, Draupadi possesses an unshakable will and a potent, fiery power that enables her to overcome and destroy her adversaries. She remains an enigmatic figure, a woman of substance whose legacy endures through history” (Hiltebeitel 110).

The critic Chhanda Gupta discusses the notion that women might gravitate toward Draupadi rather than Sita as a role model in his work “Understanding Human Action”. He suggests that women, feeling oppressed, subservient, or burdened by the weight of societal expectations, might not aspire to be like Sita. Instead, “Draupadi, with her more assertive and powerful persona, could emerge as a more appealing figure” (Gupta 218).

This perspective aligns with Gandhiji's views on Draupadi and other Indian women as role models, as noted by M.G. Agrawal in *Freedom Fighters of India*. In conclusion, *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray reimagines Draupadi's character through a feminist lens, transforming her from a symbol of subjugation to one of empowerment. The novel portrays her as a multifaceted woman who navigates patriarchal oppression, yet asserts her autonomy and strength. Ray's Draupadi challenges traditional narratives, emphasizing her resilience, intelligence, and agency. Through this analysis, Ray subverts the historical portrayal of Draupadi, offering a nuanced exploration of gender, power, and identity, and ultimately presenting a woman who, despite her hardships, reclaims her destiny with courage and determination.

REFERENCES:

1. Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra. *The Palace of Illusions: 10th Anniversary Edition*. Picador India, 24 May 2019.
2. Bhawalkar, Vanamala. *Eminent Women in the Mahābhārata*. Sharada Publishing House, 2002.
3. Das, Gurucharan. *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*. Penguin Books, 2009.
4. Hiltebeitel, Alf. “Among Friends: Marriage, Women, and Some Little Birds.” *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, Routledge, 2007.
5. Hudson, Emily T. *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
6. Ray, Pratibha. *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*. Rupa Publications, 1995.