

Polyandry-A Catalyst to Draupadi's Identity Formation as Depicted in *Yajnaseni*

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Abstract: A woman's identity is said to be associated first with her father, or with her husband, basically to any of her male relatives. Internalisation of this concept makes her a slave to the system of patriarchy. Prathibha Ray, in *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, attempts to retell the *Mahabharata* epic from a woman's perspective. She questions the atrocities against women through the story of Draupadi. Because Draupadi has five husbands, she is thought of as unchaste by the society. Her polyandrous marriage has acted as a catalyst to her identity formation, and yet that side of her life has never been told. Unlike Sita, Draupadi never shied away from injustices. She fought against those who humiliated her and moulded a unique identity for herself. Her fearlessness differentiates her from the submissive heroines of literature. It is therefore a fallacy to categorise Draupadi merely as the wife of the five Pandavas. She is much more than just a polyandrous woman. This paper, therefore, aims at unravelling Draupadi's inner turmoil of being a polyandrous woman and how this experience has altered her identity.

Keywords: *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, Draupadi, Polyandry, Identity, Unchaste, Catalyst.

Full Paper:

The identity of an individual is defined by many factors like sex, colour, race, or caste. And if that individual happens to be a female, these defining factors are most often than not either imposed upon her, or internalised by her through the course of life. Also, the stories and folklores that people learn while growing up can have a great influence on them. In that sense, Hindu mythology has a massive impact on our lives. The treatment of Goddesses and heroines in the myths helped in moulding the "traditional values" of the society. According to the Hindu epics, the "Panch Satis" are the ideal, and the most virtuous of all women. Each of them had to undergo some sort of trial in their lives which are not ideally ascribed to a "conventional heroine." Among the five, Draupadi –the "revenge heroine" of Mahabharata– can be considered as the most distinguished. Mahabharata portrays Draupadi as the valiant woman who was brave enough to raise her voice in a man's world. But a large portion of the society associates Draupadi with "the most famous case of polyandry in Indian Mythology" (Gupta 8). When Sita and Savitri are hailed for their loyalty towards their husbands, Draupadi is not given this status. She has defied all norms of patriarchy through her polyandrous marriage and even then, her valour and her courage to question the system are looked down upon by a vast majority. "There is never talk of Draupadi's chastity; but that she has five husbands often leads to accusations that she is a public woman and not a queen" (Patnaik).

Prathibha Ray, in her novel *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*,” retells the epic through Draupadi’s eyes. The text explores the difficulties that Draupadi had to undergo to preserve “Dharma” and, how she fought against the patriarchal system of that period. “It is a story of a woman in love; a woman who sacrifices herself for the integrity of her family and people. But she gets little in return” (Chandran 2). Over the years, her polyandrous marriage has become a catalyst in the formation of her identity. It will also be interesting to explore the society’s take on Draupadi’s character and how their perception was adulterated by their prejudices against women.

According to Amy Gutmann, “When people are identified as... male or female, they are stereotyped by gender... and [are] denied a certain individuality that comes of their own distinctive character and freedom to affiliate as they see fit” (Gutmann 1). This statement aptly describes Draupadi’s life as the wife of the five Pandavas. Her identity as a woman surpasses everything else that defines her. Through *Yajnaseni*, Ray strives to bring about a “balanced portrayal” of the character, one which is not overshadowed by the *Mahabharata*. “In the feminist perspective, *Mahabharata* depicts women as a non-entity and totally subservient to man. The epic provides Ray, the context to challenge the patriarchal point of view, which moulds realities, fixes values and limits vision of individual possibilities” (Chandran 1).

Draupadi’s characterisation in *Yajnaseni* concentrates on the complicated situations that Draupadi had to face in order to safeguard her Dharma. The text depicts how the patriarchy subtly compels women into submission. Draupadi is unique in the sense that she found her voice and wreaked havoc upon her enemies. At the same time she was intelligent, spirited and submissive. In an age where polygamy was the norm, Draupadi experienced both polyandry and polygyny. Though women before her have had more than one husband, the society of that time tagged Draupadi as a “public woman” thereby tarnishing her name forever.

Being born from the sacrificial fire, Yajnaseni had never experienced childhood. She was born to fulfil her father’s vow and to destroy the Kauravas, thereby preserving Dharma. Like Sita, Draupadi’s Swayamvar involved an archery contest and she was won by Arjun -the third Pandava brother- who was in the guise of a Brahmin. On their way to the humble abode of the five Brahmin brothers, Draupadi fell in love with Arjun, who was also Krishna’s “sakha.” But little did she know that destiny had a different plan for her. Draupadi’s life falls apart when circumstances make her the wife of all the five Pandava brothers. Yudhishtir, being the eldest and the wisest, gets to make a decision which will not harm either his mother’s or his brothers’ dharma. Draupadi, however, has no say in this. She was too shocked to react in any way.

The very idea was ridiculous: one woman to live as the wife of five men! There would be no such instance in the world. Why should I silently bear such an insult? Was I a lifeless statue? Lust-crazed by my beauty, bereft of reason and judgment, would these brothers impose upon me their whimsical authority and should I accept that? (Ray 56).

But her feelings found no voice. Even Arjun did not dare to contradict his brother's words. "Unwillingly, she lets herself to live with the four brothers of Arjun. She reminds us of the cunning male oppressors who emotionally manipulates women. In a patronizing manner Krishna pins her down to his motive of preserving dharma leaving no way to escape" (Chandran 3). Her greatest woe was that her name "would remain condemned in the history of the world". After she was married to the five Pandavas, it was decided that she will live with each brother for one year and will retain her purity every other year. The people who prescribed these rules never realized that her identity as a woman will be transformed forever, and that she will never be able to get a moment's happiness. Draupadi's "duty" in life from then on was to keep the Pandava brothers "satisfied" because if any one of them felt any displeasure, they will be unable to concentrate on their duties. The logic behind this argument is that a man has no control of his actions unless he is sexually satisfied. The wedding was just a beginning, after that there is the act of actually living with each of the brothers while suppressing her feelings for Arjun. Though bound by Dharma to equally love each of the brothers, Draupadi was actually only in love with Arjun. This "inability" cost her entry to heaven, when she was lying on the foothills of the Himalayas waiting for any one of her husbands to turn back and help her.

The Pandavas were given half of Hastinapur, Khandaprasth, when they returned home. They built an assembly hall with the help of Krishna and, King Yudhishtir conducted an inauguration ceremony inviting the Kauravas for a grand feast. During this time, Kunti had sent Draupadi with a plate loaded with food to Karna as he did not participate in the dinner. But, Karna refused to eat the food made by Draupadi, accusing her of being unchaste due to her polyandrous marriage. Many among the Kauravas looked at her with lust-filled eyes. Throughout the ceremony, Draupadi was treated as if she was a courtesan. What is more remarkable is that none of her husbands seemed to notice all that she had to endure. But her sufferings did not end there. Whenever the Kauravas got a chance to insult her, they did so. They never took in to consideration that she was a living, breathing woman and that her body was hers alone. To them, a woman who sleeps with five people should not have any problem sleeping with another man. Draupadi herself believed that it was natural for her husbands, or for any other men, to have more than one wife. Having many wives never affected a man's masculinity or virtuousness. She, on the other hand, being a woman, was forever under the burden of polyandry through no fault of her own. This shows how internalisation of stereotypes can influence a person's outlook. She sacrificed all her happiness for the sake of keeping her husbands happy. She did so without an ounce of guilt because that was what wives were "supposed" to do; her primary concern was to satisfy her husbands' needs, even if that meant she had to work five times harder. People of that time praised Draupadi for this quality of hers, and she herself revelled in this fact.

I was finished. I had offered myself to the five Pandavas. I had surrendered to my husbands my entire personality and self. I did not have any likes or dislikes of my own. I surrendered myself in the form that any of them wished (Ray 209).

Draupadi's beauty was another reason for her negative image. It was because of her heavenly beauty that all the Pandavas wanted to marry her. Her beauty was the reason for the Kauravas' unending enmity towards the Pandavas. Like today, people criticised the woman

for being too beautiful whereby she stimulated the man's lust. Whatever problems the Pandavas faced, the blame was always on the polyandrous Draupadi.

The Pandavas had transformed the village of Khandaprasth into the beautiful city of Indraprasth. Yudhishtir with Krishna's permission decided to conduct "Rajsuyayajna", by which he will be heralded as the "King-emperor". Jealous of the Pandavas' prosperity and fame, Duryodhan and Shakuni invite Yudhishtir into Hastinapur for a game of dice because they knew that gambling was Yudhishtir's one and only weakness. Even though he knew that this was a trick, Yudhishtir agreed to go. He, along with Draupadi, Kunti, and the other Pandavas set forth to Hastinapur. The game continued for a long time and Yudhishtir lost everything: his palace, his brothers, himself and his wife Draupadi. All of the Pandava brothers were made slaves and were disrobed publicly. Since Draupadi was menstruating, she stayed in a private mansion away from even the shadow of men. As was the custom, she wore only a single piece of cloth and her hair was left loose. She had no idea what was going on in the Assembly Hall. Moments later, one of the attendants came and reported to Draupadi the situation downstairs. She was asked to go downstairs, as per the command of Duryodhan. Unable to digest this statement, Draupadi did not move till she made sure that her husbands and the elders of the Kuru Dynasty had granted permission for this to happen. Filled with despair, she thought: "... was woman merely man's movable or immovable property? (Ray 235)." It was at this moment that Duhshasan came to her chambers and caught hold of her long tresses. He dragged her down to the Assembly Hall in her single piece of cloth in front of all the Elders, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and the spectators who have come to see the game. She pleaded with the Elders for justice, but they had none to offer. When Bhim raised his voice against Yudhishtir's twisted version of dharma, Arjun silenced him by saying that talking against their brother was against their dharma. So, the five husbands watched Draupadi being insulted and did not utter a single word in her defence. Duhshasan then began to disrobe Draupadi of her single piece of cloth. Unable to contain her anguish, Draupadi called out to everyone in the vicinity:

Such a gross outrage on womanhood will never be wiped out in history. The descendants of this country will blame the Kuru king for this. This lawless, gross injustice and tyranny of the Kuru clan will demean the entire male sex for all time. It will outrage all the chaste women of the Bharat dynasty and the entire female sex on earth. For this insult there is no forgiveness, for this sin there is no expiation. (Ray 242)

All the while Duryodhan was slapping his thigh, inviting her to sit on his lap. Seeing this, Bhim vowed to shatter Duryodhan's thigh and Draupadi vowed to leave her hair loose until she can wet it with Duhshasan's blood. For the first time in the history, a woman accuses her Elders; she seeks vengeance against her oppressors. This episode acted as a catalyst in changing Draupadi's relationship with her husbands. She now realizes that her honour is only secondary to them and she comes out as a ferocious woman who was ready to fight her own war:

When Duhshasan dragged me by the hair into the hall, I was then menstruating, wearing a single piece of cloth. I, the wife of Pandavas ... My valiant husbands remained mute spectators....I do not know where Bhim and Arjun's prowess and

valour had disappeared. Yudhishtir's humility and devotion to dharma- is that what it was? (Ray 249).

In the great Kurukshetra War, Draupadi sought her vengeance and tied her hair with Duhshasan's blood. Till then, for more than thirteen years, she had kept her tresses untied. The war brought losses to both the sides and she lost her five sons and Abhimanyu in the war. Overcome by grief, the Pandavas and Draupadi decided to climb the Himalayas to attain "swarg." On their way, Draupadi slips and falls on the foothills of the Himalayas, and none of her husbands cared to look back. She realizes that all her life was a farce:

If man suffers the consequences of his own deeds, then offering myself at the feet of five husbands for the sake of preserving dharma, why did I have to bear the burden of the whole world's mockery, sneers, innuendos, abuse, scorn and slander.... 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 a tale of calumny (Ray 3).

There laid, in the foothills of the Himalayas, the woman who had suffered the greatest injustice of all time, without the protection of her mighty husbands, devoid even of a peaceful death. Draupadi's life is scrutinised even today because of its unique turn of events. But for a woman who has shown courage in times of great distress, she is very much undermined. Her valour has been mistaken for selfishness. It is ironic to note that, there were times in her life, when she was braver than her warrior husbands. Her place in history still remains that of a wife's than of a heroine's.

Ray has given insights into the untold emotions that the heroine might have felt in the course of her life. Most of the time women are sacrificed for protecting the family ties. Her sacrifices, her strengths are never realized. Draupadi is one such woman who tears apart the docile, submissive woman. She revenges, and fights for love and honour. She has done so much to women and to mankind, and still the first thing that people associate her with is her iconoclastic marriage. It overshadows every single achievement of her life. This may be due to the reluctance of patriarchy to accept heroism in a woman. To marry five warrior princes takes an immense amount of courage, and Draupadi did all of that to "fulfil her duties." There have always been prejudices against Draupadi because of her polyandrous marriage, which acted as a catalyst in the formation of her identity. She is often linked with the bold, outspoken women who are looked down upon by the society. Even today, children are named Sita or Savitri, but very seldom are they given Draupadi's name. This is because of the stigma associated with that name. That a woman should or should not marry more than once is her choice. But, to tag her with a negative identity is unfair and downright nonsensical. It is also to be noted that all of Draupadi's husbands had other wives and they are never criticised for that. This shows the society's distorted take on women's identity. Draupadi's extraordinary life is often summed up as the most famous polyandrous life led by a woman and somehow this tarnished her identity in the eyes of the world.

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