

The Palace of Illusions and Yajnaseni-A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

In ancient days patriarchal culture of India considers women as 'object'. Women are restricted to kitchens. They are not recognized as individuals or autonomous beings. They are not allowed to think freely. They have faced many hindrances in the academic circuits. The concept of feminist writing was started by men. Later women have joined to write feministic concepts. Rabindranath Tagore is considered as the first feminist writer in India. The author focuses on how the feministic concepts are discussed in Yajnaseni and The Palace of Illusion.

Keywords: Feminist, intellectual, swayamvara, distinctive relationship, Indian woman writers, womanhood.

Introduction: Feminism is a movement that champions the cause of the woman and fights for political, social and educational equality of the women. Feminist movement started in England in 1851. In 1928 voting rights are equalized for men and women. In the USA Feminist movement starts from 1848. Though feminism is an international phenomenon, it does not have particular features. It is to centralize women's experiences of sexuality, work and the family inevitably challenges traditional frame works of knowledge. In the United States Elaine Showalter lays a foundation on feminist criticism. She establishes herself as a formative feminist influence in the 1970's with the appearance of **A Literature of Their Own**. In her essay **Toward a Feminist Poetics**, she says "The repressed messages of women in history, in anthropology, in psychology, in economics, in almost all fields dealing with women- must be sought out".

Elaine Showalter has divided feminism into three phases: 1. Feminine phase 2. Feminist phase 3. Female phase.

In ancient days patriarchal culture of India considers women as 'object'. Women are restricted to kitchens. They are not recognized as individuals or autonomous beings. They are not allowed to think freely. They have faced many hindrances in the academic circuits.

Indian Feminists have against the culture specific concerns within India's patriarchal society, such as laws and the practice of widow immolation of Sati and Child marriages. Feminism in India is divided into three phases. European male colonists started to communicate against the social evil Sati which is practicing in India. The first phase of feminism is started in the mid-

nineteenth century. The second phase started from 1915 to the time of Independence. In this phase Gandhi has incorporated the movements of women's into the quit India movement. He has given a new direction and dimension to the feminist movement in India. He desires that woman should get equal opportunities along with men in each and every field. Female writers in India have placed the problems of Indian women and they have proved their place in world literature. The highly educated and intellectual women novelists have made their observation of life and have imparted a psychological depth to their writings. These writers have given a new path for the younger generation of Indian women novelists. They have presented the internal female psyche, and their aspirations and responses to the world.

A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. As Patricia Mayer Smacks remarks "There seems to be something that we call a women's point of view on outlook sufficiently distinct to be recognizable though the countries."

The concept of feminist writing was started by men. Later women have joined to write feministic concepts. Rabindranath Tagore is considered as the first feminist writer in India. His novels like **Choker Bali** and **Chare Bhaire** are known for their bold female characters. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshav Chandran Sen, Phule, Agarkar have contributed a lot towards feminism. Kamini Roy is a Bengali poet who fights for women's education and voting rights. Her best known work is **Nirmalaya**. Kamaladas is also one of the first feminist writers in India. Her poems and fiction explore female sexuality intensively and present them fearlessly to the readers. Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni is one of the well known Indian-American authors with feminist ideology. **The Palace of Illusions** is one of her famous works. It is a feminist reading of the **Mahabharata**. Divakaruni elaborately portrays the roles of women characters in the novel Kunti, Gandhari, Sikhandi and Bhanumati. Pratibha Ray is considered as feminist writer in contemporary period. She writes **Yajnaseni** in female perspective. In the words of Susheela Singh:

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been onesided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life.⁶

Indian women writers have immensely contributed to the field of English literature. Their study and re-vision of myths prevalent in the Indian literature since the beginning. The writers in India have been taking the mythological reconsiderations as the subjects of their works. The position of women in India occupies a vital place from ancient period to contemporary period. Indian women are often seen as the embodiment of virtues. They are considered as Pativratas. Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Anasuya etc are the models of Indian Virtuous women. They are portrayed as ideal women in Indian scriptures such as **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**. In the **Ramayana** Sita is the incarnation of Lakshmi and Valmiki portrays her as an ideal wife, and ideal mother. She shadows her husband when he is exiled for fourteen years. During the exile, while they are living in

forest, she is abducted by Ravana, the king of Rakshasa. Ultimately Rama kills Ravana but she has to prove her chastity by falling into the fire and emerging unburnt. Her husband Rama is called as an ideal man by the whole world. Following the complaint of an ordinary washer man in Rama abandons her in the forest.

Sita obeys her husband's order. She lives in the hermitage of Valmiki and then gives birth to twin sons. She brings up her children with virtuous conduct. After handing over her sons to their father, she ends her life by returning her mother the goddess of earth's womb. Sita never argues with her husband and simply obeys his orders. She makes her children to be educated. Sita does not reveal the fact that her husband was abandoned by her husband to her children. Sita's life is only an example to reflect the plight of the innumerable woman in India in the past.

In Dvaparayuga the epic **Mahabharata** was written by Vedavyasa. It is the story of the Kauravas who are killed by Pandavas in retaliation to the humiliation. Draupadi is presented as the main cause of the war of Kurukshetra. Many writers have treated the epics **The Ramayana** and **The Mahabharata** in different literary forms and provided many interpretations. In the age of science and technology, many of the old values are changed and new values are respected. Modern writers began to review the old myths in order to correct and reproach old value system. The character of Draupadi in Mahabharata has attracted the attention of many modern writers as her life has provided marvelous material to discuss various issues firmly related to feminism.

Feministic concerns in the novels of Palace of Illusions and Yajnaseni: In the twentieth century women's writing is considered as an influential medium of modernization and feminist statements. The novels of the women writers consist of latest burning issues related to women exist in the society since long. Pratibha Ray and Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni have revised the myth of Draupadi in their novels **Yajnaseni** and **The Palace of Illusions** respectively. They portrayed Draupadi as a pioneer of feminism in India. She was given equal rights with men. A few women stand out as strong and brave as Draupadi. The character of Draupadi. She is the wife of five Pandava Princes, the great warriors of the time. She takes birth from sacrificial fire. Her father Drupad makes her to be educated and she writes poetry. She is interested to obtain knowledge in various subjects. Once Veda Vyasa says, "The life that ends while gathering multicoloured shells of knowledge from the shores of eternal time- that is a meaningful life."⁷(Ray.15)

When she asks Veda Vyasa for more books to read, he says that all books are created by God. Its pages are the experiences of every movement linked to this earth's dust particles.

When the Pandavas and Draupadi return home from the Swayamvara, Arjuna announces to his mother that he has brought home a prize that he has so skillfully won. Draupadi cannot identify the person who wins her in the Swayamvara, but she sincerely follows dharma of a Hindu bride

Thus she takes Sita as her role model and follows dharma of a typical wife. She does not want to be a cause for the grief of her father and brother. Following Krishna's advice, she spends a year in turn with each of her husbands. During the period the rest of her husbands she should not have any conjugal happiness. The remaining four of her husbands are forbidden to enter the chamber in

which Draupadi and the present husband of the year are residing. If one does so, even accidentally, he has to take up exile for twelve years. Thus Draupadi becomes a common consort of the five Pandavas as if her goal in the life is the preservation of dharma alone she prays to Sri Krishna : “O Lord! If my birth is for preserving dharma on earth then give me all the insults and calumny that are to come, but also give me the strength to bear them all”.⁹ (Ray.8)

Her conjugal life is strictly disciplined, requiring tremendous self-control. She changes her life style according to each husband's wish. She courageously accepts these challenges of womanhood. She has five sons from each of her husbands. She does not forget the reason of her birth. As Bhavalkar says in his **The Eminent Women in the Mahabharata**,

Draupadi as one of the most powerful, imposing and fascinating personalities in the **Mahabharata**, has been extolled by scholars ancient belief, her name is included in the group of five names of famous auspicious ancient women, and the chanting of their names to bring religious merit-Punya.¹⁰

Draupadi's extremely beauty and intelligence become the cause of her misery. Her cruel fate divides her as a possession among five husbands and cuts up her personality. She becomes merely a victim a conspicuous patriarchal society. Feminists consider that Draupadi in **Mahabharata** is harassed and exploited by the men. Modern writers, especially women writers choose her character for revision and assessed her in many ways. Some of them prove that, she is greater than all the men of **Mahabharata**

The palace of illusions is the extraordinary edifices built by Mayasur in midst of Kandava forest. palace is built a midst of the Kandava forest when Duryodhana and his entourage visit the palace , he gets puzzled and confused seeing him fallen in a dubious lake, Draupadi chides, “Andhey ka putraandha”.

Duryodhana gets enraged and plots an intrigue to defeat Pandavas. With the help of his maternal uncle Shakuni he defeats Yudhishthira in the game of dice, and loots everything including Draupadi from Yudhishthira. All the Pandavas their slaves then Duryodhana inhumanly sends his servant to call Draupadi to the court. She pleads:

I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Drishtadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned ¹²(Divakaruni, p.190)

Draupadi is a scholar in different subjects. She is an adept in Nyaya Shastra. She quoting from Nyaya Shastra, she asserts, “If Perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his life.”¹³(Divakaruni p.190)

Though her husbands the great warriors of the time and all the Kuru elders like Bheeshma, Drona, Kripacharya, Dronasra and others are presented in the assembly, she is insulted by Duryodhana and his companions. She expects that her five husbands would save her from being disrobed. But her husband Yudhishthira who lost her in the game of dice becomes a mute spectator. As a last resort she prays Lord Sri Krishna, her dear sakha. Immediately he responds her prayer and helps her.

The plight of Draupadis reflects exactly what Simon de Beauvoir says in her *The Second Sex*, “All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception.”¹⁵

Lord Sri Krishna becomes Draupadi’s empathetic friend in her *Yagnaseni*. She believes that there is a need of at least one empathetic friend in midst of all Wealth, prosperity, power, fame, friends and relations, husband, son, daughter, wife, as he provides joy that enhances bliss a hundredfold, and it is the grief who shares her and reduce the pain.(150 *Yajnaseni*) Draupadi shares a distinctive relationship with Krishna and considers him a friend and equal. She prays to him in every hour of need. She shows extreme faith to Sri Krishna. She is the epitome of both bhakti and Shakti. Once, Satyabhama the wife of Lord Sri Krishna visits Draupadi, while they are staying in Kamyaka forest asks her:

Sister! How do you manage to satisfy all five husbands at a time? They appear ready to fulfill any wish of yours. Sakhi, have you any incarnations, magical right, or herbs and recipes for keeping the five husbands under control? Do tell me?¹⁶(Ray.314)

Pratibha Ray explains Draupadi’s attitude towards Lord Sri Krishna, in her words:

O Krishna, Krishna is yours. Since my very birth I have been in an attitude of surrender to Krishna. Those who mistake my attitude of surrender also fail to understand Krishna. The love of Krishna is not erotic in the human sense. My husband understand this. Therefore, they even regard the love of Krishna as their good fortune.¹⁷(Ray.316)

Ray says that, Draupadi is called a “Krishna” due to her dark complexion. She is educated, intelligent and beautiful princess of Panchali and in her kingdom there is no discrimination on gender basis. She is given equal chance for education by her father Drupad. Krishna is intended more importance by every character including her husbands. Yudhistira becomes a witness to Draupadi’s humiliation. But he refuses to help his wife. She goes to another husband who would punish her humiliation. He is Bhima who would never disobey the elder brother. She has realized that Bhima could rescue her. Ultimately Bhima saves Draupadi by killing Keechaka.

Draupadi shows her individuality, strength, and unbending determination for both justice and vengeance. Along with all these characteristics, she has become the emblem of empowerment for women. Draupadi’s is not only an authorizing character, but she stands out with her optimistic qualities as woman and wife to the Pandavas. As Simon de Beauvoir says in her book **The Second Sex**, “To Catch a husband is an art; to hold him is a job.”¹⁸

Draupadi herself considers her life. She questions herself what experience has made her peace. She has ridden all the years in her life. She is delighted one movement, distract another movement. Neither men nor women has given joy throughout her life. She loves the palace more than her husbands. Ultimately the palace, her greatest pride has brought her sorrow. Though Vyasa depicts the character of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* as a heroic figure, authors Pratibha Ray and Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni present her character as an ordinary woman. This woman is all the more troublesome when she is seen as helpless and at the mercy of the men in her life. The authors depict

the inner conflicts of a woman through the character of Draupadi. In every difficult situation she has expected protection from men. But she does not receive any help from them. She leads controversial and polyandrous life with five husbands.

In the beginning Arjuna wins her in the swayamvar contest. She has given her heart to him. Though she has no idea about the man, she follows him unquestioningly. When Kunti asks them to divide her up, she expects Arjuna to tell his mother that it is not acceptable. But Arjuna and his brothers have accepted their mother's wish. When her mother-in-law asks her to be a wife of five brothers

When she is humiliated in Kuru court, she expects that Karna would protect her. But Karna also abuses her by saying that a woman who has more than one husband definitely enjoyed the sport like a prostitute. As she knows the fact of Karna's past by her brother Dristadyumna.

Draupadi asks all in the assembly, "Can a wife be staked by a husband who has lost himself? Can I be won thus or not?"²² (Bhavalkar, p.25)

Draupadi is an unpredictable heroine and a traditional Hindu wife. She is an early feminist known for her boldness in challenging those who harmed her or her family. Being wife of the mighty brothers, she is a smart, bold and conventional woman. Though she refuses Karna in her swayamvara, she silently accepts polyandry. According to the mythology, it is her predefined destiny. Draupadi is not a greedy woman. When Dritarastra sanctions her three boons, she asks him to be free Yudhistira from slavery as the first boon. For the second she asks the freedom of Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. She does not ask third boon and says:

Greed leads to destruction. I, unfit for a third boon, cannot accept it. There can be one boon for a good vaisya, two for a Ksatriya woman, three for a king, and hundred for a Brahmana.²³ (Bhavalkar, p.32)

She does not win all her battles. Her husbands take other wives Hidimba, Kali, Devika, Balandhara, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Karunamat. Though she feels jealous of their marriages, she is a practical woman. She does not expect her husbands to remain celibates while they waited for their turn as her spouse. She has been at their side when they were young and in danger. She plays a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. She shares their hardship in Khandav. She helps them in designing the unique palace. In the **The Palace of Illusions** she says, "If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were stung."²⁴ (Divakaruni p.156) Draupadi commits herself to the welfare of the Pandavas and their kingdom.

In the Mahabharata, the woman characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Subhadra and Uttara stand as eminent women. They are the women who have power and chastity. They object against exploitation in their own powerful way. In the novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni* the character of Kunti is portrayed as a heroic mother. In the epic Mahabharata she is treated with much respect. Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni and Pratibha Ray make her a role model for

contemporary mothers who lose their husbands and who have taken up the responsibility of bringing up their children,

The Character of Gandhari is depicted in the Mahabharata as a faithful and a devoted wife. Though her husband is sightless king, she sacrificed her sight by blindfolding herself throughout the life. She has the power to curse anyone. After the Kurukshetra war she curses even Lord Sri Krishna because of his interference in the war and being caused the destruction of Kuru dynasty. Nevertheless, she knows her sons are wrong doers, due to her mother's love she tries to protect her sons from their enemies. Thus Ray shares possessive attitude of a mother towards her children.

The character of Subhadra is also portrayed as an influential mother in the epic Mahabharata. She is one of the wives of Arjuna and sister of Lord Sri Krishna. She is abducted by Arjuna with the help of her brother Sri Krishna. She shares mother's love for Draupadi's children along with her son Abhimanyu while the Pandavas are in exile. In Ray's novel, this character is given secondary place. In Chitra Benerjee's novel the character of Subhadra is not appeared.

The Princess of Virata Kingdom Uttara marries Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna. She is depicted in the epic as a patriotic wife who encourages her husband to participate in the war to show his prowess. After the war she becomes widow at a very younger age. Her only son remains the heir of Kuru dynasty. She teaches her son in the administration of the kingdom. In Yajnaseni Ray portrays this character as patriotic and legendary woman.

Vyasa considers Draupadi as a heroic figure in the epic **Mahabharata**. But he does not express female agony and distress. But in the novels **The Palace of Illusions** and **Yajnaseni** Chitra Benerjee Divakaruni and Pratibha Ray portray the character of Draupadi as an empowering woman. Draupadi is married to five men and she sacrifices herself according to their wishes and for the sake of their kingdom. In **Yajnaseni**, she says:

Chheh!, Why such selfishness in me? An ordinary man belongs to his wife, parents, family. But the hero belongs to the country, the people, the society and the world. My five husbands are all heroes. Then how shall I keep them bound for my happiness only²⁶ (158)

She does not breakdown the reputation of her parents and in laws. She curses every one present in the assembly but she does not run away from there. As Bhavalkar states,

Her fortitude, courage and endurance were tremendous. She was bold and eloquent in her speech and always dignified, and also modest, respectful and humble towards elders.²⁷ (Bhavalkar p.144)

It is hard to believe that Dharmaraj Yudhistir puts his wife on stake. She vows not to tie her hair until she decorated it with the blood of Dussasana. Though she loses all her sons in the war of Kurukshetra, she swallows her grief and agony and leads her remaining life respectfully. She is a compelling, intriguing and controversial character in Indian Mythology. She also emerges as a tragic heroine. She becomes an echo of every woman in this world. In those days women are treated as properties of their husbands. They do not have political, economical, social independence. They

are the subordinates of their father, husband and later sons. Though Draupadi belongs to a very powerful family and she is not an ordinary woman. She is subjected to great humiliation and sufferings. She becomes a slave in the hands of the patriarchal society.

Though she loves Arjuna, She has to surrender to all her husbands. But she protests against the injustice and compels all the men including her husbands, father in law and all elders to question their actions. She is also accused of triggering the great war between the cousins of Pandavas and Kauravas. Her character is an inspiration of a modern woman.

Draupadi is praised for her beauty and virtues not only by her husbands, her mother-in-law, her relatives, friends and her sakha Sri Krishna, but also by her enemies. Yudhishthira says that she is such that any man would desire for her and that she has never committed any sin. Bhishma equals her to the ancient famous wives. Her mother-in-law Kunti praises her for the virtues and her laudable behavior with all her husbands. They always express their grief for her insult and suffering in the hands of the enemies. They try to keep her happy and are anxious about her safety. She always busy day and night by preparing food for thousands of guests, sages, mendicants, anchorites, and the poor and needy.

Drupad arranges Sordress to teach social skills to Draupadi. She teaches her queenly and unqueenly skills. Sordress makes her to lie on the floor at night, with only her arm for a pillow. She makes Draupadi to wear the cheapest cotton saris and prepares her what the lowest servant eats. She teaches when to lie and when to speak the truth. Draupadi has learned from her how to discover a man's hidden tragedies by reading the tremor in his face.

As modern novelists Pratibha Ray and Divakaruni present a psycho-analytical study of the character of Draupadi. Draupadi has to play different roles as distracted mother, a secret lover, a proud queen, a rebellious daughter-in-law. She always reminds her husbands about the revenge on her enemies. These extraordinary qualities of Draupadi like courage, ability to work hard, peaceful mind, eager for knowledge, ability to fight for justice, modesty, forgiveness, softness, self sacrifice, aggressiveness and softness make her an extraordinary woman. In Yajnaseni she declares:

A woman desires a man full of heroism, prowess, wealth, beauty and other qualities. But among men, he who can apprehend the secret thoughts of a woman is not only desirable but with mediating upon. How many men understand a woman's mind? ³¹(P.110)

The combat for women's rights in India is usually focused on crimes which are generally proliferated against them such as dowry, rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, female infanticide and the like but never has the women's organizations in India questioned the basis of discrimination in the Indian society. Simone de Beauvoir in her feminist classic **Second Sex**, explains the status of women in today's world in the chapter The Independent women.

It is observed that feminism is found in different arenas. In Indian mythology, Goddess Durga kills Mahishasur and fights with Lord Siva. In the great Indian epic **Ramayana** Sita is interpreted as a feminist by the modern writers. She is presented as submissive character who follows the orders of

Rama. She rejects her husband's invitation to be queen of his kingdom at the end. In Dvaparayuga Draupadi is considered as feminist. Though she is presented as aggressive woman, she has soft nature and quietly fights for the justice for her insult at Kuru court. She makes her husbands to take revenge on her enemies who want to harm her and her family. Lord Sri Krishna's beloved wife Satyabhama kills Narakasura to preserve the dharma.

Now the times have changed. Mr.Bhavalkar rightly remarks that:

Unlike in the times of the Epics when for the protection of women, they were considered undeserving for independence, now all the fields are open for women, with education they can compete with men and establish their equality with men.³⁴(Bhavalkar p.150)

Rabindranath Tagore is considered the first feminist in India. Many feminists like Anita Desai, Kamaladas, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Desh Pande, Mahaswetha Devi, Pratibha Ray and Chitra BenerjeeDivakaruni portrayed the vital role of woman in their works.They have recognized female agony and tried to bring change the oppression of women. They depicted the violation of women rights through their characters

GurajadaApparao encouraged widow marriages through his play Kanyasulkam. Women like Smt. Indira Gandhi, our Ex Prime Minister, BenazirButto, Ex-Prime minister of Pakistan, held glorious positions in their life. In the field of sports P.T.Usha, Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal have earned laurels for the country. In the field of Space Kalpana Chawla sacrifices her life through NASA activities.

Conclusion:As per our studyDraupadi is not only old traditional women she also role model for this generation women also. She shows her individuality, strength, and unbending determination for both justice and vengeance. Along with all these characteristics, she has become the emblem of empowerment for women.

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