

Draupadi - A Changing Cultural Image

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A culture is perceived and experienced through certain perceivable entities that can be seen and embody essence of that particular culture. It is known as cultural myth that is created by the culture's value system and operates as a major influence on that society. C. Larson (Web) holds that, cultural myths are always carried through cultural images and are instrumental in influencing and persuading the public. In fact, these myths propagate that wisdom that is essential for good living comes through 'challenge and suffering.' Women in Indian myths have been constructs of culture oscillating between challenges of identity and suffering for family and state. Cultural myths therefore become fundamental aspects of a society and are intertwined into its fabric. They give one a sense of identity and space. This space has been usurped by patriarchy, which has marginalized the position of woman to that of subjectivity. The voice of a woman in almost all cultures, down history, has been silenced and rendered passive. Indian mythology is replete with such cultural images. The great Indian epic *The Mahabharata* has also portrayed women as passive. In the epic, woman is relegated to the position of subject and commoditized, often used as an object of the male gaze. She has only one objective, that is, to preserve her 'Dharma' and to be useful to men without any objection to any injustice meted out to her.

This article proposes to analyze the image of the passive Draupadi from *The Mahabharata* as an image of abject suffering, meant to be sacrificed in the feud between the Pandava and Kaurava Princes, and weigh her against the character of Draupadi, who is also known as Yajnaseni, the one who was obtained from sacrificial fire for the benefit of society. The same Draupadi is portrayed as Yajnaseni in the award-winning novel *Yajnaseni* written by the noted Odia feminist writer Pratibha Ray. Draupadi of the original epic is a beautiful princess, subservient to the authority of her father, Drupada, the King of Panchala. Beautiful and coveted, her story is a saga of suffering and disgrace. Passively she takes everything in her stride as she adheres to her dharma. Subjected to polyandry, Draupadi finds her five husbands discarding her repeatedly: each takes at least one more wife. She loves Arjuna, the man who had actually won her in the *swayamvara*, but she never gets him to herself for he marries Ulupi, Chitrangada and has Subhadra as his favourite wife. Yudhishtira, the eldest of her five husbands, pledges her like chattel at a game of dice and she bears insult and disgrace in the name of dharma. Ray rewrites the character of Draupadi in *Yajnaseni*, as a new woman who questions her 'dharma'. She is not afraid of expressing her resentment towards the ills done to her in the name of culture. While succumbing

to polyandry, she questions its justification; resents being gambled upon in the court and offering her body as an extension of commodity, she also refuses to accept a passive role like her counterpart, Draupadi, in the original *Mahabharata*. Trapped as she is inside cultural and sexual politics, she is not afraid of expressing her desire for the third of her five husbands, Arjuna. This paper will make a socio-cultural analysis and examine the *swayamvara* and marriage episodes involving Draupadi and bring to light how the new Draupadi 'writes back' or resentfully vocalizes the wrongs done to her by Hindu patriarchal culture.

Culture as a concept has been defined veritably in its multiple dimensions. Raymond Williams has described culture as "general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (1976, 80). It is acquired and cultivated and is "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (80). It can be said to be "the signifying system through which necessarily . . . a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (1981, 13). Culture is a practice that embraces social, political and economic institutions. The practice constitutes meanings, values and subjectivities. Jordan and Weedon in *Cultural Politics* claim that "*everything* in social and cultural life is fundamentally to do with power. Power is at the centre of cultural politics. It is integral to culture" (11). They explain that meaningful practices in society '*involve relations of power*' (11) and the cultural discourse operates upon domination and subordination. Power enables patriarchy 'to realize for themselves particular possibilities which it denies others' (11) - in our case women. Women are to accept the meanings, social and moral values as defined by the dominant male. Hindu cultural ethics in the times of the *Mahabharata* considered *dharma* to be a system of social and

religious duties central to Hindu ethics. It was equated with duty and morality. Krishna, one of the major patriarchal figures, who dominates the epic, affirms that adherence to *dharma* is the ultimate good and most valuable of human goals. He advocates *dharma* as the consequence of intrinsic good. Joseph Dowd discusses consequentialism in this context. He says that "Consequentialism is one approach to ethics. For consequentialists, the sole aim of morality is to produce good consequences" (36). Rules and actions sometimes do not complement each other in the *Mahabharata* as Krishna constantly considers the utilitarian consequences of *dharma*. Dowd analyses this in terms of *act-consequentialism* and *rule-consequentialism*. Proper rules are said to lead to good action that have a good consequence. "According to *act-consequentialism*, the right action is whatever action maximizes intrinsic goods. According to *rule-consequentialism*, right actions are actions that obey certain rules, where the rules have been chosen based on their *tendency* to maximize intrinsic goods. However, despite their disagreements, consequentialists agree that the point of morality is to maximize intrinsic goods" (36). *Dharma* which equals duty and morality cannot be a synonym for rules rather, Dowd explains that, "Krsna's moral system is called *dharma-consequentialism* because it says that right actions aim at maximizing global adherence to the rules of *dharma*; this is very different from saying that right actions themselves adhere to the rules" (47).

During the period a different *dharma* was constituted for women known as *stridharma* or duties of women in life as prescribed by the dominant patriarchy. The most popular Hindu orthodox, Brahmanical text that prescribes *dharma* is *Manusmṛiti* or *The Laws of Manu*. It grants women a severely limited position as a wife

and householder. In many ways, *The Laws of Manu* subordinates women, recommending that they should never obtain any kind of independence or autonomy (Doniger 115). *The Laws of Manu* discusses to great length marriage and the relationship between man and wife. The text suggests that a husband should be considered the “god” for a wife, which consequently, in theory, would create a relationship based not on equal companionship, but on hierarchal dominance. “A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities.”(115). The religion or duty of a wife therefore does not primarily consist of worshipping a deity, but worshipping her “caretaker” and head of household who, as a male, is inherently closer to the gods. Thereby, she would justify her *stridharma*. The laws further recommend that women should always be under the authority and supervision of male authority figures throughout every stage of their life (363). After this discussion on what dharma entails, it is pertinent to look at the ‘Swayamvara Parva’ in Vol 1 of *The Mahabharata* where Draupadi is paraded with a garland before a mass that measure her up. Her father proclaimed “He that will sting this bow and with these well-adorned arrows shoot the mark above the machine shall obtain my daughter” (Roy 420), offering her as a prize and commoditizing her in this manner. Draupadi meekly walks up to the Brahman who has won her and accepts him as her husband. At this point Stephanie Jamieson’s discussion regarding Hindu marriage comes to mind. She argues that the rite of marriage reduced a woman’s status to an object or commodity while at the same time granted her an elevated position in society. She describes a Hindu daughter’s arranged marriage as a “simple exchange token between two family groups” as well as a “gift” and “piece of property”(253). As a “gift” to a

new household and family, a woman was seen as a link or mediator between these two families, which, according to Jamieson, was a dangerous, “anxiety-inducing” position (253).

Draupadi becomes a willing gift to the Kuru household. Her anxiety of being in the role of the mediator in her father’s design to avenge his insult by slaying Drona; and her in-law’s pawn to get her father’s clan to fight for them in the battle of Kurukshetra as her *dharma* remains with her throughout the epic. She becomes a subject in the discourse of hegemony and domination. The episode that follows is the concern of this paper, the post-*swayamvara* marriage of Draupadi to the five Pandava brothers is an exercise in the discourse of hegemony, power and domination. Hegemony needs to be understood in the Gramscian terms. Giovanni Arrighi analyses Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in his book, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. He notes the Machiavellian characteristics of the term and says that hegemony is different from pure and simple domination; it can take the form of a “combination of consent and coercion.” Consent, he notes, is associated with moral leadership, or as we have seen in the case of Krishna, *dharma-consequentialism*, while domination implies “the use of force, or a credible threat of force”. Hegemony adds itself to domination and ‘accrues to a dominant group by virtue of its capacity to place all the issues around which conflict rages on a “universal” plane’ (28). “Universal,” Arrighi explains, is “seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favourable conditions for the latter’s maximum expansion” (28). In this context it is equally pertinent to discuss Robert Cox’s analyses of Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony”. Like Arrighi he notes the Machiavellian root of Gramsci’s understanding of power. He says that for Gramsci power is “a

necessary combination of consent and coercion”(164). According to Cox hegemony prevails when “the consensual aspect of power is in the forefront”(164). Because hegemony is “enough to ensure conformity of behaviour in most people most of the time”, coercion will be mainly latent and used only in particular, deviant situations (164).

This is particularly true in the *Mahabharata*, where the dominant Patriarchy led by Krishna lays down rules or dictates of *dharma* which has to be followed unquestioned. Draupadi’s consent is consensual and the episode of marriage of Draupadi to five men is a case in point. After the Swayamvara the Pandavas returned to the Potter’s hut and presented Draupadi to their mother Kunti as alms won for the day. Kunti instructs them to share amongst them equally whatever they had won. “Enjoy ye all (what ye have obtained)!” (432). Then she sees Draupadi and is anxious :

‘Oh, what have I said?’ And anxious from fear of sin, and reflecting how everyone could be extricated from the situation, she took the cheerful Yajnaseni by the hand, and approaching Yudhishtira said, ‘The daughter of King Yajnasena upon being represented to me by thy younger brothers as the alms they had obtained, from ignorance, O king, I said what was proper, viz. Enjoy ye all what hath been obtained. O thou bull of the Kuru race, tell me how my speech may not become untrue ; how sin may not touch the daughter of the king of Panchala, and how also she may not become uneasy !’ 432.

Mother Kunti addresses the eldest son Yudhishtira and brings the issue of morality so that her *dharma* is not violated and her words are not disobeyed. Yudhishtira addresses Arjuna as he is the winner of Draupadi to take some action and preserve *dharma*. The ever obedient Arjuna subservient to hegemony replies:

“O king, do not make me a participator in sin ! Thy behest is not conformable to virtue ! That is the path followed by the sinful. Thou shouldst wed first then the strong-armed Bhima of inconceivable feats then myself, then Nakula, and last of all, Sahadeva endued with great activity. Both Vrikodara and myself, and the twins and this maiden also, all await, O monarch, thy commands. When such is the state of things, do that, after reflection which would be proper, and conformable virtue, and productive of fame, and beneficial unto the king of Panchala. All of us are obedient to thee. O, command us as thou likest !” 432.

On hearing this all the brothers look lustfully at the beautiful princess and covet her. Yudhishtira to create favourable condition for his clan decides on something very improper. We read: “And the King then, from fear of a division amongst the brothers, addressing all of them, said “The auspicious Draupadi shall be the common wife of us all !”” (433). This according to the scriptures should have been sacrilegious and profane, but in the *Mahabharata* is not considered so, rather it gains sanction of society as per utility and the theory of consequentialism. Morality becomes a devise of power and something unthinkable becomes proper. Draupadi, the woman, is commoditized. She is treated as a passive object who should silently and tacitly consent to follow her *stridharma* of obeying and consenting to whatever was prescribed as her lot. She has no objection to becoming the wife of five men and “cheerfully did all that she was directed to do” (435). Draupadi is projected as a stereotype of the Hindu docile woman who has been described elaborately in terms of physical attributes but has no character, voice or opinion, instead she consents to the dominant male who subject her to latent coercion in the name of *dharma* and greater good. After

marrying the five brothers Draupadi eats meagerly, serves her mother-in-law and husbands. She sleeps at the bottom of the grass mat with five pairs of legs of her husbands resting on her body. The *Mahabharata* explains that, “though she lay with the sons of Pandu on that bed of Kusa grass along the line of their feet as if she were their nether pillow, grieved not in her heart nor thought disrespectfully of those bulls amongst the Kurus” (434). Draupadi, the woman, the daughter, the wife is rendered passive a ‘nether pillow’, and completely marginalized. She has no feelings and is said not to “grieve in her heart”, nor think about the men with disrespect.

Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni* offers an alternative narrative diffused in the same space as the *Mahabharata*. Elaine Showalter in her book *A Literature of Their Own* discusses a narrative that resists the traditional or ‘masculinist’ narrative. This narrative that depicts conscious resistance is the alternative narrative or the ‘feminist’ narrative. Ray’s novel is situated in the times of the *Mahabharata*, the characters, theme and plot are the same, yet the narrative grammar in *Yajnaseni* problematizes the subjectivity of the passive female. Remaining within the ambit of Hindu moral order and ethics, Yajnaseni/Draupadi questions the equation of domination and subordination. The novel and the central character Draupadi/Yajnaseni resist simplification. Yajnaseni is the embodiment of a scripturally learned woman who had been neutralized in the epic. In Ray’s novel although she faces daily humiliation, she rises above domination remaining within the Hindu relegio-cultural space. She preserves, protects and propagates the spiritual essence of Hinduism but not as an instrument, but as a participant. *Yajnaseni* fills the silent narrative space of the traditional text by describing the post-swayambara and pre-marital relationship between Draupadi and Arjuna. Draupadi’s learning has

been completely marginalized in the original text, but Ray’s narrative appreciates the education of Yajnaseni. Arjuna says: “I had heard that the princess is adept in the scriptures. Then I believed that for women to know scriptures meant learning them by rote like parrots. But now it appears that you have not memorized the scriptures but internalized them. You are not only knowledgeable but full of wisdom too. I admit defeat before you” (52). The narrative here is not reductive rather it is culturally and socially engaging taking cognizance of the important and participatory role of woman in society.

The same scene of marriage and passive acceptance of polyandry as consequence of utilitarian dharma is narrated in Ray’s *Yajnaseni*. As Yudhisthira, the elder brother, informs their mother, Kunti about a prize they had won that day, she instructs them to share it equally amongst them. After seeing Draupadi, Kunti is put in a dilemma of preserving her dharma while violating the *stridharma* of Draupadi. She is aware that “it is an insult to her [Draupadi], an undying limitless shame” (56), yet for her Machiavellian aims she, Krishna and the five brothers advocate a wrong in the name of dharma as it suits to unify the five brothers. Draupadi’s passive position in the traditional narrative space of the *Mahabharata* is disturbed in the narrative of the novel. She does not silently and “cheerfully” accept her predicament. She says:

My mind rebelled. Did I have no say? . . . I had placed the garland of bridegroom-choice around the neck of one already. By law, and according to dharma, it was he alone who was my husband. . . . Why should I accept the other brothers as my husbands? Would that not destroy my dharma? The very idea was ridiculous: one woman to live as the wife of five men ! . . . Why should I silently bear such an insult? . . . bereft of reason and

judgment, would these brothers impose upon me their whimsical authority and should I accept that ? 56.

The dilemma is resolved as hegemony overrides reason. Tactfully, using latent coercion Kunti wins the consent of subordination from Draupadi, who is made to believe by both Kunti and Krishna that accepting five husbands is for greater good. Hegemony prevails and consensual aspect of power comes to the forefront and ensures conformity, in this case Draupadi accepting five husbands in the name of universal good. Arjuna in the pretext of preserving dharma says, “we shall all enjoy the princess equally. She will be the wife, according to dharma, of us all” (57). Unlike, in the traditional *Mahabharata*, Draupadi reacts and engages in a mental battle born of insult and anguish. Anger burns within her. She refuses to accept the cultural significations, the meanings, social and moral values as defined by the dominant male. She revolts from within :

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 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.⁵⁷

Draupadi in Ray’s novel is not ‘cheerful’ in accepting the directions of domination. She understands the cultural politics and that cultural discourse operates upon domination and subordination. She sees through the game of power that enables patriarchy to realize for themselves particular possibilities which it denies others. Kunti and her sons preserve their dharma destroying her’s. “All of them wanted to accomplish their own aims by using me, but were chary of acknowledging it” (60).

Yajnaseni seethes with anger even as she realizes that she has no alternative but to accept hegemony of patriarchy, “ Was it the integrity of my womanhood that was of greater moment to me or the mother’s word, the protection of my husband’s and his brother’s dharma? To sacrifice myself for safeguarding the dharma of others – was that my duty or was it my duty to choose one husband for the sake of my self-respect and happiness?” (60). Dharma-consequentiality and consent through latent coercion inform the narrative which would otherwise have escaped the traps of patriarchy and claimed to be a complete alternative feminist narrative. The narrative of Ray’s novel engages in a socio-political debate and ultimately Yajnaseni confirms to the dogma of hegemony. Dowd’s theory of consequentialism is self-evident as Yajnaseni undergoes a traumatic internal debate and forces muteness upon herself. She reasons:

“the mother’s words would not be honoured. The brothers would be guilty of violating the mother’s command. My husband, too. In fact, his sin would be greater. In such circumstances would I be able to found a household of joy with my husband? From the very beginning I would become the target of everyone’s aversion for not honouring the mother’s and the elder brother’s words. Ultimately my husband, would blame me for turning him into a rebel against his mother. In such a situation, how could I speak out my mind openly?” 59.

Pitting dharma, duty, morality and happiness against practical reality, Ray’s narrative very subtly points at the coercive power of hegemony that demands and ensures consent through moralizing. Draupadi does write back in Ray’s Yajnaseni. She is not at all the passive, silent woman subservient to patriarchal authority. She does not accept the prescribed *stridharma*

without questioning it. It is interesting to note the same scene on the first night that she spends with her husbands and mother-in-law at the potter's hut. Similar to the narration in the original Mahabharata, Draupadi/Yajnaseni lies down at the feet of the five husbands. In the original masculinist text Draupadi had no objection to her situation, in fact we are told that she happily accepts her situation and position. But not Ray's Yajnaseni. She is shocked and scandalized that ten feet rest on her body, she ridicules the *dharma*: "Making a cushion of my body of five elements, all ten feet would be placed on it. This would be my appropriate dharma as a woman!"(65). She further introspects and agonizes, saying "But a woman going to bed at the same time with more than one man – how shameful and painful it was! Who besides myself would realize this: how shameful it was for me to touch the feet of five husbands all together?" (65).

The narration here challenges the wisdom of the narration in the epic *Mahabharata* where no one can conceive of questioning authority. Subtly suggestive of an anti-hegemonic alternative narrative Ray's *Yajnaseni* becomes subversive. The nightly conversation between Draupadi and Kunti that is absent in the original *Mahabharata* is an important device in Ray's novel. Kunti tells Yajnaseni about her own marriage and about the manner in which she had obtained her sons in order to appease her anger. Interestingly, this serves just the opposite. Yajnaseni, rightly or wrongly, understands that Kunti had deliberately placed her in such a shameful predicament. "Mother's own conscience must at times have been weighed down with a sense of sin, shame and hesitation. She would have felt guilty. Perhaps even at such times she would have become the target of scorn and ridicule" (66). Yajnaseni presumes that Kunti must not have wanted to look

shamed and small in front of her daughter-in-law, who would eventually come to know about this, and had hence hatched such a conspiracy and had "deliberately compelled her daughter-in-law to accept five husbands"(66). She again thinks that Kunti had used her as a pawn in her selfish design to acquire power for her sons; "was it that for subjugating the hundred sons of her elder sister-in-law, Gandhari, and giving the throne to her own sons, it was essential for them to remain one in heart and soul and, therefore, she cast her daughter-in-law into this terrible predicament?" (66). Theme and plot remaining the same Ray's Yajnaseni acquires a distinct and different position in the narrative. She writes back to patriarchy's cultural and sexual domination of the woman who is supposed to bear all silently and passively. The narrative becomes subversive; addresses *dharma* or morals as used for the convenience of the dominant oppressor and exposes the ills of Hindu patriarchal culture. Meaning and equivalence undergo a cultural transference in Ray's characterization of Draupadi. By transplanting the cultural image of Draupadi and using her alter-name Yajnaseni, the narrator faithfully retains the originality of the image and at the same time creates a different cultural image of Draupadi. This new image addition takes on the added flavor of the present socio-cultural myth of the emancipated woman.

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