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‘Vyasa’s Leftovers’: Shifting [Con]texts of Draupadi from Myth to Fiction

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Abstract

How do we understand the tale of Draupadi? as a single event, or as an inclusive part of a series of events in an epic tale about a great war? The Mahabharata, with its many oral and written variations, translated and transcreated in various languages down the generations, forms one of the many cultural legacies of India. “How many Ramayanas?” asks A. K. Ramanujan (131) as he points out that “classics like the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* have multiple existences” (131). The many variations of the Mahabharata as “history, poetry, moral law, and scripture” (224), Sheldon Pollock states, subjects it to multiple meanings and entails “quite different protocols for interpretations” (224). Events and tales from the Mahabharata have been isolated and given different folk and literary forms as creative variations. B. N. Pattnaik reminds us of the story as it grew from Bharata to the Mahabharata, and of storytellers such as Pampa (10th century), Nannaya (11th century), Kumara Vyasa (15th century), Sarala Das (15th century), Kashiram (16th century) and others who retold the story or parts of it in different literary forms. In this context I try to understand Draupadi, as she has been received by the literary world down the ages as one of Vyasa’s ‘leftovers’, engaged in the discursivity of legal ambiguities of women’s rights. Her question before the Kuru *sabha* to which she is dragged in, if Yudhisthira had staked her before or after losing himself in the game of dice, has led to discussions on the legal rights of women, and the morality of woman’s status as property, thereby, making her one of the subjects of many recent feminist discourses.

By ‘leftovers’ I do not in any way mean that the canonical Sanskrit epic has not given sufficient space to this character. Rather, I believe that events dealing with Draupadi are an essential part of the form of the epic narrative, without which the Mahabharata, either as a narrative tale, or its action leading to the catastrophic end, would not have been possible. Even the unfortunate incidents that make her a victim of certain social and political systems, while significantly, but sadly resounding in current times, are inevitable to discussions of the central

issue of '*Dharma*' in the epic, and also to the devastating end that the narrative is heading towards as a consequence of disregard of the issue. It may not be ignored that Draupadi only forms a part of a long epic, T R S Sharma calls "a leviathan of an epic, three times the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together" (2) with various legends and tales, political, philosophical and ethical discourses, and claims to historicity of a specific era.

These past few decades have been witness to empathetic responses to Draupadi in the form of adaptations and commentaries, and rewritings of this character in various literary forms such as short stories, novels, and plays. The list might include Saoli Mitra's dance drama rendering *NathabatiAnathabat* (1991) based on IravatiKarve's interpretation of the Mahabharata in her *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (1989), regional works like that of Subramanya Bharati's Tamil narrative poem *PanchaliSabatham* (1912), or the Assamese plays *DraupadirBastraharan*and *Beni Samhar* by Ratneswar Mahanta, and a long poem *Draupadi* by Assamese poet ToshaprabhaKalita. By "leftovers" I refer to this ever proliferating responses to the epic, that keep emerging out of their predecessors, in an unending process of interactive literary discourses. Notable among these various revisionary rewritings, and of particular interest to this essay are the Odia novel *Jagyaseni* (1985) by Pratibha Ray, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's*The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and the Bengali activist and writer Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1978) which have emerged as the site and source of many a debate and critical insight. The paper aims to take a critical look at this intertextual process of [re]writing Draupadi, not as isolated acts, but as products of the epic tale's dialogic engagement with the social, cultural, historical and literary contexts within which it exists.

Since the form of a discourse is determined by its purpose, these available rewritings of the story of Draupadi make us wonder about this recent urge to represent her in different genres. Could it be that Vyasa has really left something unsaid, or that Draupadi's sentiments have not been amply, or aptly portrayed, or that she has not been sufficiently avenged in the epic, for the humiliations she suffered in the Kaurava court? Or still, something that is almost impossible to believe in India, that the myth of Draupadi has not found sufficient circulation in popular culture for common people to empathize with her?

It is not as if within the ‘original’ epic Draupadi has not had the opportunity to express her sentiments and dissatisfactions. There are number of instances where Draupadi is seen to be voluble, as she is after Duhsana’s disrobing attempt, or even during the Pandava’s exile when Krishna, and her brother Dristadyumna, along with Chedi King Dhristketu and Kekeya Prince come to meet them in the Arjunabhigaman Parva. She speaks her heart out, vents her anger, complains before Krishna against her husbands’ apathy, and desires revenge. In response, she is assured by Krishna, and others present, including Arjuna, that she shall be avenged. Krishna vows to make her the queen, her brother promises to kill Drona, and assures that Shikhandi shall kill Bhisma, Bhim vows to kill Duryodhan, and Arjuna to kill Karna. Draupadi cannot be lacking in sympathetic responses within or outside the text. In the Van Parva, on their way to the Gandhamadan mountains when Draupadi faints and falls down, a remorseful Yudhisthir laments, and curses himself for having given in to the temptation of the dice game and making his wife suffer. Kunti too expresses her sorrow and anger in the Udyog Parv stating that Draupadi’s humiliation was the saddest and most painful event of her life. She desires revenge for her daughter-in-law, and expresses her displeasure when the Pandavas are reluctant to go to war. Even citizens of Hastinapur are said to have mourned her departure to the jungles, as she walked down the street with the Pandavas, menstrual blood staining the single piece of cloth that she had wrapped around her. The urge to re-present her pains is surprising when it is impossible to believe that the story could have been erased from public memory.

Pratibha Ray tries to give a reason, not purely creative, when in the Preface to her novel *Jagyaseni* she states that some unpleasant remarks made against a woman of her acquaintance named Krishna instigated her to defend the mythical character. Ray illustrates the situation of mythological Draupadi through the example of this twentieth century woman named Krishna, who had divorced an alcoholic and abusive husband. She had later married a German and settled in Germany. Ray criticizes friends in India who had earlier sympathized with Krishna in her suffering, but are now bad mouthing her:

ନାମଟିଯେତେବେଳେ “କୃଷ୍ଣା” ସେଗୋଟିଏସ୍ୱାମୀପାଖରେସନ୍ତୁଷ୍ଟରହନ୍ତାକିପରି?କୃଷ୍ଣାତପଞ୍ଚପତିବରଣକରିମଧସେତିକିରେସନ୍ତୁଷ୍ଟନ ରହିକର୍ଣଏବଂଶ୍ରୀକୃଷ୍ଣଙ୍କପ୍ରତିଅନୁରକ୍ତାଥିଲେ...

How can a woman named Krishnā be satisfied with a single husband? Krishnā herself, even after taking five husbands was attracted towards Karna and Sri Krishna…

(My translation)[1]

Perhaps, Ray supposes that it is possible to bring about a social change in the attitude towards women in a conservative society through a revisionary rereading of Draupadi’s story, as was, and still is intended by the television serials of epics in which, in the words of Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “[t]he traditional is represented as the timeless, and hence inclusive of the modern, while the modern is viewed merely as a transitional phase which disguised the permanent ‘essence’ of timeless tradition” (*Real and Imagined Women* 134). I do not, however, agree with Rajan’s view when she goes on to state that the serials do not lead to “real change” (135) because Draupadi, both in the serials as well as in the epic, does raise her voice against injustice and poses pertinent questions regarding the rights of women. This surely would have an impact on the consciousness of the common people, who form a major part of the audience of such popular television serials. The awareness that is thereby created among the audience, about the ‘universality’ of Draupadi’s suffering, would be able to make the audience contextualize and empathize with the sufferings of the heroine. The intentions of the representations, however, become ambiguous when it is in the form of a written work primarily meant for an educated and elite readership, when someone with self-proclaimed feminist concerns like Pratibha Ray, in spite of all her supposed best intensions, chooses a woman from the twentieth century to defend her concern for Draupadi. What emerges as a consequence, even while she tries to rewrite the sufferings of the mythical Draupadi, is a total lack of social and historical consciousness which

[1]All translations of Pratibha Ray’s *Jagyaseni*, in this essay are mine.

appears to make her insensitive to current social evils. Only a few lines immediately following her expression of concern for Krishna, in the same Preface Ray goes on to state

କଳିଯୁଗରପତିପରିତ୍ୟକ୍ତାନାରୀକୃଷ୍ଣାପ୍ରତିଏଭଳିମନ୍ତବ୍ୟମୋବ୍ୟଥାରକାରଣନୁହେଁ।... ଦ୍ୱାପରଯୁଗର

ଅସାମାନ୍ୟବିଦୁଷୀ,ଭକ୍ତିମତୀ,ଶକ୍ତିମତୀନାରୀକୃଷ୍ଣାପ୍ରତିଏପରିବିଚାରଶୁନ୍ୟମନ୍ତବ୍ୟମୋଦୁଃଖରକାରଣ।

> My heart does not pain for the abandoned woman of the Kaliyuga…. My anguish is caused by such thoughtless remarks against the highly learned, devoted and powerful woman, Krishna of the Dwapar Yuga.

In other words, Ray betrays a total disregard for the real people around her while trying to espouse the cause of a mythical character. Impervious to the sufferings of "Krishnā" at the hands of an abusive husband, Ray is troubled by the flippant remarks made against Draupadi. True, Ray has every right as a novelist to defend and speak for Draupadi, but sadly, in a way, her words mirror a moral stasis and restricted perspective. If we are supposed to shed tears for the disregard of *satitva* and *patibratya* in mythical characters like Draupadi and Sita, we certainly cannot also ignore the suffering and plight of women of our times. After all, Laurence Coupe opines, "the present exists as a tension between the way things have always been and the way things ought to be" (97). He cites Ricoeur to state that myth is "all about this dialectic of past and future, it is a narrative whose beginning and ending continually inform the middle" (97). The Indian narrative of ancient tales, similarly, as Indra Nath Choudhuri points out "is laid in the timeless dimension of the ever present" (4). His claim regarding the Indian narrator of oral culture as different from others is based on the selection of a "vantage point sometimes in the time past or the present or in the time future" which gives him "a holistic vision and time turns (4). It is necessary to remember that the myth of Draupadi, although essential, is only a part of the composite epic, which may have originated orally, as is generally believed, or based on written archetypes, as Pollock argues (224). And, in order to have a holistic understanding of the tale it cannot be read independently of the entire epic as a narrative structure. Keeping in view the holistic and timeless nature of the Indian epic, I wish Ray had reversed the situation and

taken the mythical character as an example in order to illustrate the harassment still meted out to women in a society yet to evolve out of the domineering world of a patriarchal order.

This essay will depend on the interactions between the historical and literary dimensions of such rewritings on Draupadi to find out if fictional narratives of mythical characters can ignore specific historical and socio-cultural contexts in which they are created, or exist independently of the discourse that conveyed them in the first place. After all, as Jonathan Culler suggests, a story "is determined by discourse" (8). And, the epics, upon which the modern rewritings of characters such as Sita or Draupadi depend, "are not mere stories of love and adventure or of mere war and heroism. They are neither pure histories, nor romances" (Narayanchar 114). A. K. Ramanujan argues

> Texts may be historically dateless, anonymous: but their contexts, uses, and efficacies, are explicit. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* open with episodes that would tell you why and under what circumstances they were composed. Every such story is encased in a meta-story. And within the text, one tale is the context for another within it, not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story, the inner story illuminates the outer as well. It often acts as a microcosmic replica for the whole text. (42)

In their novels, which can best be defined by a term Rajeswari Sunder Rajan borrows from Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice"—"psychobiography" ("The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing" 333)—Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni project Draupadi as a sensitive and responsive character with an independent cast of mind. Their attempt to invest a new dimension to our understanding and appreciation of the mythical character from the perspective of our own time is indeed commendable. But a mere character analysis, as it turns out to be even with the first person narrative voice, and plot restructuring, without reference to the social and historical contexts in which they develop makes the characters appear stunted, biased and stereotypes of their original with only slight variations. "It is not often recognized," says Pollock, "how significant features

spatiality is for the *Mahabharata*, both internally in the story it has to tell and externally in the kinds of literary-cultural practices that ensured the text's reproduction and promoted its circulation" (224). The story of the Mahabharata comprises both texts and contexts. Composed by Vyasa, with its multiple narrators, some of who stand outside the narration not participating in the events, like Rishi Ugrashrava, who initiates the story of the Mahabharata having heard it from Vyasa, and some inside, including Vyasa himself, it is so complex a tale that a literal lifting of the characters, along with their ideologies and faith, from their historical space limits the possibilities of interpretation of a text, which in its original not only evokes rich interpretations of complex ideas of the times when it was first written, but also provides a cultural legacy for reclamations by every generation of writers and readers.

Pratibha Ray's *Jagyaseni* was originally written in Odia for a regional readership. It was later translated into English in 1995. The novel adopts the European epistolary form of writing with Draupadi narrating her story in first person to her *sakha*, or friend, Krishna. Ray effectively uses the discourse of the epistolary form to place a woman of the ancient times in a position where she can speak out, albeit within the frame of a letter as a subversive act, to accrue power to herself. But even as Draupadi expresses her disillusionment with her husbands and her victimhood in a partriarchal set up, the narrative becomes an account of her devotion to Krishna, and her spiritual growth, constructing herself as a devout subject. The narrative method can also be said to be in the style of the Western self-begetting novel, an account usually in first-person of the development of a character to a point at which s/he is able to compose and begin writing the novel we have just finished reading. The end of Ray's novel is the beginning from where she starts all over again. The ending itself is a consummation which directs us back to the flux from which it arose. This manner of projection of the character helps in the construction of a 'new' woman. 'New' in the sense of having arisen as a modern and liberated woman in response to the times in which she is [re]written.

The epistolary form which had served a particular purpose among English women writers of the nineteenth century also had its influence in India with the coming of literacy to Indian women in the early part of the twentieth century. Literary writers in India also exploited the letter

form to project the “new” literate Indian woman as she tries to challenge established notions about gender ideologies, and come out of her domestic confinements. Rabindranath Tagore’s short story, “The Wife’s Letter” stands out as an example to “communicate the idea that marriage, segregation, and gender politics of the domestic space were forms of socially sanctioned servitude that rendered women invisible to the outside world” (Mukherjee 67). Written in colloquial Bengali it is the story of coming of age of a young woman, Mrinal who terminates her marriage as a protest against women’s subordination in a typical Indian bourgeois household. Although attempting to come out of the confined nature of her existence Mrinal is still trapped within socially prescribed gender roles, and unable to make any truly radical statements. As rightly pointed out by Reshmi Mukherjee in her discussion of the new *bhadramahila* in Tagore’s stories, she is “typecast as a pastiche of extraordinary qualities: arrogant but disciplined, feisty but moral, independent but caring, and modern in logic but traditional in practice” (71). Ray’s Draupadi similarly, although modern, is still a generation older to the time in which she is [re]written—the 1980s, in belonging to the class of newly literate Indian women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century “whose literacy was deemed an enabling factor ‘for the perusal of religious tracts with greater devotion that would generate more diligent and devoted wifely duties’” (Mukherjee 71-72). Draupadi’s narration in the case of Ray too, like Mrinal, is the story of her rise from material to spiritual realization. Her letter, after all, addresses Krishna, her spiritual mentor and friend. Ray’s Draupadi is also like her older counterpart Mrinal in her literary aptitudes in writing poetry. Ray’s choice of the epistolary form of communication like Tagore’s is therefore, “in congruence with the same tradition that expects women to write in silence rather than speak….As a result she is not created from a new mould but rather, modified to influence the cultural imagination of the time” (Mukherjee 72).

Ray’s Draupadi, with her acknowledged equal education like that of her brother, her learned debates, and intellectual discourses, her strength of will, her revolutionary thoughts along with her courage to protest against injustice, emerges as a modern woman. She is a woman with progressive ideas and a civilizing mission. She refuses gifts offered by Kuber (after Bhim’s mission to pluck golden lotuses for her from Kuber’s lake at Kailash) and instead proposes education, roads, temples, rest houses and wells for the Sabars and other tribes of Kamyak Forest

(337-338). And yet, when she plays the role of a devoted wife and compassionate mother she can at best be called a "new woman" in the tradition of Tagore's Mrinal from "The Wife's Letter," or Bimala from his novel *GhareBaire*, and not the "protofeminist" we would like to believe her to be. It would not be inappropriate to say that applying Western literary models to rewrite tales from ancient Indian classics, if innovative and thought provoking, can also sometimes become restrictive. Adapting a spiritual mode of narrative for Draupadi restricts her desire for freedom and gender equality, which a rebel woman's personal letter promises. Ray also often forgets the epistolary technique she has adopted and speaks to her addressee, Krishna, in third person, and not second: "ମୁଁଗୋବିନ୍ଦଙ୍କୁଚାହିହିଁଲି।ମୋଆଖିରଅସହାୟତାବିଗୋବିନ୍ଦଙ୍କୁଆମୋଦିତକରୁଥିଲା।ସେମୃଦୁମୃଦୁହସୁଛନ୍ତି... (116)" [I looked helplessly at Govinda. He was amused at my helplessness and kept smiling…]

In the same way, whereas the novel *The Palace of Illusions* is written in first person, Divakaruni is unable to accommodate the shock of Draupadi's personal intervention to refuse Karna's candidature at her *Swayamvara* in first person and reports it in third person:

> Then, out of the silence that shrouded the marriage hall, a voice rose, sweet as a koel's song, unbending as flint. Before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, it said, tell me your father's name…. It was Draupadi, and as she spoke, she stepped between her brother and Karna, and let fall her veil. (95)

Ray's narrative device to frame her fiction in a self-reflexive and self-begetting mould, or Divakaruni's first person autobiographical mode to represent the psychological turmoil of a woman in a slow process of coming of age, is as if legitimized by the writers' gender. Even so, as we all know, every representation involves a gap between how we see things and how, potentially, they might be, and like Gillian Beer in her essay "Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past" states:

> …gender is largely a cultural product. It is risky to read women's representation of women, even as if the gender of the writer makes them thereby automatically

authoritative. Such an assumption is to simplify our understanding both of the writing and of our internalization of past gender constructions. (65)

Ray celebrates and glamorizes Draupadi as a model of female virtues of chastity, purity and devotion in a mythical world which could well accommodate women like Kunti and Madri, who begot issues outside marriage, with dignity. Of course, *Niyoga*, or the practice of bearing children from other men when the husband is impotent or dead, as in the case of Pandu (husband of Kunti and Madri) or his father respectively, was not always done with consent. Ray's Draupadi becomes representative of the iconic feminine Shakti in Indian mythology, the ideal mother and wife, the violation of whose chastity rouses her wrath to bring about a devastating war. There are moments in the text when Ray stereotypes women by presenting Draupadi as the ideal Mother figure who willingly sacrifices her identity, individuality, and material pleasures to follow the path of her husbands. The novel, in epistolary form, rewrites Draupadi's story and in the process almost the entire epic narrative in brief. But with the stereotypes of women that it produces, it would not be out of context to suggest that women's role as historians is still marginalized by stereotypes that deny them a capacity for rigorous and objective analysis. Ray attributes to Draupadi the power of the Shakti, to be eulogized and tries to convince the reader that violating her chastity is sure to lead to some sort of catastrophe. If Draupadi is loving and caring, Ray would have us believe that she can also be the wrathful destroyer of evil:

ମାତ୍ରଜଗତଜାଣିରଖିବାଉଚିତଯେଉଁନାରୀସୃଷ୍ଟିକାରିଣୀଓକଲ୍ୟାଣୀ,ସେଇପୁଣିପାପାତ୍ମାଦୁରାଚାରୀମା
ନଙ୍କରଧ୍ୱଂସକାରିଣୀହୋଇପାରେ।

The world ought to remember that the generous and benevolent woman, who is the source of all creation, can also be the destroyer of wrong doers. (285)

But strangely, her power to perform such feats lies not in her physical strength or prowess in warfare but ironically in her devotion, loyalty and faithfulness to the same husbands who, she says, betrayed her. Ray repeatedly tries to convince the reader that Draupadi was a chaste and loyal Sati in spite of her five husbands. Implying, if Draupadi had not proved to be a Sati it

would have been justified to condemn her. What Ray, after all, is displeased with is the twentieth century twice-wed Krishna being compared to a Sati like Draupadi. Her concern excludes those women who are victims of sexual abuse and violence or, for that matter, those women who defy the norms of conventional morality. Ray seems to have internalized the norms of a conventional social order with her ideologies constructed primarily by the principles of a biased society. She fails to question, or even to critique social dogmas that breed under cover of ambiguous terms such as honour, dignity, chastity and morality. There is no denying that even the mythical Draupadi had been a victim of such social dogmas.

Although Ray does not denounce the act of the modern day Krishna in her example, she also does not accept her as a fit comparison to the legendary Draupadi, whether to glorify or to condemn. The presupposition is that women in general are tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized beings. And, any woman, who like Krishnā suffers social injustices and rebels against established norms and values can only be pitied, but not compared to the ineluctable Draupadi—an embodiment, for Ray, of self-sacrifice and self-control. Ray's Draupadi does not forget to remind us of her superiority as one born of a sacrificial fire, and therefore, spiritually and morally above ordinary mortals. She is super human in her birth, her beauty, a part or "*ansh*" of goddess Laxmi. The following passage expresses Draupadi's outrageous sense of self-importance:

> ପୃଥିବୀରଅଧିକାଂଶନାରୀଶରୀରରେଅସତୀନହେଲେମଧମନରେଅସତୀ।ସ୍ୱାମୀଏକହେଲେମଧସେମାନଙ୍କମନତଳେଅନେକପୁରୁଷଆଲୋଡନସୃଷ୍ଟିକରନ୍ତି।ଶରୀରକୁଦୂରେଇରଖିଥିଲେମଧମନେମନେପରପୁରୁଷସହସେମାନେମଧୁଶଯ୍ୟାରଚନାକରନ୍ତି।କିନ୍ତୁମୋରସେପରିହୁଏନାହି।
>
> Most women are not physically unchaste, but they are unchaste in their thoughts. Even though they have only one husband, a number of other men also excite their passions. Despite keeping physically apart they dream of bedding men other than their husbands. But this does not happen with me. (234)

Instead of questioning the ethical imperatives of a traditional society and presenting Draupadi as a site of feminist conflict, which Ray perhaps intended to but was afraid to admit, she presents a Draupadi who complies to the demands of her society. Located as her regional readers are in a traditional, conservative society, Ray feels the necessity of dedicating the novel to Lord Krishna, in the same way as Sarala Das, the fifteenth century canonical Odia transcreator of the Mahabharata had done, and who she acknowledges to be one of the influences on her writing.

Sarala Das had not translated Vyasa's Mahabharata but he had retold it in Odia. Odias have reason to take pride in Sarala Das as the *Adi Kavi* or the First Odia poet, and the glorious literary tradition that he began with his Odia Mahabharata popularly known as Sarala Mahabharata. The text lacks in philosophical deliberations, and localizes the events for its uneducated peasant addressees, and even today is read ritually in almost every village temple of Odisha, and is given the status of a puranical religious text. It is also known to be the first Mahabharata to be written in a regional language in the Eastern states of India. However, eulogizing such transcreations should not overlook the fact that these texts have also promoted social biases against women. While stories from the 'original' could possibly have led to a more liberated womanhood, the Sarala Mahabharata appears to have bred, and if not bred then certainly contributed to a significant degree to the demeaning status of women of succeeding generations. Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik points out to us of Sarala Das's perception of Draupadi's "revengefulness" as a "moral failure" (Patnaik 87). Das considered Draupadi as the "worst offender" and went so far as to give the view that the

> Kauravas had humiliated her on account of their ignorance… but her response to it was vile and vicious. He condemned her for keeping her hair loose for fifteen long years only to tie it up with the blood of a brother. He held her responsible for the death of the Kaurava brothers and the destruction of the lineage." (86-87)

Instead of providing a scope for women to advance towards a more modern culture, Sarala Das has been instrumental in the regression of a culture so far as women are concerned.

The following lines from Sarala Das about Drupad during Draupadi's parting after her marriage, which Patnaik quotes, would shock any sensitive modern day reader:

> Unable to control himself, [Drupad] burst out saying what a misfortune it was to be the father of a girl. No matter how great and powerful one might be, one simply turned into the most helpless of servants… to the family to which one gave one's daughter in marriage…. [I]t would be better for one to abandon one's wife if she gave birth to a girl than go through such humiliation…. [O]ne should abandon that girl child as well. (138)

Vyasa, of course, enters at this moment with a different view, but only to comfort him with the story of creation and the role of women as Shakti in it, and then only to be interrupted with a stronger argument verging on a retort from Drupad that Uma was the cause of her father's death. A worse statement comes when Yudhisthir rebukes Bhima for swearing to kill Duhsasana after the disrobing act: "ଦ୍ରୌପଦୀପରିଭାରିଜାଶତେମିଳିବେଥିଲେଭାଇ / ନିଜଭାଇମାରଇଆଉପାଇବାଟିକାହିଁ" roughly translated by Patnaik as "one would get a hundred wives like Draupadi if one had brothers… but one would not get brothers if one killed them" (140). Patnaik also cites examples from Sarala Das of women who share his opinion of their low moral status, and suffer from low self-esteem. In Das's tale Ambika confides to Satyavati that women are born impure as they have always hankered for handsome men. His Draupadi, similarly, corroborates the statement in another context when she hints at incestuous desires of women by saying that this "handsome and well dressed man could be just anyone—may be a brother or even a son" (Patnaik 140).

Just as Sarala Das's*Mahabharata* arose in response to the Sanskrit and classical original, Ray's novel in many ways arises out of Das's work. But whereas, Das's [re]writing was a subversive response by a non-Brahmin to the canonical Sanskrit, Ray's work emulates the Odia version's stereotypical and derogatory representation of women.

Although Ray's heroine does make powerful strategic interventions in lines such as:

ଦୁଃଖ ଏବଂ କ୍ରୋଧରେ ଭାବୁଥାଏ, ନାରୀ କ'ଣ ପୁରୁଷର ସ୍ଥାବରଜଙ୍ଗମ ସମ୍ପତ୍ତିର ଅନ୍ତର୍ଭୁକ୍ତ?... ମୁଁ ନାରୀ ବୋଲି ମୋର କ'ଣ କିଛି ନିଜସ୍ୱ ସତ୍ତା ନାହିଁ? ମୋର ଆତ୍ମାଉପରେ ମୋର ମଧ୍ୟ ଅଧିକାର ନାହିଁ? ମୋର ଏ ଦେହଟା ଉପରେ ତାଙ୍କର ଅଧିକାରବୋଲି ସେ ତାକୁନେଇ ଯାହା ଇଚ୍ଛା ତା କରିପାରିବେ?

> Sad and angry, I was thinking if woman was one of man's personal properties? Does a woman have no claim to her selfhood? Have I no right to my own identity? Just because they have a right over my body can they do as they please with it? (266)

These ideas get diluted and moderated when the same heroine, to the disappointment of the reader, talks of herself as an "object" of desire, and feels sorry for all the men who could not "obtain" her:

> ସୁନ୍ଦର ଦ୍ରବ୍ୟପଟି ପ୍ରତ୍ୟେକ ମଣିଷ ଆକୃଷ୍ଟ ହୁଏ। ... ଉଚିତ ମାର୍ଗରେ ପାଇନପାରିଲେ ଅନୁଚିତ ମାର୍ଗରେ ତାକୁ ଆୟତ୍ତ କରିବାକୁ ଚେଷ୍ଟାକରେ। ଲୋଭାତୁର ମଣିଷ ସେତେବେଳେ ବୁଝିପାରେନାହିଁ, ସେହି ସୁନ୍ଦର ଦ୍ରବ୍ୟଟିକୁ ଲାଭ କରିବାର ଶକ୍ତି ଓ ସାମର୍ଥ୍ୟ ତାର ଅଛି କି ନା। ସବୁ ଚେଷ୍ଟାରେ ବିଫଳ ହେଲେ ଦୁଃଖୀ ହୋଇପଡେ।ତେଣୁ ଆଜି ଲକ୍ଷେ ରାଜାଙ୍କର ଦୁଃଖର କାରଣ ମୁଁ।
> Human beings are attracted towards beautiful objects. If they cannot be obtained by fair means, they try to adopt unfair ways. The greedy man fails to understand if he indeed has the strength or means of obtaining them. If he fails in achieving the desired object he becomes sad. Therefore, today I am the cause of the sorrow of one million kings. (50)

Just as Sanskrit held its dominance over the less privileged vernaculars by silencing their voices "in both the literary and documentary records" as Pollock points out (35), Odia literature too, such as Ray's rewriting of Draupadi, has not freed itself of the authority of Sarala Das. Although he might be referring to the dominance of a classical language over the vernaculars, Pollock's statement reminds us that the ideals perpetuated by literatures of the past "will not go

away by ignoring it or pretending it is past: either we master it through critical historical analysis or it will continue to master us" (36).

Ray's novel, instead of questioning the idea of Satitva, merely re-phrases and re-writes with a bit of imagination the psychological workings of a character that has undergone several traumatic experiences. Perhaps, the representation of Draupadi in popular media like the one shown on an Indian Entertainment TV Channel better recognizes women's potential and individual talents by sensitizing its audience to the twenty-first century predicament of women. Unlike the Sarala Mahabharata, it presents a Drupad who expresses his wish to shelter an unwed daughter at home instead of pushing her into a polyandrous marriage. The Kunti of the serial is, similarly, a repentant one who does not wish her daughter-in-law to honor her word, and marry her five sons. This Draupadi, like Ray's, is also a pageant of beauty, but with the moral responsibility of keeping the clan together. It is she who decides to surrender to an unjust marriage even when she has the choice to opt out of it, so that she might not to be the cause of quarrel among brothers who might all nourish a desire for her beauty. Ray's Draupadi, on the other hand, is so obsessed with her beauty that she forgets that the narrative mode adopted by her in the novel is a recapitulation of events which she chooses to remember as she lies dying, having fallen down from the steep path to heaven. Her husbands have decided to proceed towards heaven without interrupting their journey, or giving a thought to the faithful, and now suffering wife. Under such circumstances, when she has been dispossessed of her mighty husbands, and of heaven, it is highly improbable that a sensitive and sensible victim, who possessed wit enough to question the nature of justice [*Dharma*] to the wise elders in the court of the Kauravas, would devote a number of pages to the celebration of her beauty (refer, for example, page numbers 8, 46, 50). The following lines are illustrative:

> ମୁଁ "କୃଷ୍ଣା" ନୀଳପଦ୍ମର ପାଖୁଡାପରି ମୋ ଦେହର କାନ୍ତି। ସମୁଦ୍ରଲହଡି ଭଳି ଘନନୀଳ ଊର୍ମିଳ କେଶଦାମ, ନୀଳପଦ୍ମଭଳି ଢଳଦଳ ଉଜ୍ଜ୍ୱଳ ବୁଦ୍ଧିଦୀପ୍ତ ମନୋହାରିଣୀ ଦୁଇଟି ଅଯତଆଖି। ବିଶ୍ୱର ଶ୍ରେଷ୍ଠଶିଳ୍ପୀର ହାତଗଢା ନିଖୁଣ ପ୍ରତିମା ଭଳିଆ ନନ୍ଦିତ ମୁଖଶୋଭା, ସୁଠାମ ସୁଗୋଲ ଅଙ୍ଗସୌଷ୍ଠବ, ଦୀର୍ଘଦେହ... (8)

I am Krishna. My body glows like the petals of the blue lotus. My hairs are dark blue and flowing like the waves of the sea; attractive eyes as bright and beautiful as the blue lotus. My face is meticulously hand crafted by the best sculptor of the Universe. My body is curvaceous…

Although Ray has tried to effectively use the epistolary form in the manner of a self-begetting novel, her prolixity makes the narrative ramble off the rigid format, which would otherwise be the portrait of a self in the process of developing its sense of identity. It is also interesting to note at this point what Ray has to say in the Preface, about beautiful women:

କାମାନ୍ଧ ପୁରୁଷ ଦ୍ୱାରା ସୁନ୍ଦର ନାରୀ ଯୁଗେଯୁଗେ ନିର୍ଯ୍ୟାତିତା ଏବଂ ଅପମାନିତା ହୋଇଆସିଛି। (୪)

Beautiful women have been tortured and humiliated by lustful men through the ages.

One fails to understand what fate the ‘ugly’ ones suffer (or do not suffer). The suggestion perhaps is that they are lucky to have been born so! Ray’s Jagyaseni is morally irreproachable, and a flawless beauty. It is her beauty that provokes men to immoral acts, and not the attitude of the ‘lustful’ man. Ironically, the author who has obviously internalized the demeaning view of women, lays the responsibility on god, or nature for making women beautiful:

ପ୍ରକୃତରେ ମୋ ପ୍ରତି ଆକୃଷ୍ଟ ହୋଇ ସେ [ଯୁଧିଷ୍ଠିର] ଯଦି ଏଭଳି ବିବାହର ଆୟୋଜନ କରିଥାନ୍ତି, ତେବେ ସେଥିରେ ତାଙ୍କ ଦୋଷ କ’ଣ? ଦୋଷ ତ ତାଙ୍କରି ; ଯିଏ ନାରୀଦେହରେ ଭରିଦେଲେ ଏତେ ରୂପ ଓ ଯୌବନ , ଯିଏ ପୁରୁଷ ଦୃଷ୍ଟିରେ ଭରିଦେଲେ ସୌନ୍ଦର୍ଯ୍ୟର ପିପାସା। (79)

In fact, being attracted towards me, if Yudhisthir has arranged such a marriage, how is he to blame? It is only he at fault who has made women young and beautiful, and men lust after the beauty.

Ray subscribes to the patriarchal ideology of a gender-biased society which conveniently offloads the blame on to the woman for her victimhood. As a therapeutic means of dealing with her problems, as mentioned earlier, in the form of a “psychobiography,” Ray’s Draupadi tells her difficulties to Krishna. This makes the novel an odd combination of a letter and a confessional, and even a diary, when Ray forgets the narratee through the course of the narrative. But as we

notice, instead of challenging the unreal demands made on her, in this particular instance by Yudhisthira, which a diary would have done, this Draupadi, like in a confessional, has internalized the problem as her own. As it happens in the case of Ray's Draupadi, to put it in the words of Sara Mills in her book on *Discourse*, "One of the ways in which subjects are disciplined is the confessional…. The confessional, where women talk about their difficulties, may be used as a way of dealing with these problems in ways which are not in the woman's interest" (81-82).

Ray's Draupadi, just like the mythical one, is rebellious, but she will not abandon the culturally inherited conventional values as Mahasweta Devi's character Dopdi, in her short story "Draupadi," could. Ray's Draupadi is the upholder of social morals, albeit, with the all too human weaknesses of attraction towards Krishna or Karna. Ray's concern is that, in spite of everything, Draupadi exercises self-restraint, and proves to be a Sati during the disrobing act at the Kaurava court. But the moot question is, what would have been the possible authorial stance in case there had been no divine intervention of Krishna with his miraculously endless supply of clothes to prove Draupadi's 'Satitva,' and without her large-heartedness to forgive her husbands? And, how would Draupadi have responded without her power to curse the perpetrators? Without 'Lord' Krishna's help, who is, not coincidentally, also a male god, Draupadi would not have proved to be the Sati that she is perceived to be. Would she then have had the privilege of gaining the sympathy of an author who wishes to defend her against slanderous tongues? Would she then have been eulogized the way she has been, or condemned to the unwritten pages of history?

Jagyaseni can be said to be Pratibha Ray's most self-consciously 'feminist' fiction. But throughout the novel she exhibits the age old and unmistakable trappings of power-play to which she too willingly succumbs. Obsessed with her beauty, Ray's Draupadi exemplifies the contradictions with which women are culturally conditioned to grow up as recipients of public gaze as both "admiration and scorn" (Rajan. "Draupadi's Disrobing" 335). "[N]either response," Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, "is free of the overtones of the other, or of sexual significance. The woman's response to the gaze is also ambivalently divided between pride and

shame" ("Draupadi's Disrobing" 335). Rajan further points out this contradiction as represented in the mythical Draupadi's exposure to public gaze twice:

> In the *Mahabharatha* episode Draupadi explicitly recalls the only other occasion she had been viewed in public in the *swayamvara* arena by the assembled kings come to woo her, when she had chosen her future husband, Arjuna, for his feats of prowess. So she laments: "Alas, only once before, on the occasion of the swayamvara, I was beheld by the assembled kings in the amphitheatre, and never even once beheld afterwards. She whom even the winds and the sun had never seen before is exposed to the gaze of the world. I think these are evil times when the Kurus allow their daughter-in-law to be thus tormented." Then she had been a cynosure of all eyes. Her appearance—in both senses of the word, her dishevelment as well as her presence in the court—is a very different matter now…. I am led to the intuition that what she experiences as trauma is not the shock of the unexpected but the recognition of the familiar. (335)

One must realize that it is not the physical denuding of Draupadi that would have caused her to be shamed, and that it was her divine power (or divine intervention of Krishna) that saved her from the fate. The act of the disrobing could only have been a symbolic illustration of the shame that Draupadi had already been subject to, even before a divine intervention could have saved her, having been dragged into the court in a single attire while she is menstruating, exposed to the gaze of the courtiers, derided and denuded as she was by the slanderous words of Karna, the Kauravas, and others present.

'Polluted' and isolated because menstruating, and yet dragged into the court, Draupadi's menstruation becomes symbolic not only of her imprisonment, enslavement, and finally exile, but also of the exclusionary practices of the discourses of dharma that subject her to humiliation under public gaze. And the supernatural act that 'saved' her from being 'shamed' was just a consolation but not justice. If her 'satitva' made an impact on the audience within the epic, her 'shaming' was essential to the narrative purpose of bringing justice to all victims, and in this specific instance, to Draupadi. Every humiliation of Draupadi (except in the Kaurava court) as that by Kichaka or Jayadratha, is avenged without delay. But Draupadi's complaint in the epic,

and of Ray's in the novel is against the apathy of the Pandavas in the court. Had Bhima responded to the appeals of his wife and appeased her by killing Duhsasana and Duryadhana, only the shame of her physical denuding would have been avenged, and justice would have been partial. But, technically speaking, all those present in the court had been responsible for, and compliant in the shaming of Draupadi by their silence and voyeuristic gaze.

In an epic whose narrative is structured around a group of observers and observed, the denuding of Draupadi cannot be said to be her shame alone, but it is a representation of the shame and impotency of those who watch the act being performed. Just as Dhritarashtra's auditory observance of the war through the eyes of Sanjaya becomes a mark and reminder of his helplessness and impotence, and so his shame for the injustice he had approved through his silence, greater justice to Draupadi is done only by leading the epic to an end where each of the 'gazers' is punished to establish *Dharma* or 'Law'. The women in the 'harem' of the Kauravas are also equally punished for being silent witnesses, by raising no voice of resistance. Of course, they were helpless, but the story of silent victimhood is no different today. Surrender to injustice is not what the Mahabharata proposes. And, Draupadi is not the only example of the 'resisting' woman in the Mahabharata. There is the story of Nandini, the Kamadhenu (cow) preceding the episode of Draupadi's *Swayamvar*, who avenges her own violation by sage Vishwamitra. She resists, and it is her breed of *mlechhas* or the underprivileged classes who fight a war and bring her freedom. Draupadi resists and a revolution is possible. It is precisely this potential of Draupadi's humiliation to raise a revolution that demands our attention.

In an age which has witnessed women being stripped and paraded naked through village streets as traditional punishment for what are believed to be sexual offences, in times when resistance to such forms of public humiliation and/or denial of human rights is essential to bringing about a social revolution, Ray's feminist concern is directed towards defending the sexual morality of a mythical character. Ray seems to forget that traditional moral codes are merely means of exercising social control, and myths provide contexts against which literature attempts to grapple with such contemporary issues. She merely participates and provides an alternative reading to a mythical situation without being sensitive to contemporary social and political issues, ignoring the lived realities of real women in real social settings.

Mahasweta Devi, the Bengali writer, journalist and activist, who died in 2016, castigates writers of her time in the Preface to *BashaiTudu* “for their lack of social awareness” (Chakravarty 96). Against the traditional manner of rewriting the myth of Draupadi, her short story, “Draupadi” which first appeared in 1978 in Bengali in a collection called *Agnigarbha*(*Womb of Fire*) as Spivak informs us in her Translator’s Foreward (4), brings together myth and reality “as a way of envisioning alternatives to the social ills that her fiction addresses” (Chakravarty 96). By giving to real events the form of a story Devi addresses the problem of oppression of landless tribal peasantry of West Bengal by the landlords with unofficial support of government officials. The story is set in 1971 immediately following India’s defeat of Pakistan when the armed forces of India cracked down on the Naxalites of West Bengal, as Gayatri Spivak reports, because of the supposed “alliances between the Naxalites of West Bengal and the freedom fighters of East Bengal (now Bangladesh)” (Translator’s Foreword 8). The central character, DopdiMejhen is a Naxalite Santhal woman on the run. The name Dopdi, obviously derived from Draupadi, is given to her at birth by her upper-caste mistress whose husband had been killed by the Naxalites. She is finally apprehended by the police and ordered by the police chief, Senanayak, to be gang-raped into giving information about her comrades. The story ends with a brutally tortured and naked Dopdi triumphant over an intimidated Senanayak as she stands unarmed, refusing to be clothed: “I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me…. Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts and for the first time Senanayak is afraid of standing before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid (36-37). Her nakedness, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan opines in her essay in the book *Signposts*, “is offered as an affront to their masculinity” (353). Dopdi refuses to be shamed, and rape or nudity is no more a sign of humiliation or fear. Her refusal to be clothed rather becomes a reversal of the accepted meanings of nakedness as public disgrace and shame. Mahasweta Devi rewrites the story of Draupadi, and Spivak rightly calls it “at once a palimpsest and a contradiction” (11) in her Translator’s Foreword. However, in rewriting or rereading the tale of the epic heroine it would not be altogether right to go by the common feminist readings of Draupadi, as Spivak agrees to, when she blames “male lust” in making reference to the disrobing episode, an idea to which Ray subscribes. In her introduction to the collection *Breast Stories*, Spivak states: “God had prevented male lust from unclothing her [Draupadi]” (ix). It would be

erroneous to believe that public stripping or rape could be an act of sexual gratification when it is motivated by political intentions of State authorities like the Kaurava princes in the epic, or the police in Devi's short story. Similarly, again in the Translator's Foreword Spivak notes: "In the epic, Draupadi's legitimized pluralization (as wife among husbands), in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory" (11). Such a response to Draupadi's marriage would only give a partial understanding of the epic where the marriage of Draupadi to the Pandava brothers is undoubtedly represented as a political decision of Kunti and the eldest Pandava, Yudhisthira to keep the brothers, and later the nation, united. We have to agree with Pollock that "[w]hatever else the *Mahabharata* may be, it is also and preeminently is a work of political theory" (17). Moreover, if we go by Spivak's opinion of the possibility of 'Dopdi' being the original tribal name of the ancient, but Aryanised/Sanskritised Draupadi, polyandry among certain tribes was not an unknown fact in India. If we agree with Spivak to the colonialist function of the Mahabharata to integrate the Aryan invaders with the tribals of India, then surely a polyandrous marriage was a political necessity in the epic.

Devis's story is rather more in agreement with the epic when it identifies the predicament of its protagonist with that of the ancient Draupadi. It testifies to the existence of the epic, in Pollock's words, "in a quasi-universal transregional space and spoke across this space in an entirely homogeneous voice" (229). For Devi, the particular incident of the disrobing of the mythical Draupadi becomes a symbol for State manipulated violence, and an illustration of nudity as a political act of resistance. Devi's "Dopdi", which projects the cause of the tribals like her other works, raises issues of class, caste, and gender. Dopdi, as the menial subject of her mistress who had given her the name, is a victim of the feudal Zamindari system as well as of the carceral disciplinary networks of institutions of the State. Senanayak orders his men to "Make her. Do the needful"(34). And so, like the mythical Draupadi who had suffered humiliation because she raised questions about women's slavery and sexual oppression by the masters in the court, Devi's Dopdi is a victim of sexual humiliation as punishment as she finds herself trapped in the intersections of political power and social ideologies of gender, class and caste.

Published in 2008, much later than Ray's *Jagyaseni* or Devi's "Draupadi," Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's*The Palace of Illusions* is written in the psychobiographical tradition

mentioned earlier. The cover blurb of the novel declares it to be “Panchaali’s Mahabharat”, and makes its subversive intention clear by giving it the subtitle *A Novel* as against the original epic narrative. Nevertheless, the novel turns out to be a mere rehash of the epic with a different narrative perspective—the first person—and a different form and structure. Keeping an eye on her Western non-Indian English readers of the novel, the writer, Divakaruni caters to the cultural stereotype of the Indian woman by creating a Draupadi who endorses such notions. In the novel Draupadi emphasizes on gender discrimination in India and describes a childhood when she was denied the same education as her brother. Later, when she was finally given an education, it was with much reluctance, and because of the divine intervention of Krishna, for her unusual birth from a sacrificial fire to serve a specific purpose:

> A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal! Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was the king’s duty to provide this to me, did he agree with reluctance. (23)

Such discriminatory feelings against Draupadi’s learning or scholarship had never been questioned in the epic in terms of gender, although her scholarly questions, to her disadvantage, may have caused a lot of debate.

Divakaruni does give a twist to the story of the Mahabharata by imagining a childhood for Draupadi, whose mythical birth is believed to have been of the sacrificial fire as a full grown woman. The novel concentrates on the anxiety of being brought up in the absence of a real mother or father, by a surrogate mother. As such, the novel deviates from the original epic which presented Draupadi as a loved daughter. IrawatiKarve notes “How beloved [Draupadi] was in her father’s house can be seen from some of her names” (81). Divakaruni’s character hates the “damp” and “bare” confining stone walls of her father’s palace as cold and unbearable (6-7). Dejected and lonely, she identifies with, and dramatizes the predicament of her postmodern author’s diasporic identity as a displaced woman, who ponders over the “illusion” of a stable home, given the significant title of the novel. The author’s state of home/lessness determines Draupadi’s notion of a ‘home’ that eludes definition:

> Truly it was a transient world we lived in. Yesterday in a palace, today on the road, tomorrow—who knows? Perhaps I would find the home that had eluded me all my life. But one thing was certain: the currents of history had finally caught me up and were dragging me headlong. How much water would I have to swallow before I came to a resting place? (139)

The Author's note at the beginning of the novel reminds us of Divakaruni's Indian origin, of her parents' home in Kolkata, and her grandfather's village home in Bengal (xiv) where she had gained her first experience of the Mahabharata and decided that if ever she wrote a book she would "place the women in the forefront of the action. [She] would uncover the story between the lines of the men's exploits" (xiv-xv). Relying on the postmodern emphasis on perspectives, Divakaruni presents a narrative that questions its own validity and points to its constructedness, and the possibility of variant readings:

> Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing. Certainly no one had told us this particular one…. We'd had to cobble it together from rumours and lies, dark hints Dhai Ma let fall, and our own agitated imaginings. Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling. Or is that the nature of all stories, the reason for their power? Dhri was dissatisfaied. 'You're looking at the story through the window,' he said. 'You've got to close it and open a different one. Here, I'll do it.' (15)

Instead of a shared sense of intimacy with her reader, and acutely conscious of her foreign audience, who, as Ramanujan says, are appalled by the epic (162), the narrator goes to the extent of qualifying and explaining certain obvious facts about Indian culture. Thereby, irrespective of its narrative perspective, the novel denies an independent existence to the story in its mythical origin. The narrator even feels it necessary to explain the significance of the cow as a sacred animal to Indians. She gives the reason for Karna's being cursed by a Brahmin to die defenseless for killing a cow with an explanatory phrase, "the most sacred of animals," as a tag to "cow": "he realizes he has killed a cow, the most sacred of animals" (87). Similarly, we find Drauapdi expounding on the disgrace a married woman "could face" when she is sent back to her father's house.

Further, although Divakaruni's narrator, like a true feminist, refers to the silences that women have been subjected to (40) she does not rise above the petty quarrels of *saasbahu*—mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The magnitude of the epic narrative gets reduced to the triviality of quarrels between the *saas* and *bahu* in the novel. The *saas*-*bahu* episodes tend to get irritating with Draupadi's complaints against Kunti, which begin at page 105 in chapter 14, and continue for pages, at least, upto chapter 23. After this, Draupadi's interest shifts to the other wives of the Pandavas. The novel plays on the stereotypes of such representations in popular culture, such as in the popular soap opera *KyunkiSaasBhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* televised on Star Plus from 2000 to 2008, the year Divakaruni's novel was published. Some references from the novel are illustrative:

"from the moment she saw me yesterday, my mother-in-law regarded me as her adversary." (105)

"I asked her if I might have a bit of turmeric and some chillies. Perhaps some cumin. She replied, 'This is all there is. This isn't your father's place!" (107)

"Kunti and I (yoked together uneasily by our desire for Pandava glory) had frozen into our stance of mutual distrust." (125)

"My [public] appearance [with Yudhisthir] were greeted with much cheering, a fact that caused Kunti to teeter between pride and annoyance." (128)

Not half an hour had passed after Duryodhan's mishap when Kunti summoned me to her quarters. (It made me wonder how many of my women she had bribed to be her informants.) I was surprised at the summons; since coming to this place, my mother-in-law hadn't behaved in such an imperialistic manner. When I went to her, I found on her face that old expression, exasperation at my stupidity. For a moment, it was as though the years had spun away and I was a new bride again. Politely and scathingly, she wondered how it was that I could not control my women's tongues. She recommended that I confess what had happened to Yudhisthir without delay. (174)

The result is that Divakaruni's Draupadi emerges, not as the dignified and learned Kshatriya princess of the ancient narrative, who recognized the sufferings of her mother-in-law,

but as an irritatingly quarrelsome, jealous, possessive and conceited woman—a stereotype of an illiterate 'housewife' which any feminist would question—in contradiction to the narrator's claims that she had wished to be different from the women/queens in her father's palace. While on the one hand she finds it "intolerable" to "sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining, chewing on mashed betel leaves with toothless gums" (343-44) on the other hand, her insistent complaints against her mother-in-law become somewhat exasperating for the reader. She even goes to the extent of imagining the nature of tête à tête between Kunti and Gandhari when they meet: "Perhaps the two dowagers relished this chance to complain to each other about their daughters-in-law!" (183). I believe, we need to understand that a character, or even an action, arises out of its historical context. The temporal distancing from the original might lend to the character a different psychological insight. However, the character will always be determined by the social, cultural, philosophical and political ideologies with which she is brought up, and within which she exists. In the words of IrawatiKarve, "Kunti alone among [the women] seems to have been born to endure only sorrow. A dozen years of happiness were too few to compensate for her long life of sorrow and humiliation" (42). Divakaruni's narrative perspective, on the other hand, denies a sympathetic response to this character and presents a Draupadi who is so obsessed with her mother-in-law that even her response to Kunti's generosity, towards the end, is tinged with irony: "Kunti surprised me by donating artifacts she'd held on to all these years, things that had belonged to Pandu" (324). With a twist to the epic, Divakaruni presents a more socially responsible Draupadi, when after the war she and other women like Uttara begin a social mission of helping the families of victims of the war by donating their ornaments and furnishings. They set up destitute homes for the war victims and provide women with the means of being self-sufficient, and the novel claims that "Hastinapur became one of the few cities where women would go about their daily lives without harassment" (325). Except for the social mission and utopian vision of a *Satya Yug* for women, which is yet to come, and the first person narrative perspective, the novel turns out to be a drab summary of the epic narrated by Draupadi, like the ones we find in the comic series, *Amar Chitra Katha*. The flat tone of Draupadi's narration, full of jealous responses against other women in the family, and always disapproving of others, a tone that does not find any expression of love even for Arjuna (but indicates attraction towards Karna) or even of anger at being 'shamed,' is wanting in some

of the redeeming passions that the mythical heroine is recognized for. Re/presentation, of course, involves selection and re-arrangement of events in a narrative. But, the discursivity of a complex epic narrative missing, and without a plot that is crucial to giving the narrated events a meaningful structure—"as parts of an integral whole" (White 9) Divakaruni's novel becomes merely a bland and sequential ordering of major events. Instead of becoming the space "within which discourses are elaborated and transmitted, a *dispositif* in which social forces and institutions, storytellers and tellers of counter-stories… either come into conflict or collude with one another" (Salmon ix) it becomes what Hayden White refers to as "annals": "consisting only of a list of events ordered in a chronological sequence" (5).

If we go by Foucault's understanding of discourse as something which produces something else (Mills 17) the first person monologic narrative of Divakaruni, in a way, closes off any possibility of productive discursivity through dialogic intervention by the reader. It aims mainly at directing the readers' sympathy towards a particular character. But, at times it fails to achieve the purpose with a reader who finds it merely a rehash of an early story in a new form, without actually allowing for the character's potential to grow beyond its specific space and time.

Literature, as in the case of Ray or Divakaruni's postmodernist rewritings may corroborate Foucault's opinion of it as a "self-reflexive activity" (Mills 24). However, one needs to keep in mind that such rewritings as these are in fact re/tellings of myths and epics that may have origins in oral cultures, and are invariably taken up by a mass of literate elite as their social and political privilege. As such these rewritings/retellings bear the responsibility of rendering the mythical "discourses itself a subject for discourse," as Sheldon Pollock puts it, and we might agree:

> [W]riting claims an authority the oral cannot. The authorization to write, above all to write literature, is no natural entitlement, like the ability to speak, but is typically related to social and political even epistemological privileges. For another, writing enables textual features far in excess of the oral; for literature it renders the discourse itself a subject for discourse for the first time, language

itself an object of aestheticized awareness, the text itself an artifact to be decoded and a pretext for deciphering. (4)

He reminds us that even Bamaha thought of the *kavya*, which the Mahabharata obviously is, as a text where form and content receive equal attention. Although events in the Mahabharata may appear to exist in isolation, or in a confused jumble, nevertheless, Pollock argues that the epic insists on contextualizing the events that get narrated, “placing the action and thereby producing a specific macrospace, one with a uniformity, coherence, and salience” (226). As an illustration of this fact, Ramanujan cites the example of the tale of Nala and Damayanti which is narrated in the middle of the Pandavas’ exile after losing the game of dice. Although the story of Nala appears to be an independent tale, its narration by a sage to Yudhisthira, in fact, gives him a perspective to view his acts and their consequences, and comes to the reader/listener as an illustration of the depth of Yudhisthira’s despair. The temporal, spatial and the political contexts of the epic, in fact, become mutually constitutive in giving to it its structure.

All the texts discussed above also operate within certain historical and political contexts: Ray’s novel contextualizes the fate of a modern day Krishna trapped within her personal aspirations and the value systems of a morally blinkered conservative society; Devi places her heroine in a Naxal affected Bengal struggling against institutionalized violence of powerful forces; and Divakaruni contextualizes a diasporic self in search of social acceptability, and a stable identity. However, these texts even while operating within the context of the epic from which they originate, and challenging established ideologies, also sometimes spill out of the discursive structure of the epic, or get entangled within the ideological inheritances of their leftovers. The shifting [con]texts of Draupadi, I believe, can become truly discursive only when they “make allowances for the complex and unstable” (Mills 44) processes that have produced her, and from which she has originated. The Mahabharata raises a number of issues about *dharma*, sexuality, subjectivity, slavery and kingship, and much more, without in fact challenging them. But it does participate in a discursive act that allows its women characters, particularly Draupadi, to engage in debates and pose questions to established laws. The “ongoing intertextual process” (Smith 161) of rewriting Draupadi is proof of its discursive powers.

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