



Dynamics of Power: A Comparative Study of the Portrayal of Draupadi in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*

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Abstract

This paper examines the portrayal of Draupadi in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, exploring how the character is constructed, deconstructed, and reimagined across classical and contemporary narratives. By comparing the epic's traditional framing with Ray's feminist retelling, the study foregrounds how shifts in narrative voice, cultural context, and authorial intent radically reshape perceptions of power, agency, and gender. While Vyasa's Draupadi functions within a patriarchal moral framework, primarily as a symbol of virtue and sacrifice, Ray's *Yajnaseni* empowers Draupadi with introspection and dissent, revealing the emotional and psychological costs of patriarchal expectations. The paper argues that Ray's text not only restores Draupadi's voice but also challenges the silencing mechanisms of epic tradition, making a compelling case for the transformative potential of feminist revisionist literature.

Keywords: Draupadi, Mahabharata, Yajnaseni, feminist retelling, Pratibha Ray, Vyasa, gender and power, polyandry, narrative voice, Indian epic, patriarchy, reimagination of myth, symbolic body, spiritual transcendence.

Introduction

In the vast corpus of Indian epic literature, few characters evoke as much intrigue, reverence, and controversy as Draupadi, the fiery queen of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. Traditionally portrayed by Vyasa as a noble woman shaped by destiny and divine will, Draupadi's story has been subject to various interpretations across centuries. Among contemporary retellings, Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* stands out for its powerful reimagination of Draupadi's voice, offering a first-person narrative that reclaims her agency and probes the gendered power dynamics within the epic.

This paper investigates the portrayal of Draupadi in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, analyzing how each text negotiates themes of power, agency, and patriarchy. By juxtaposing the canonical depiction with Ray's feminist reinterpretation, the study explores how shifts in perspective, narrative voice, and socio-cultural context can radically transform the representation of female agency in literature.

Historical and Literary Context

Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and the Classical Draupadi

The *Mahabharata*, attributed to the sage Vyasa, is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. Composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, it serves as both a spiritual allegory and a socio-political chronicle. Draupadi, born of fire and

destined for greatness, occupies a central role in the epic's moral and metaphysical landscape. She is often idealized as a pativrata (devoted wife), whose trials and tribulations exemplify the dharma of womanhood in a patriarchal cosmos. Yet, even within the classical epic, Draupadi emerges as a complex and assertive figure. Her humiliation in the Kaurava court—where she is disrobed and questions the legality of her husbands' actions—marks a rare moment of female resistance in epic literature. However, Vyasa's Draupadi ultimately remains a character whose fate is tethered to the actions and decisions of men.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*: Rewriting from Within

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (originally written in Odia in 1984 and later translated into English) offers a radical reinterpretation of Draupadi's life through a feminist lens. Presented as a personal letter to Krishna written at the end of her life, Ray's Draupadi recounts her life story with introspection, sorrow, and suppressed rage. In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi is not a passive recipient of fate but a deeply self-aware woman who questions her circumstances and the moral codes that bind her.

Ray's work aligns with a broader tradition of feminist revisionist mythology, wherein women characters are reimagined as agents of their own narratives. By giving

Draupadi a voice, *Yajnaseni* challenges the silences and omissions of the original epic, revealing the psychological cost of the patriarchal order.

Thematic Comparison

Power and Voice

In Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's moments of assertion—particularly during the dice game—are dramatic but isolated. Her rhetorical question, "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (Book 2, Sabha Parva), is a scathing indictment of her objectification. However, her resistance is ultimately subdued by the need to uphold dharma and family honor.

In contrast, *Yajnaseni* repositions this moment as a turning point in Draupadi's emotional and philosophical awakening. Her voice is not only assertive but reflective, shaped by the trauma of betrayal. Ray's Draupadi laments, "I was born of fire, but all my life I burnt in the flames of expectation, duty, and silence." This poetic introspection foregrounds her inner life and struggles.

Ray's use of first-person narration empowers Draupadi to recount her story on her own terms, thereby undermining the male-dominated narrative structure of the epic.

Gender and Agency

The portrayal of gendered power dynamics is one of the most striking differences between the two texts. Vyasa's Draupadi is circumscribed by the patriarchal expectations of her time: obedience, chastity, and devotion. While she occasionally transgresses these boundaries, her ultimate role remains that of a moral anchor for the Pandavas.

Ray's Draupadi, however, persistently questions these roles. She resents her polyandrous marriage, imposed upon her without consent. She critiques the moral hypocrisies of her husbands, particularly Yudhishtira, whom she regards with a mix of reverence and disillusionment. In *Yajnaseni*, agency is not only a matter of action but of thought and feeling, articulated in Draupadi's internal monologue.

Draupadi's Relationships: Husbands, Krishna, and Kauravas

Draupadi's interpersonal relationships play a critical role in shaping her identity and status within both texts. In Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, her relationships with her five husbands are marked by duty and reverence. Despite being shared among the Pandavas, she is rarely depicted as voicing dissent. Her bond with Yudhishtira, the eldest, is characterized by respect but also blind submission, even when his decisions lead to her suffering, as in the infamous dice game.

In *Yajnaseni*, however, these relationships are rendered with nuance and emotional complexity. Draupadi expresses profound pain over her polyandrous marriage, feeling objectified and alienated. Her disappointment in Yudhishtira is deep and lasting. Ray writes, "He gambled me away like an object, and never once sought my forgiveness." Her interactions with Bhima are more affectionate, while Arjuna is remembered with romantic sorrow. Nakula and Sahadeva remain distant figures, emotionally and narratively.

Draupadi's relationship with Krishna, in both texts, represents a spiritual and emotional refuge. In Vyasa's epic, Krishna is her divine protector, intervening during the dice game to save her from shame. In *Yajnaseni*, Krishna is both confidant and conscience, the one being with whom she can fully share her inner turmoil. Ray's portrayal of Krishna as an empathetic listener and guide heightens the emotional resonance of their bond.

Her relationship with the Kauravas, particularly Duryodhana and Dushasana, is framed by humiliation and rage. In the classical text, she vows revenge for her dishonor, an oath that becomes a catalyst for war. In *Yajnaseni*, the trauma of that moment reverberates throughout her narrative, symbolizing the systemic violence endured by women. Her rage is no longer just a plot device but a deeply personal and ethical response to injustice.

The Body and the Symbolic: Draupadi as a Site of Conflict

Draupadi's body functions as a contested site of honor, shame, and resistance in both versions of the text. In Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, her body is a battlefield where masculine pride and patriarchal values collide. The disrobing scene is not just a personal humiliation but a symbolic act of political and moral collapse. Draupadi's public stripping becomes a national disgrace, initiating the countdown to war. Her body, thus, is politicized—simultaneously sacred and violable.

In *Yajnaseni*, the physical and symbolic implications of this act are explored with psychological depth. Draupadi reflects on the trauma of being reduced to an object of display, her nakedness transformed from a moment of shame to one of spiritual revelation. Ray's narrative underscores the body as not merely physical but emblematic of a woman's autonomy. Draupadi muses, "My honor was not mine; it was a token passed among men, a relic of their pride."

This critical reimagining foregrounds the intersection of gender, body politics, and ethical action. Where Vyasa focuses on the event's external consequences, Ray internalizes the pain, enabling readers to engage with the personal cost of such symbolic violence.

Spirituality and Liberation: From Suffering to Transcendence

Draupadi's journey, while marked by pain and subjugation, also contains spiritual undercurrents. In Vyasa's epic, she is portrayed as steadfast in her dharma, unwavering in devotion to her husbands and Krishna. Her endurance becomes her virtue, culminating in her ascent to heaven. The classical text rewards her loyalty and suffering with divine recognition.

Yajnaseni, however, reframes this narrative of endurance. Draupadi does not passively accept her suffering; she questions it, challenges the divine rationale behind her pain. Her spiritual evolution is not about acceptance but awakening. Krishna becomes the mirror in which she sees her own divinity. Her liberation is not external, granted by gods, but internal—achieved through self-realization and emotional catharsis.

Ray's Draupadi transcends her roles as queen, wife, and victim to become a seeker of truth. She writes, "My soul does not belong to any man. It belongs to the cosmos." This transformation from political pawn to spiritual subject represents the ultimate reclaiming of power.

Conclusion

Draupadi's story, whether told by Vyasa or reimagined by Pratibha Ray, is one of extraordinary emotional, ethical, and symbolic power. While Vyasa's Draupadi is emblematic of moral virtue and dutiful femininity, Ray's *Yajnaseni* offers a powerful critique of those very ideals. Through first-person narrative and introspective depth, Ray restores Draupadi's voice, rendering her not merely a victim of circumstances but an active interpreter of her fate.

This comparative study reveals how reinterpretation can

become resistance—how reclaiming a silenced voice from a canonical epic can illuminate the persistent inequalities of gender and power. Draupadi, born of fire, remains a blazing symbol of womanhood—wounded, questioning, and ultimately transcendent.

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