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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ARTICULATING THE GENDERED 'WOMAN' SUBJECT THROUGH 'ALTER' NARRATIVES OF 'DRAUPADI: A COMPARATIVE READING OF PRATHIBHA RAY'S YAGNASANI AND CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

Dr. Prathyaksh Janardhanan

Assistant Professor GLSBBA Institute, Faculty of Business Administration, GLS University.

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Abstract

Gender as a conceptual and epistemological category for sociological and academic debate has always spurred contestable narratives, which might not be binary in nature. The fact that the category continues to spark the ashes of resistance in itself is a testimony for the need to further these debates and discussions. Indian epics, which are the repository of stories, due to its genre based palimpsest narratives culminate in the silencing of vital voices from within the macro narratives of the text. Further since epics have predominantly focused on the exploits of men. Women characters in the epics are relegated to the role of the muse and the source of inspiration and strength for the hero. The character of Draupadi is an aberration in this sense of articulation. While her portrayal in the epic has been along the lines of a self-willed, headstrong woman who dragged an entire illustrious race to the decadence of war and annihilation, several character based rewritings of the epic have attempted to create 'alternative' narratives or 'alter' narratives to contest the biased patriarchal macro narratives which attempt to frame Draupadi as the reason for the genocide of a race. This paper offers a comparative reading of several rewritings and works on Draupadi with specific focus on Prathibha Ray's Yagnaseni and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions to argue how alternative narratives as showcased in these novels help articulate a new 'alter' narrative voice for the gendered subject, through which she is enabled the agency to create new narratives of resistance to combat the macro epistemic narratives created by the larger framework of a patriarchal ecosystem.

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Introduction:-

In the two volumes of Women writing in India by Susie Tharu and K Lalitha. they attempt to create a context in which women writings can be read and thus situate the ideologies that shape their writings which, in turn form the fulcrum upon which their resistance is formulated.

Women articulate and respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentred positions within them. Familial ideologies, for instance, clearly constitute male and female subjectivities in different ways, as do ideologies of nation or of empire. Further, ideologies are not experienced – or contested-in the same way from

Corresponding Author:- Dr. Prathyaksh Janardhanan

Address:- Assistant Professor GLSBBA Institute, Faculty of Business Administration,
GLS University.

different subject positions.....we might indeed learn to read them not for the moments in which they collude with or reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class, nation or empire, but for the gestures of defiance and subversion implicit in them. (35)

The character of Draupadi embodies flamboyant resistance against patriarchal systems. However, alternative versions of ‘her’ story through essays, critiques and literature based adaptations and rewriting enable redeem a myopic and homogenous mode of approaching and problematizing the concept of gender as its seen through the lens of the gendered subject itself. The first section of this paper focuses on the role of macro narratives as they are presented in epics. The remaining sections will attempt a reading of texts and sub texts which discuss the epic character of Draupadi.

Epics and myths as a repository of tradition and culture and as a testimony of a glorious past also helped forge the identity of a nation. This is exemplified, when the Greek epics were appropriated by Europe as their own, to facilitate the foundation of a national identity for the West through its allusion to a glorious past. (Martyniuk, 190). Romila Thapar in “Epic and History: Tradition, dissent and politics in India” secondly this claim through her argument that the epics helped in a literary crystallization of a heroic ideal. Much of early Indian history appears to be embedded in cultural forms such as the epics (Thapar 26). This is exemplified by the fossils found at the foot of the Swalik Hill, where the war as described in the Mahabharata took place (Michael and John, 87).

Epics as a part of mainstream culture were deliberately reconstructed for nationalist revival. The nationalists also changed its form to mobilize support for a different ideological position (Thapar, 3). Through the example of the Ramayana, Thapar argues that the epics were appropriated by the Brahmans to convert it from a literary text into sacred literature. The hidden agenda could also have been to valorise the Vaishnava Cult through the portrayal of Ram as the avatar of Vishnu (Thapar, 7). The singing of the Ramayana in the court of Ram by Lav and Kush is thus seen as a redemptive measure adopted by the Brahmans for forcibly appropriating the literature of the Bards as their own. Conversely, the epic Mahabharata has been seen to provide an ideological and narrative grounding for a brahminical concept of monarchical rule in the wake of the Mouryan Empire (Fitzgerald, 811). The references to the Lunar line along with the narratives based on societies that adhered to clan and lineage organisations exemplify the claim stated above. The Great War in the epic, thus marked the end of clan based societies and saw the emergence of Kingdoms (Thapar 100). The performance of the Pandav Lila at Garhwal exemplifies this through the validation of the legitimacy of the Rajput lineage through the Pandavas (Sax, 101).

As discussed above, epics and myths form the alternate forms of history and a rewriting of the same recreate the history in a new light, thus providing a continuation of the Indian tradition (Chakrabarti, 12). The epics constitute the collective consciousness of Indians and lend themselves to political interpretations and rewriting from the different societal and ideological positions (Jain, Indigenous Roots of Feminism, 29), which thus alter the way in which they are rewritten.

The rewriting of epics in the late colonial period explicated tales of bravery and thus need to be read as allegories of colonial expression (Lothspeich, 280). This is also seen in the portrayal of female epic characters such as Draupadi who was deified and atrocities committed on her were analogised as on Mother India. This is seen in the works by Ramcharit Upadhyay’s *Devi Draupadi* (1920), Maithilisharan Gupta’s *Sairandhri* (1927) etc. However after independence, writers and playwrights utilized epic material to project visions of an independent India, with female characters donning more bolder independent versions of themselves as seen in Narendra Sharma’s *Draupadi* (1960) (Lothspeich, 28). The rewriting of the epic through the novels attempt to fill the gaps created due to the magnitude of the epic. This is achieved through the rewriting of the epic characters that certain events in the novel get highlighted and depicted in a new light. The rewriting of epics also focused on the questioning of the role of myths in suppressing the voice of the woman subject.

In the article, ‘Decentering a patriarchal myth: Bhasham Sahni’s *Madhavi*’, Pankaj and Jaidev argue through the analysis of the epic character of *Madhavi* and the rewriting of the epic character in Bhasham Sahni’s *Madhavi*, as to how the play retrieves the epic character and allows it to protest against her victimization by the patriarchal structures (Pankaj and Jaidev, 4).

Like Madhavi, the rewritings on Draupadi too allows her to speak, feel and protest against victimization by patriarchy (Pankaj and Jaidev, 4). The next section will focus on the analysis of Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi', Irawati Karve's Yuganta and Ram Kumar Bhramar's Aahuti to portray the ways in which Draupadi has been analysed and rewritten in these works.

Draupadi, of all the characters in the Mahabharata, has received the maximum attention due to her sufferings and her boldness. Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' gained popularity because of her treatment of the character from the point of view of the subaltern and the foreword to the story by Gayatri Spivak, where she emphasises the inability to understand the song of Dopdi as one of the major problems faced by the First World scholar, who cannot comprehend the reality faced by the subaltern, precisely because of their training (382). The play on the word 'counter' questions the understanding of the meaning of the word by an illiterate woman as opposed to the tyrannical state, which cannot make sense of her nakedness or her words (389).

Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi revolves the story of Dopdi Mehjen and her tribe, who are hunted after being labelled insurgents. The consequent apprehending of Draupadi and her rape in the name of interrogation relates the story to the public humiliation of Draupadi after Yudhistir loses her to a game of dice. The rewriting of the character occurs when Dopdi unlike her namesake, Draupadi, refuses to wear any clothes, and insists on appearing naked before the Senanayak to confront her oppressor.

Through her refusal to wear clothes or saved by the male divine agency (388), Dopdi turns her mangled body, a product of the male violence into her agency of resistance, thus terrifying her enemy.

Irawati Karve's Yuganta is a collection of articles on the characters of the Mahabharata. The chapter on Draupadi offers a glimpse of her life and how she manages to traverse the three difficult moments of her life: her marriage, her laughter and her public dishonour at the hands of the Kaurava clan leaders.

Through a juxtaposing of the lives of Sita and Draupadi, Karve manages to assert that most of the troubles faced by Draupadi were wrought by her own people. While, Draupadi was no silent sufferer like Sita, it does not absolve her of her mistakes such as the laughter at Duryodhana and her question to the clan leaders of the Kuru Assembly.

Yuganta, on one hand, offers an unbiased critical reading of the epic character, but ironically holds Draupadi responsible for her misery on the other. Ram Kumar Bhramar's Aahuti is the sixth novel of the twelve written on the epic characters of the Mahabharata. As the title states, Draupadi has been portrayed as Aahuti or oblation condemned to burn for the sake of others or to fulfil the purpose of being the oblation for the War.

The novel pivots the life of Draupadi, when she gets the news of the death of her sons and her brother. The novel spans her journey to see the dead bodies of her sons and their subsequent cremation. The novel progresses through the mental journey of Draupadi as she attempts to understand her position in the society to which she belongs.

Aahuti portrays Draupadi as a princess and her life with her sakhis Shauvya (11), the crucial moments of her life of her sylvan life, where she rejects Karna because she feared that he would win her not for himself, but for Duryodhana (15), her marriage to the Pandavas where she was forced to accept the five husbands, thus compelling herself to be a sanyasin than a normal wife (30) etc. Further, the novel progresses through the life of Draupadi as a wife but, clearly registers her angst at her being insulted and manipulated by men exemplified by her anger at being pawned as an object by Yudhistir.

Ram Kumar Bhramar's Aahuti rewrites the character of Draupadi through a portrayal of her mental angst and her helplessness. The novel clearly affirms the loneliness of Draupadi and her position as a subject who rebels from within the confined space of patriarchy.

In conclusion, the rewriting of the epic character Draupadi, questions the dominant patriarchal ideological structures. This section focused on three diverse interpretations of the epic character. Central to all of them was the angst of Draupadi and her questioning of the patriarchal ideological structures which were responsible for her misery. Mahasweta Devi's short story Draupadi, utilizes the name of the epic character and the disrobing scene to question the position of a woman in a society who was both a Dalit and a woman. Through the insistence of Dopdi to appear naked before her oppressors, Devi reinstates the protest of women against patriarchy without the help of the divine male

agency. Through the story, Devi, transforms the woman subject into an agent of resistance against victimization. Irawati Karve's chapter on Draupadi offers an analysis of the epic character through the comparison of Draupadi with Sita. By juxtaposing Sita and Draupadi, Karve shows how Sita's docility and Draupadi's need for vengeance act as agencies of resistance against patriarchy. Although Karve holds both the heroines responsible for their misery, she attempts to absolve them of the stigma of being a Kritya (Karve, 92).

The chapter of Draupadi by Karve analyses the life of the epic heroine and provides a new interpretation of the character, while it does reinstate the loneliness and angst of Draupadi that refer to her as *nathavati* (Karve, 91), because she was not wholly responsible for the events in her life and yet was the worst victim. The loneliness and sense of loss is also seen in Ram Kumar Brahmara's *Aahuti*, where her journey with Arjun to see dead bodies of her sons, propel her memories back to her life as a princess, queen and wife, where she realizes that she did not have an identity of her own. She was a pawn of her father (who had created her for his vengeance) and the Pandavs (who wanted her as a wife). She recoils at the realization of her being a pawn, at not being able to register her protest against the structures that orchestrated her destiny and thus was an oblation to the turbulent times. Through the narration of her helplessness and impotent protests, Bhramara affirms the presence of Draupadi as a woman who complied but never submitted to the patriarchal structures.

The rewriting of epics also questions the dominant ideological structures through narratives, exemplified by the analysis of the rewriting of the epic character Draupadi. In the Foreword of the first translated edition of Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* (1968), Professor Norman Brown had stated that Karve's treatment of the characters of the Mahabharata shows them as not wholly good or bad, but has the following to opine about Draupadi: her Draupadi, heroine of the whole epic story, though the model of a good wife, was also an arrogant, opinionated, selfish, untrustworthy young woman, and an inveterate troublemaker throughout her life. The catalogue is endless (*Yuganta*, ii)

While Karve in her chapter on Draupadi comes closer to describing the latter in the similar derogatory terms, Brown's estimation of the character of Draupadi forms the crux of most of the rewritings on the character. In other words, the rewritings on Draupadi attempt to depict the character differently from what has been described by Brown. This has been exemplified by the analysis of the epic character of Draupadi in the novels: Ram Kumar Bhramara's *Aahuti* and P.K Balakrishnan's *Let me Sleep now*. They attempt to rewrite the character of Draupadi after the war, which had resulted in the mass genocide. Bhramara uses the journey of Draupadi in the chariot alongside Arjun, to see the bodies of her dead sons as a metaphor, to allow her to have an analeptic and proleptic mental journeys, when she attempts to see her life as a princess, wife, queen and mother. Her journeys through her own life and her futile attempt to locate her identity lead her to realize that she was never seen as a woman but an oblation (*aahuti*) to the already turbulent relations between the Kauravas and Pandavs.

While *Aahuti* begins with Draupadi's journey to see her dead sons, *Let Me Sleep now* maps her angst and mental turmoils when she realizes that Karna, who was her husband's arch rival was the eldest Pandav and that she had been offered as a bait to defect to the Pandavs by Krishna, Kunti and Bheem. Her horror at being offered to the man whom she had hated, thus surpasses Yudhishthira's guilt of an inadvertent fratricide. Her repulsion emerges from the realization that she was nothing sort of a luxury, which the Pandavs had won in a *svyamvara*; was a prize shared equally among all; was pawned alongside other amenities of Yudhishthira and finally, was presented as a luxury to lure Karna.

Conversely, the interpretation of the epic character in Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* and Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*, attempt to read Draupadi differently. Devi's *Draupadi* takes the name of Draupadi and transforms her into *Dopdi Mehjen*, a tribal woman on the run from the police. Further, her rape by the police and her refusal to wear clothes form the departure from the epic character's defamation and disrobing in the Kuru Assembly Hall, where the divine male agency protects her. Through an inversion of the disrobing episode, Devi questions the state sponsored exploitation of the tribals through the exposure of their atrocities etched on the mangled breasts of *Dopdi*, and her defiant questioning of *Senapati* in the end of the story.

Karve's *Yuganta* attempts a critical analysis of the major characters of the epic Mahabharata including Draupadi. Karve, through a comparison of Sita and Draupadi show how the two heroines of the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata are its worst victims. Further, she argues how the characters negotiated their presence in the

male dominated society. However, Karve explicitly holds Sita and Draupadi partially responsible for their misery exemplified by Karve's criticism of Draupadi's questioning of the Kuru Assembly.

Thus, the interpretations of the epic character Draupadi, discussed thus far, show the character's quest for identity as a woman of her times. The novels, *Yagnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* by Prathibha Ray and Chitra Divakaruni respectively attempt to address the forging of the gendered identity through the narration of Draupadi's story and a rewriting of the events of the epic through her perspective.

In Alf Hiltelbeitel's *The Cult of Draupadi: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurushetra* (1988), he argues the presence of Draupadi as a goddess connected with the rural market of Gingee (in Tamil) and her deification as a goddess of Melaciri (4). Through the analysis of the *Terrukuttu* (street dramas) performed at Draupadi festivals, Hiltelbeitel argues how the epic heroine, the wife of the Pandavas, becomes the pure virgin and goddess.

Further, the depiction of Draupadi in the epic focuses on certain characteristics of the epic heroine: her dark magnetic beauty and birth from the sacrificial fire for vengeance (Adi Parva, 473), her alternating between compassion and vengeance: she loved her husbands' and co-wives but wanted blood as a retribution of her insult (Sabha Parva, 828), her infatigable physical (sexual) stamina: she was able to be the wife of five husbands on a one-year basis (Adi Parva, 577) and finally the combination of beauty and knowledge at par with her husbands which allows her to argue her stance in the Kuru Assembly (Sabha Parva, 792). This stereotypes her as a goddess or an example of sexual licentiousness for her non-normative acceptance of five husbands and thereby denies her the veneration offered to her ancestor Sita (Jain, *Indigenous Roots*, 42).

Prathibha Ray's *Yagnaseni* and Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* attempt the rewriting of the epic heroine, Draupadi and foreground her as the agency of questioning the patriarchal ideological discursive structures which dictated all her actions. This is achieved through the analysis of the aforementioned characteristics of the epic heroine.

Firstly, Prathibha Ray's *Yagnaseni*'s rewriting of Draupadi explicitly states through the character, the need to absolve Draupadi of the divinity attributed to her by Vyasa. She argues the need for her story, written in 'indelible letters' to be read, so that she gets recognized as a woman and not as a goddess or be a part of the 'food and mockery' of debauched men and women. The novel progresses through the questioning of the prophecy at her birth through Krishna. While the name alludes to her magnetized dark complexion (Yagnaseni, 21), it simultaneously binds her to the masculine god Krishna. Although, the novel progresses through the spiritual relationship between Krishna and Krishnaa, it depicts Draupadi different from the celestial Yagnaseni and the masculine godhead. The dark magnetism of Krishnaa, which has been argued in the novel as one of the reasons for her misery: the lust for her body in the Kauravs and Pandavs and the kings, has been attributed to their lack of self-control than any fault from her side, although she sees her unbraided hair as the emblem of her lost honour thereby affirming her physical similarity to Kali: The Dark Goddess with open hair. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the dark complexion of Paanchali has been interpreted through her as a bane, which lowers her self-esteem (The Palace of Illusions, 8). Like Yagnaseni, it is Krishna who forces her to see and understand her beauty through the examples of his own life and by calling her Krishnaa: the irresistible.

Unlike Yagnaseni, Paanchali inspired by Krishna understands the magnetism of her body and uses it to assert her presence in the male dominated society. The novel also does not emphasize the role of prophecy, although it codes her as the changer of history and shows how her life had already been written by Vyasa. However, the novel focuses on her actions more than the agency of a prophecy governing her life. It de-centers the primacy of her celestial birth and focuses, instead, on the character as the agent of her destiny.

Both the novels reinstate the interplay of the characteristics of compassion and vengeance in Draupadi. Yagnaseni initially progresses through the two names: Yagnaseni and Krishnaa to depict the characteristics of the compassionate and the vengeful, while the novel argues that her alternation between the two emerges from the context in which she finds herself: she protests against the marriage to the Pandavs and Arjun's mute assent, but agrees to avoid fratricidal conflict, vows vengeance against Jayadrath and Ashwathama, but forgives them for the sake of their wife and mother respectively, because they would suffer in the process. Her oscillation between the traits of compassion and vengeance also shows her awareness of the implications of her actions. Her intuitive understanding of the lives of women around her, and her need to show her

life as an example to women forms one of the key arguments in both the novels. This is exemplified when she resorts to general statements on the position of women in the contemporary society and tends to relate with them. Her combination of compassion and courage, thus questions the binary which attributes passivity to women and action and valour to men.

The oscillation between the characteristics of compassion and vengeance is exemplified when Krishnaa accompanies her husbands' to the forest, she rewrites the vengeful trait of Draupadi by showering her maternal affection on the Shabars, which she should have given to her sons. Through the glorification of the qualities of a mother and motherhood, Krishnaa absolves the epic character of being a heartless mother. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni portrays the mother in Draupadi differently. This is seen, when Paanchali accepts that, her decision to accompany her husbands' to the forest was not because she was not a good mother, but because, she craved for revenge and wanted the Pandavs to remember her insult.

Divakaruni's treatment of the epic character through Paanchali operates through the juxtaposing of the versions of narratives that had already essentialized Draupadi and Paanchali's versions. This is exemplified in Paanchali's description of her decision to question Karna (Divakaruni, 33) and her tantrums when her husbands' took more than one wife (Divakaruni, 90). Unlike Yagnaseni, Paanchali continuously questions and reflects on the events around her, which reinforce her need to understand her identity in the light of the contesting narratives around her.

Both the novels, strangely do not refer explicitly to Draupadi's immense sexual capacity as the wife of five husbands, although there are subtle references to it in *The Palace of Illusions*, seen in the description of the names of Paanchali's sons, who were born with one year's interval (attributed to the one year spent with each husband) and one of the reasons for her lack of attention to her children was because she was preoccupied being a wife five times over (*Palace of Illusions*, 148).

However, while Prathibha Ray's Yagnaseni details her education and her exemplary scholarship, *The Palace of Illusions* shows the education of Paanchali as restricted to the rules of comportment, the skills needed by a woman to control her household by the sorceress, Dhai Ma and the stories about virtuous women. Her knowledge about the education of men was through the bits that she siphoned from her brother Dhri and her tussle with Nyayasastra in a bid to achieve equality with men. While Yagnaseni, does not show Krishnaa's role in governance directly, *The Palace of Illusions* shows her role in governance as the queen. However, both the novels show the inefficacy of her learning and her knowledge of the men's rules during her disrobing in the Kuru Assembly, where her question which emerged from her understanding of the books, does not provide her any protection against the infamy. Thus, the novels corroborate on the gendered and biased systems of knowledge which operate differently and the heroine's resistance to the same as the systems turn her into a subject.

The rewriting of the epic character in both the novels, problematize and question the traits seen in her and through the rewriting portrays the character from a new perspective. Thus, in the novels, Draupadi fights against her preordained destiny which makes her into a martyr for the gains of her father or the Great War. While in Yagnaseni, it is the public avowal of her thought processes that subverts the discourses, *The Palace of Illusions* focuses on the role of stories as a significant marker of identity while positing a strong female character through the portrayal of Paanchali. This is summarized in Jasbir Jain's *Indigenous roots of Feminism* as:

Modern interpretations like Prathibha Ray's Yagnaseni and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* or Saoli Mitra's play 'Five Lords Yet none a protector', are attempts at psychoanalysis, social criticism, and deconstruction... It needs to be added that resistant interpretations acquire an ideological base or at least work from one. The narrative dramatic voice is that of a woman and as female psychologies are unveiled, both the victimization of these women and their resistance or strategic bypassing of male control are also made visible. (29)

Yagnaseni, through the spiritual relation between Krishnaa and Krishnaa subtly narrates the story of a woman who was both the heroine and victim of her times. The problems faced by her may be unique to her, but has not been completely different from what women face today. Thus, the problems faced by Draupadi are not entirely unique, when seen in the light of the patriarchal ideological structures. Through

her love for Krishna (couched in spirituality), empathy for her husbands' archrival Karna, her relationship with the other women such as Subadhra, Maya, Rituvati, Kunti etc and her incessant questioning of her position as a woman born into the society of men, the novel rewrites the epic character through an analysis of the mental thought processes of the character and highlights the inner turmoils and desires. Chitra Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions*, like Yagnaseni deals with the emotions and secret desires of the bold heroine of the epic. It rewrites the story of Draupadi beginning from her birth as a child (thereby questioning the divinity of the epic character) and proceeds to uncover her identity as a woman from the multiple stories that have already been written about her. Her narration thus works as a counter discourse against the discursive gendered identity imposed on her.

The rewritings of the epic character Draupadi cognates with the rewriting of Madhavi, another epic character of the Mahabharthain Bhasham Sahni's play *Madhavi*. The rewritings and the play converge on the treatment of the epic character, differently from the portrayal of the epic character in the epic. Like Draupadi, Madhavi has also been portrayed as one who valued her duty more than her own feelings and emotions (Pankaj and Jaidev, 7).

Bhasham Sahni's play, like Yagnaseni and *The Palace of Illusions* engage in an exercise of justice (Pankaj and Jaidev, 15) to portray the epic character differently and to rewrite the narratives on them, by providing the characters the agency to question the biased narratives.

Both Yagnaseni and *The Palace of Illusions* also rewrite the character of Draupadi through the subtle questioning of the ideological structure of dharma, chastity etc. They work from the ideological position of providing the agency of resistance to the epic heroine, who through the narration of her story resists and subverts the ideological patriarchal structures. Thus, Krishnaa Yagnaseni and Paanchali manage to negotiate their identity from within the identity imposed on them by the dominant structures of patriarchy.

The play 'We are so different now' by Shauna Singh Baldwin which was staged in 2009 exemplifies the need to present the narratives of contestation against the patriarchal ideological structure in today's world. The play pivots the life of a twentieth century woman, Sheetal who plans to commit suicide and is rescued by Draupadi (who has still not attained moksha)

Remember me, the woman who rose not from a mother's womb, or her father's desire, but

from flickering embers.
I am the woman with the never-ending sari.
With my brother, I played chess, moving vazeers, ghoras and pyadas across the board.
And in the forest our arrows flew swifter than the wind.
But--unlike my brother--
I learned that my words were only for the enchantment of my husbands and Lord Krishna.
My father taught me every guest must be fed from the bounty of the earth before I ate.
And my husbands gambled me away along with their kingdom. (pause)
My father, my brother, my husbands are long gone. My spirit remains. (12)

The play, progresses through the conversation between Draupadi and Sheetal, where the latter's life begins to echo that of Draupadi: only the terminologies have changed, but the plight of women remains as it were: tangled in the issues of money, property and lust. The contemporaneity of Draupadi with a never-ending sari gets enunciated, when she decides to leave to help many others like Sheetal.

Sheetal

So if you're not staying, where are you going?

Draupadi

Where I'm needed most. Two women in villages, women in the chawls. There are women and men all over India who are feeling right now, as you felt – total despair. I've been reading reports on the net. – we have a hundred thousand suicides a year. Farmers,

Unemployed people, retired people. People your age. So many young girls, Sheetal, so many women. (22)

Thus, the play uses the epic character, Draupadi to allude to the lives of women who struggle to forge their identity within a polarised, discursively constituted gendered world. As discussed above, rewritings question the dominant ideological structures and attempt to subvert them through their narratives.

Thus, the rewritings of Draupadi seen in the light of the allegations by the upper caste Hindus against Husain's portrayal of Draupadi (Juneja, 155) and the protests against the Telegu novel, Draupadi, by Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad winning the Sahitya Akademi Award (Khan, 4), argue against the stereotypical representation of Draupadi as a chaste goddess. In other words, both the protests stated above are the products of the Hindu moral policing, which codify Draupadi as a goddess and refuse to see her in any other form.

To conclude, the need to situate Draupadi as a mortal woman of her times and describe her sufferings and protests is perhaps what makes the rewriting of the epic character relevant and contemporary. To return to the initial quote by Susie and Lalitha, they coin women's struggles as an ideological struggle from within a 'decentered position' in the larger context of the text that created them. While the epic character of 'Draupadi' constantly raises questions verbally and non-verbally through her open hair, the silencing of her angst and victimization has been subtly strategised from within the larger framework of the epic. This is where 'alter' narratives as discussed through the works of Prathibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, play a pivotal role in help articulate the voice of the gendered subject.

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