Chapter-5

Conclusion

The study and re-vision of myths prevalent in Indian society and literature has been a subject of keen interest for contemporary women writers like Pratibha Ray, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Mahasweta Devi. The conflict of tradition and modernity which has provided an apparatus through which Indian women endeavour to characterise themselves, also could be considered as the axis around which is yoked the constant comparisons and contrasts of contemporary women with their traditional mythic counterparts. This dissertation has made a detailed textual analysis of three texts: Pratibha Ray*'s Yajnaseni*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi". As discussed in the previous chapters, these three texts have rewritten the mythical character, Draupadi. Ray's, Divakaruni's and Devi's representation of Vyasa's Draupadi has played a central role in the understanding of the mythical character, Draupadi as our contemporary, in modern India, and perhaps also across the globe.

Such rewritings have Indian sensibility as they are intrinsically shaped as well as nourished by religion and mythology. Mahabharata and Ramayana, the preservers of tradition and spirituality are paradoxically the carriers of transformations which have transgressed the rigid boundaries of culture and conventional ideology. The story of Mahabharata has been told, retold, interpreted and reinterpreted a number of times by the writers of distinct backgrounds. For centuries, female identity in the Indian context has found representation through religion and mythology. David Carrol gives his opinion that "[l]iterature is considered to be representational when it produces ... a

figure of an ideal, mythical, metaphysical ['] reality [']" (201). This research work has

dealt with representation of mythology without alienating it from the contemporary

context. The focus has been primarily on the representation of Draupadi in the three

texts mentioned. In the reading of these texts the character of Draupadi as our

contemporary comes up not only as a meek, subjugated wife to her parents, in-laws

and husband/s, but she also evolves as a voice of resistance, as perhaps one of the

earliest feminists of India.

Indian mythology is replete with cultural images. The great Indian epic The

Mahabharata has also portrayed women as passive. In the epic, woman is relegated to

the position of subject and commodified, often used as an object of the male gaze. She

has only one objective, that is, to preserve her 'Dharma' and to be useful to men

without any objection to any injustice meted out to her. This thesis has highlighted the

fact that the plight of Vyasa's Draupadi still replicates in the lives of women even

today.

Mythical Draupadi has been perceived through a particular culture as myths

are always carried through cultural images and are instrumental in influencing and

persuading the public. In fact, these myths propagate wisdom that comes through

'challenge and suffering.' For generations Draupadi has been seen by Indians as the

embodiment of sacrifice and suffering and in present times has set standards of

comparison for contemporary women. She is a dynamic character who finds

improvisation in each successive version of the Mahabharata of which she forms a

part. The fictional representation of Draupadi by Ray, Divakaruni, and Devi maintain

a balance between mythology and modernity. They have taken their Draupadis' to a

different level in their respective works and have represented in her, their personal

anguish at the eternal prejudice against women as only a sexual object for possession or exploitation. While Ray and Divakaruni set their novels in ancient mythological times, and limit their protagonist to such times, Mahasweta Devi allows her character to move beyond her mythological limits to establish a fresh perspective to women's strengths and weaknesses. In some way or the other the three texts have gone "out of [their] way[s] to transcribe the troublesome distance between what represents and what is represented" (Weimman 211).

In the epic Draupadi's humiliation became the driving force for her revenge. But Draupadi was also a daughter, a sister, a daughter-in-law and above all a woman alive to the situations in which she found herself. It is these facets of the woman that Ray, Divakaruni and Devi have been essentially concerned with. Every rewriting of Draupadi's character in the three concerned texts have opened new facets of her personality.

Moreover, Ray, Divakaruni and Devi have tried to understand as well as redefine Draupadi in postmodern situations. In the process they have also redefined and thrown new light on the considerations which bound the life and literature of ancient times in shackles of conventions, tradition and redundant prejudices. These rewritings of Draupadi's character have facilitated the need among modern women, whether readers or writers, to rediscover and assert their self as individual independent beings. They have found the need to re-vision the mythical characters in the modern context. The very purpose of a "re-vision" is an attempt towards reconstructing and granting a fresh perspective to events and literature of the past. It not only provides a new understanding but also a new domain of tradition.

Through this discussion of the political and ideological issues involved in representation of a mythical character, specifically Draupadi, we come to understand the various ways in which Ray, Divakaruni and Devi have exploited mythical characters in order to negotiate between traditional representation of women and their more contemporary social situation. A critical review of the social and political implications of the metamorphosis that the mythical Draupadi has undergone in various literary works has established her as a character whose suffering touches us even today. Women continue not only to sympathise with her, but also, although under different socio-historical circumstances, very often identify themselves with her predicament.

The feminist perspectives of Ray, Divakaruni and Devi, as they position their protagonist in the patriarchal system of a society so far removed from that of the epic, bring out the complexities involved in the intertextual representation of myths in modern narrative forms like the novel and short story.

Each of the writers, Ray, Divakaruni and Devi, while drawing upon Vyasa's character, represent their Draupadi as significantly different from the others, while at the same time also deviating from the mythical origin. Although Vyasa had presented Draupadi as one of the most powerful female characters to instigate Pandavas to the great war, the Mahabharata, his epic had given her no voice or speech. There are no dialogues, in the epic, which could give expression to the feelings and emotions of a woman who feels her individuality violated in various ways. Vyasa has made her the reason of the great war as an instrument to propagate Dharma. Iravati Karve, in her book, Yuganta, denies the commonly held view of Draupadi as the chief cause of the "war". She states:

> ....But that Draupadi was the cause of the war in the Mahabharata- at
> least the main cause – is definitely not true. The seeds of war had been
> planted on the day Dhritarashtra was denied the throne because of his
> blindness and Pandu was made king. (93)

Although the mythical Draupadi is denied speech, yet, the things that happened with her determined the course of life of other characters in the epic. Vyasa's Draupadi indeed remains exceptional in herself but she has undergone several metamorphoses through the ages in the hands of different authors. For instance Pratibha Ray's novel *Yagnaseni* allows to Draupadi a space for expressing her deepest emotions and opinions. Likewise, in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi continually complains and draws the readers' attention to the unpleasant turns that her life takes despite her protests. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," on the other hand, as a drastic changeover from any other earlier version of the character, is a rebel, entirely a modern version of Vyasa's Draupadi. Through ages different authors have depicted Draupadi as the universal woman suffering in the male dominated society which still remains a burning issue. Pankaj K. Singh and Jaidev have agreed: "[t]he need for myth is as real for women as it is for men. Yet the situation is asymmetrical because while men have myths on their side, women have myths against them" (3).They go on to suggest that "[t]he most acceptable" way of "resolving the dilemma" is to "recast renovate myths so that they would not be out of step with our changing realities" (3). For them:

> Construction of alternative, new myths appears to be another possibility,
> but in practice a new myth is likely to have enough power to counter the
> authority of the old. The third way could be to seek to organize life

mythlessly. One respects this radical method, but its chances of success are low. A total break from the past, even when it is motivated by the most honourable considerations, does not seem to have sufficient appeal. (3)

The distaff, as if, now has been taken over by women writers who have deconstructed the ancient epics to give new shape and voice to the silenced women characters. Ray has deconstructed the great epic, Mahabharata and given to it a new form in her novel, by making Draupadi a mouthpiece for female justice. Ray's Draupadi has adequately represented the sentiments of a modern woman. Although traditionally, her name is counted among the five satis, - Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari, Satavati and Draupadi, still she is condemned for infidelity. In her "Afterword" Ray has mentioned about a personal acquaintance named 'Krishnaa" whose first marriage was miserable due to "her debauched drunkard of a husband" (400). So, she left him and married another man. "Her conjugal life is comfortable" (401). But "people who were at one time sympathetic towards Krishna, said after the second marriage" (401) that, "Well! When her very name is Krishna, she could be happy only after taking a second husband. Arre! That Krishna of the Mahabharata took five husbands, and still not being satisfied, was attracted to Karna and Krishna" (401).

Ray did not bring Draupadi out off the mythological pages. Rather, she has represented Draupadi as a contemporary woman. And in doing so, she updated a myth that has neglected female voice so far. By retelling the story of the Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi in her novel, *Yajnaseni* Ray has endeavoured to relocate the position of women in Indian society. She has brought out the inner voice of Draupadi giving vent to the long silenced grievances of women while questioning the

very idea of dharma and women's relation to it. The epistolary form of the novel has made a better understanding of the psychological complexities of the mythical Draupadi.

The novel has presented Draupadi as a victim of her dharma as a daughter, wife and daughter-in-law, and to many of her husbands' irresponsible and thoughtless actions. The game of dice is the worst of many such acts. The character has acquired a new dimension as with Ray's Draupadi pouring out her heart in the form of a letter to a confidant, who in this case happens to be Lord Krishna. Although supposed to be privately addressed to Krishna in a letter, the reader is allowed a peep into the most intimate thoughts and feelings of a woman, whose life has been mostly of compromises, and who, at the end, feels unloved and discarded in spite of her five husbands. Ray has focused on female experience, in protest, demand and self-discovery.

Ray's Draupadi has adequately represented the sentiments of a modern woman in her novel. Although traditionally, her name is counted among the five satis, still she is condemned for infidelity. Through Draupadi Ray has criticized a society that judges a woman's chastity by the number of husbands. Ray has focused on the fact that chastity should not depend on such social assumptions. Although Draupadi has often been insulted for her five husbands and insinuating remarks are made about her loose moral character, Ray's narrative has given her the honor of holding the Pandavas together and being an agent of change during her time. Ray's novel has given Draupadi a space for self-expression.

Though Draupadi's ideal was Sita, she also like most modern women questions Sita's silent acceptance of her husband's verdict. Sita had not protested

when her husband had doubted her chastity and abandoned her. Draupadi on the other hand, as the opposite of Sita, has become the ideal for modern women in their protest against any kind of injustice. Though Ray's Draupadi has been trapped by circumstances, she comes out as an early feminist of the Dvaparyug. She has broken set rules of the times consistently. The novel has treated her as a human being with human flaws.

In Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi has been represented as an intense character from the epic written in the form of a letter to Lord Krishna. The woman's perspective has given it the sensibility that only a woman feels for the sufferings of other women. Ray's Draupadi has nourished an anti-idealistic and realistic value of life. In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi's scope is both narrow and broad, giving room to the author to intervene every now and then.

Ray's creativity in representing Draupadi has shown her rewriting of myth, a challenging as well as incomprehensible task. Moreover, Ray understands how women are oppressed in the name of mythology. As Singh and Jaidev have stated in their essay:

> Myths oppress by denying their victim's voice, visibility and dignity. The only tribute we can pay to the makers of the world of our mythology and lore is that they fabricated such fool-proof constructs as allowed no decent escape routes to those they targeted. (30)

When she fell from the mountain she was abandoned by the same husbands for who she had sacrificed her entire life. But she sustained. Since this entire story is written by a woman and told from a woman's point of view, the vulnerability and the

naiveté of this one scene, when she was being disrobed in the Kuru Court, is supremely presented by Ray.

Ray rewrites the character of Draupadi in *Yajnaseni*, as a new woman who questions her 'dharma'. She is not afraid of expressing her resentment towards the ills done to her in the name of culture. While succumbing to polyandry, she questions its justification; resents being used as a pawn to meet men's needs in the court and offering her body as an extension of commodity, she also refuses to accept a passive role like her counterpart, Draupadi, in the Mahabharata. Trapped as she is inside cultural and sexual politics, she is not afraid of expressing her preference for the third of her five husbands, Arjun.

The swayamvaraa and marriage episodes of Draupadi brought to light how Yajnaseni, the new Draupadi 'writes back' in the form of a letter, or resentfully vocalizes the wrongs done against her by patriarchal culture. Culture as a concept has been defined veritably in its multiple dimensions. For Ray, dharma which equals duty and morality cannot be a synonym for rules. In her anxiety at having to play the role of the mediator in her father's design to avenge his insult by slaying Drona, Draupadi becomes a subject in the discourse of hegemony and domination. Morality becomes a devise of power and something unthinkable becomes proper. Draupadi, the woman, is commodified. She is treated as a passive object that should silently and tacitly consent to follow her stridharma of obeying and consenting to whatever was prescribed as her lot. She has no objection to becoming the wife of five men. Draupadi is projected as a stereotype of the Hindu docile woman who has been described elaborately in terms of physical attributes but has no character, voice or opinion. As Sutherland points:

"Draupadi...makes her first appearance in the epic at an assembly at which the heroes

or (hero) have demonstrated their physical prowess. The contest and the wedding delineate the character of the hero more than that of the heroine" (64)

Ray's novel, situated in the times of the Mahabharata, the characters, theme and plot being the same, problematizes the subjectivity of the passive female. Remaining within the ambit of Hindu moral order and ethics, Ray's Draupadi questions the equation of domination and subordination. The novel and the central character Draupadi resist simplification. She is the embodiment of a scripturally learned woman who had been neutralized in the epic. She also fills the silent narrative space of the traditional text by describing the post- swayamvaraa and pre-marital relationship between Draupadi and Arjun.

The narrative of Ray's novel engages in a socio-political debate and ultimately Yajnaseni confirms to the dogma of hegemony. Pitting dharma, duty, morality and happiness against practical reality, Ray's narrative very subtly points at the coercive power of hegemony that demands and ensures consent through moralizing. Draupadi does write back in Ray's *Yajnaseni*. She is not at all the passive, silent woman subservient to patriarchal authority. She does not accept the prescribed stridharma without questioning it. Meaning and equivalence undergo a cultural transference in Ray's representation of Draupadi.

Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* has reduced the complex world of the Mahabharata into a fictional form. It has characters and scenes which are imaginary. Both Ray and Divakaruni have used imaginary characters in their novels. In Ray's novel the imaginary characters are 'Nitambini', 'Nilmani' and 'Niranjan'. Whereas the imaginary characters in Divakaruni's novels are 'Dhai Ma', 'Maya' and

'Sorceress'. Like Ray's *Yajnaseni,* this novel has been about the representation of Draupadi and has highlighted Draupadi as a victim of a patriarchal society.

Further, like Ray's *Yajnaseni, The Palace of Illusions,* also a woman-centered novel has represented Draupadi as our contemporary. An oppressed woman, she too is a voice against the victimhood of woman in a traditional society. These novels have been written in an autobiographical mode representing contemporary Draupadi. Although written for the most part in first person narrative form, the frequent switches of perspective, mainly through the incorporation of dreams or stories told by other characters, builds up an illusory world in which the characters live. Draupadi is also seen as a woman whose life is guided by the prophecies of others more powerful than her. Although it was prophesied, when she emerged from the sacrificial fire, that she would change the course of history, giving her an illusion of power, ironically, she only becomes an instrument to settle scores between powerful dynasties. And yet, she has certainly changed the course of literary representation in every generation rewriting the history of women's suffering.

Her migration to America, has given Divakaruni the objective distance to revisit her homeland, and the India of her childhood memories to create a new frame for her fictional character, Draupadi. She exploits her knowledge of, and interest in Indian mythology to express her concern for women's issues, and to give voice to her imagination of Draupadi. Her female interpretation of the epic gives a new perspective to the story of Draupadi.

Divakaruni's retelling of the epic through a female character is a clear attempt at claiming a female agency to narrate the famous tale of war between two families. Presented as a motherless child, in the novel, Draupadi's life in her father's palace

writes the stories of deprived daughters of today who still struggle for equal education and rights with their brothers. The father's palace as a suffocating confinement also raises questions about the notion of home. Like the author of *Palace of Illusions*, who as a diasporic writer would not be able to conceive of a clear definition of "home," Draupadi too, is both an insider as well as an outsider in her father's house. Her idea of "home" remains but an illusion that never actually gets realized. The novel demonstrates Draupadi's obsession with her origins and portrays her as a rebellious character struggling for a feminine identity.

Divakaruni also develops brother-sister relation as a formative experience for a child, and does not limit her character's emotions to simply love and/or revenge. Whereas most writings on Draupadi only concentrate on her identity as a wife or a sati, Divakaruni's ingenuity lies in bringing out the other faces of a woman, as a daughter, sister and mother. Divakaruni's Draupadi has loved the company of her brother who is both protective and caring. Like any modern woman Divakaruni's Draupadi has rebelled against the lack of professional education for women, confining her learning to acquiring skills of painting, sewing and poetry. She perceives such female skills as useless in comparison to the knowledge imparted to her brother.

Ray's Draupadi has modern notions and has questioned her victimhood. She loves poetry and also at times, accepts the social and cultural norms of her days. Divakaruni, on the other hand, has made her Draupadi jealous of the kind of education imparted to her brother. Draupadi's childhood pranks, never mentioned in any previous versions, get imagined in innovative ways by Divakaruni as her novel does not ignore childhood experiences as important to the formation of an individual's personality.

Divakaruni has also presented a Draupadi who felt self-conscious of her dark complexion. Ideas of female beauty has perhaps never changed with time, with beauty becoming a primary concern for marriageable women seeking prospective grooms.The eternal quarrel between sister-in-law and mother-in-law in Indian society also does not go unmentioned. Kunti had, after all, become a rival to Draupadi when she deprived her of the love and companionship of Arjun as her sole husband.

Divakaruni's does not include the Pandava brothers to her list of favourite epic heroes in the author's note emphasizing on trustworthiness about the sanctity of marriage. Her novel has retold a mythical tale shattering the protective image of husbands.

Her novel allows insight into the interaction of gender and identity, particularly into the complex construction of femininity already inherent in the original text, while challenging it from a contemporary perspective. Like Ray, Divakaruni, by retelling the epic from the point of view of Draupadi, has reclaimed female agency in the tale of war between two families, hyper-masculine heroes and their devoted wives. The text has highlighted a crucial relation established between womanhood and vengeance. Moreover, it has displayed the struggle for identity in a mythological context, which is distinctly Indian, yet transcends cultural borders.

Mahasweta Devi, on the other hand, has removed her Draupadi from the mythical context. Devi's protagonist, Draupadi does not, like the mythical one, belong to the upper echeleons of society. She is rather an ordinary woman and a rebel Naxalite who puts in perspective the changing faces of women and their suffering. Dopdi, the protagonist of Devi's story is removed from the mythical context of the epic and is placed strategically as an opponent to authoritarian government rule to

voice resistance to any form of oppression. Devi's Draupadi draws a parallel between the mythical Draupadi and victims of rape projecting the latent violence of masculine dominance in a traditional society.

A Santhal tribal woman and a Naxalite Devi's Draupadi who is gang raped and suffers the indignation of public humiliation becomes a rebel woman. She is shown to be a symbol of womanhood standing against patriarchal society. After multiple rapes, Devi's Draupadi comes out as a symbol of strength and determination. She sheds her shame and becomes bold in her resistance to oppression with nothing more than her bare body. Devi has raised the tragedy of an ordinary woman to a mythical level. The story challenges the justification of rape as a political punishment'. The vulnerability of a woman's "honor" makes her an easy target to patriarchal oppression. Devi challenges established social norms and ingrained notions of femininity and feminine "honour" when she makes Dopdi shed her clothes as symbolic markers of shame.

Devi's Draupadi, different from her other fictional or mythical counterparts, still is a dutiful and faithful wife who accompanies her husband to the forest in his Naxalite mission. She becomes an embodiment simultaneously of the victimized and marginalized womanhood. A victim of patriarchy in a hierarchical society of class, caste and gender discrimination, Draupadi refuses to be subdued by her marginalized status.

In the story, Devi's Draupadi has acquired a new self definition. She has become an active maker of her own identity and meaning. She has become a figure of resistance. She has challenged the whole patriarchal and political system as she has

empowered herself after multiple rapes, presented as an "unarmed target" (Devi 37).She has created a kind of terror in the eyes of enemy.

Devi has rewritten the mythical Draupadi giving her a new interpretation, challenging and never accepting the existing ideals in society through her powerful fiction. Devi has placed her Draupadi within the framework of myth in order to give a new meaning to society just as she has banished the elite Draupadi by giving her a new identity, that of a tribal and dispossessed Dopdi.

This thesis has explored the various ways in which Ray, Divakaruni and Devi have represented Draupadi as a symbol of Indian woman's strength, virtue, honor, and self-sacrifice while still possessing the ability to resist injustice. Gillian Beer observes in his essay "Representing Women: Representing the Past" (1989) the need for representation as:

> [w]e favour currently the word 'representation' because it sustains a
> needed distance between experience and formulation. It recognizes the
> fictive in our understanding. It allows a gap between how we see
> things and how, potentially, they might be. It acknowledges the extent
> to which ideologies harden into objects and so sustain themselves as
> real presences in the world. (63)

The aggressive strength of Draupadi in the three concerned texts has been brought out "as a powerful defense mechanism, a means by which she can express feelings of rejection and depression that developed out of her frustrations" (Sutherland 72). She has been rewritten as an ordinary woman of modern India imbued with mythical virtues.

However, in recent years, many women writers have reappropriated and reinterpreted her story to comment upon and reflect the changing ideas of womanhood and have deviated from "the dominant group and norms of feminity [that] have worked in the interest of men" (Belsey and Moore 3-4). However powerful the forces of oppression the flame of resistance has still not died down. Rather, the rewritings of powerful women characters like Draupadi continue to marshal the cause of women by opening newer paths of female emancipation and redemption. Sutherland rightly supports that the representation of Draupadi as "a fictional character [she] would still, after more than two thousand years, exert such a fascination on the lives of men and women in the Indian sub-continent is an extraordinary occurrence and one that deserves some attention"(63).

This dissertation has a promising scope as the representation of the mythical character, Draupadi makes mythology relevant to today's world. Also it has placed Draupadi in a broader critical context of women studies, similar to the way and sense in which postcolonial writing has moved beyond a "writing back in anger", or postmodernism beyond a mere celebration of openness and uncertainty, feminist writing has transcended the rebellion of "us vs. them". Women writers like Ray, Divakaruni and Devi through their Draupadis disagree with the idea that:

> [w]omen are [ ] advised or presumed to be contented with their status of "non-autonomous, non-bourgeois, non-secular personhood". This is the nationally permitted social space within with women must look for their social "formation and pleasure, emotions and ideas of good life" (Bannerji 911)

Also, again through Draupadi, these women writers have not only strived to question the women's "happy subordination to Hindu patriarchy" (Bannerji 911) but also their "victimhood and their resistance to violence" (Rajan 6). Similarly, like Draupadi, there are multiple characters in the Mahabharata, who have endowed their readers with different perspectives to comprehend their own lives in accordance to the teachings of the great epic. The epic has multiple layers of meanings for future scholars to explore and unearth. The juxtaposition of mythology and modernity opens up newer ways of comprehending human reality. Singh and Jaidev have rightly observed:

> The only tribute we can pay to the makers of the world of our mythology and lore is that they fabricated such fool-proof constructs as allowed no decent escape routes to those they targeted. Decentering this world is not disowning it, but attempting to revise and recast it more justly and fairly. The fact that no single myth has escaped reinterpretation or improvisation gives further legimacy to practices of critiquing and updating myths. (30)

Hence, it would not be out of place to conclude that the representation of Draupadi has further scope of research with every generation of writer and scholars paving ways for 'new thinking' and widening our horizon of understanding. "According to many feminist readings, Draupadi is an assertive woman who learns to fight for herself by using patriarchy for her own purposes" (Dalmiya 73). Thus, Ray, Divakaruni and Devi can be said to be pioneers in their creative pursuit of representing Draupadi as a modern woman who still fits into the current scenario of

the postmodern world. Readings of Draupadi have still not been exhausted with writers discovering new and multiple aspects of a powerful character.

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