

Retelling the Mahabharata: Yajnaseni as Archive of gender and power

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Abstract

This article examines Yajnaseni by Pratibha Ray as a powerful retelling of the Mahabharata that functions as an archive of gender and power. By narrating the epic through the voice of Draupadi, the novel revisits a well-known story from a woman's perspective and brings forward experiences that were largely silenced in the original text. Through Draupadi's reflections, emotions, and personal struggles, Yajnaseni preserves and reinterprets the cultural and social realities of its time, especially the position of women within patriarchal structures.

The study argues that the novel acts as a literary archive by recording how power operated within family, marriage, policies, and war. Draupadi's life becomes a lens through which issues of female agency, humiliation, duty, and resistance are explored. Her relationships with the Pandavas, Krishna, and other characters reveal the unequal power relations that shape her destiny. At the same time, her voice challenges these structures by questioning norms of obedience, honor, and sacrifice imposed on women.

By retelling the epic from Draupadi's viewpoint, Yajnaseni not only revisits mythological history but also connects it to contemporary debates on gender justice and identity. The novel shows that epics are not fixed stories, they can be rewritten to highlight hidden perspectives and alternative meanings. Thus, Yajnaseni becomes both a cultural memory and a critical space for examining how gender and power continue to influence society.

Keywords: Gender, Power, Patriarchy, Feminist Reinterpretation, Cultural Memory, Resistance, Identity.

Introduction

The Mahabharata, one of India's oldest and most important epics, has been told and retold in many ways over the centuries, reflecting changes in culture, ethics, and politics. Among its characters, Draupadi is one of the most complex, she is respected yet also suffers, but often silenced in a male-dominated society. Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni retells the epic from Draupadi's point of view, turning her from a symbol of honor and suffering into someone who tells her own story. This version not only makes Draupadi more human but also presents her life as a record of women's experiences and power struggles within the epic.

By telling the story from Draupadi's perspective, *Yajnaseni* questions the rules, authority, and patriarchy that shape the epic world. The novel is more than just a retelling; it highlights the ways women's voices and experiences have been ignored in classical stories. Draupadi's body, voice, and memories show how questions of consent, duty, desire, humiliation, and resistance are all connected. Her story helps us understand how gender and power work in relationships, marriage, family, and even war.

This article looks at *Yajnaseni* as an alternative archive a way of recording and reinterpreting gender and power in the Mahabharata. It argues that Pratibha Ray's retelling challenges traditional readings of the epic and presents Draupadi not just as someone who caused a war. But aware person negotiating power in a patriarchal world. In this way, *Yajnaseni* turns myth into a space for feminist reflection and a fresh look at history.

This article looks at *Yajnaseni* as an alternative archive—a way of recording and reinterpreting gender and power in the *Mahabharata*. It argues that Pratibha Ray's retelling challenges traditional readings of the epic and presents Draupadi not just as someone who caused a war, but as a thinking, aware person negotiating power in a patriarchal world. In this way, *Yajnaseni* turns myth into a space for feminist reflection and a fresh look at history.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interpretative approach, meaning it focuses on understanding the ideas and themes in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* rather than collecting numbers or data. The study closely reads the text, looking at how Draupadi's story is told and also compares it with the original *Mahabharata* to see how the narrative, characters, and ideas have changed. The research used feminist theory to study patriarchy, women's power, and resistance in the epic and Ray's retelling. It examines how Draupadi's first person narration gives her control over her story. It challenges the traditional male-centered history, and created what can be called a counter archive a way of preserving experiences that are often ignored in epic stories.

By analysing the shift from the third person narration of the original Mahabharata to Draupadi's personal storytelling in *Yajnaseni*, the study looks at how memory, voice, and personal experience become tools of resistance. Key events like Draupadi's swayamvara, her polyandrous marriage, the dice game, and her disrobing are examined to show how power and gender are portrayed differently in the novel.

This research is analytical, not experimental. It also uses secondary sources like scholarly articles, books to understand how the *Mahabharata* has been interpreted in history, myth, and feminist scholarship. By combining close reading with feminist and archival ideas, the study shows that *Yajnaseni* is more than a retelling, it is a critical re-examination of gender and power in the epic.

Literature Review

The *Mahabharata* has been studied widely in literature, history, gender studies, mythology, and cultural studies. Early studies mostly focused on moral lessons, heroism, and the concept of dharma (duty). Scholars like V.S. Sukthankar and other editors looked at the text's authenticity and structure, while others explored its ethical and philosophical ideas. These early studies, however, mainly focused on male heroes and often ignored women's perspectives.

In the late twentieth century, feminist scholars began examining female characters like Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari. They looked at how women's bodies and roles were controlled by society and politics. Draupadi, in particular, has been studied as both a symbol of resistance and someone who experiences humiliation and moral dilemmas. Scholars like Alf Hiltebeitel explored her symbolic importance, while feminist critics emphasized her power within a male-dominated world.

Retelling the *Mahabharata* has also been studied as a way to give voice to those who were silenced in the original epic. Modern writers like Pratibha Ray and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retell the epic from women's perspectives, challenging traditional male-centered narratives. Among these, *Yajnaseni* is notable because it allows Draupadi to narrate her own story, giving her depth and psychological insight.

Scholars have pointed out that Ray's novel transforms Draupadi from being just a character in epic events into a subject with her own thoughts, desires, and moral reasoning. The novel questions ideas like chastity, obedience, sacrifice, and honor, and shows Draupadi negotiating love, humiliation, and political power. Recent research also connects these retellings to ideas about memory and archives. Archives are not only official records—they can also exist in personal memory and storytelling. In this sense, Draupadi's story in *Yajnaseni* acts as an alternative archive, preserving women's experiences that were often ignored in epic history. However, fewer studies have looked at the novel as a full-fledged archival intervention.

This study builds on previous feminist and narrative scholarship, extending it by showing how *Yajnaseni* preserves, critiques, and reinterprets gender and power in the Mahabharata. It combines feminist theory with archival thinking to give a deeper understanding of the text.

Discussion

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* retells the Mahabharata in a way that focuses on gender and power. Draupadi is not just a mythic figure, she becomes an active narrator, recording oppression, resistance, and her own experiences. Unlike the original epic, where she is often seen in relation to men like Yudhishtir, Arjuna, or Krishna. *Yajnaseni* tells her own story, sharing her doubts, thoughts, and moral struggles. This approach shows how family, society, and politics shape her life.

One important aspect of the novel is its focus on female agency. Draupadi's marriage, her polyandry, and her humiliation in the Kaurava court are not just events. It shows how society controls women's lives. At the same time, Draupadi makes moral and emotional choices, showing awareness and strength. Her reflections on events like the dice game highlight the link between gender, honor, and power, showing that women are often treated as tools in a male-dominated world. By telling these stories, Ray makes Draupadi a living archive of women's suffering and resilience.

The novel also challenges traditional ideas of dharma and justice. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's suffering is often seen as part of divine or karmic plans. In *Yajnaseni*, she is shown as a thinking person who questions right and wrong. This helps the novel critique male-centred ideas of power and shows that social and political authority is shaped by gender.

Yajnaseni also acts as a counter archive keeping alive the experiences of people who were historically ignored. Draupadi's memories, thoughts, and emotions preserve the realities of war, family, and marriage for future readers. The novel shows that archives do not only exist in institutions. It can also exist in stories, memory, and personal experience. This fits with feminist archival theory, which recognizes alternative ways of recording knowledge.

The first-person narration, emotional language, and episodic storytelling in the novel strengthen its feminist impact. By letting Draupadi speak for herself, the novel challenges traditional power structures, questions the passive representation of women, and places female experiences at the center of history and morality. *Yajnaseni* shows that retelling myths can both reinterpret stories and critique society, creating a space where women's experiences are valued and preserved. This novel shows that storytelling can challenge patriarchal structures and act as a tool for feminist history and literature.

Objectives

The main goal of this study is to examine *Yajnaseni* as a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata that acts as an archive of gender and power. These specific objectives are:

1. To analyze Draupadi's voice and perspective to see how first-person narration makes her an independent narrator rather than a passive character.
2. To explore gender and power to understand how the novel shows patriarchy, female agency, and the connection between gender and authority.
3. To explore gender and power to understand how the novel shows patriarchy, female agency, and the connection between gender and authority.
4. To study the novel as an alternative archive to see how Draupadi's memories and experiences preserve marginalized voices.
5. To examine feminist intervention to analyze how the retelling critiques traditional interpretations of the Mahabharata.
6. To situate the novel among other retellings to compare Yajnaseni with other modern versions of Indian epics in its approach to gender, power, and narrative.

Conclusion

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* is an important feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata*. It transforms Draupadi from a minor character into a narrator who preserves and reflects on women's experiences and power dynamics. By focusing on her voice, the novel examines patriarchy, power, and ethics in personal and political life. Draupadi's experiences with marriage, polyandry, the dice game, and humiliation show both the restrictions on women and their resilience, agency, and moral insight.

Draupadi's memories and thoughts challenge traditional male-centred interpretations and show how retellings can reshape history, memory, and power relations. Overall, *Yajnaseni* demonstrates how literature can tell stories and serve as a tool for feminist history, using myth to question, critique, and rethink gendered authority. Draupadi becomes more than a mythic character, she is a living archive whose story continues to inspire discussions about gender, justice, and power today.

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