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# Writing Draupadi: Politics and Poetics of Myth in Modern South Asian Literature

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### Abstract

Modern South Asian literature celebrates Draupadi as one of the key icons that helps explore the embedded tenets of thoughts about self, history, and polity. Human beings make meaning of their endeavours in the political setup of historical context by placing self-therein. Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), Oriya novelist Pratibha Ray (1943-), and Nepali novelist Neelam Karki (1975-) rewrite Draupadi's myth from the Mahabharata in "Draupadi" (1978), *Yajnaseni* (1984), and *Cheerharan* [Disrobing] (2016) respectively. Each of the woman authors addresses the formation of a woman's self at a particular historical juncture in their society. Devi's rebel self emerges from prevailing discrimination in Bengali society where the Mundas were socially and politically pushed to the margin. Ray broadly reflects on the plight of women in her contemporary society where they have lost independence to the dictations of society upon their self as they have no freedom of choice. Narrated in an epistolatory form addressing Krishna as her spiritual companion, Ray's Draupadi reveals the vibes of her inner heart and her intimate observations about the world and the people. In Karki's *Cheerharan*, Draupadi organises a programme to bring four generations of women together: Satyawati from the first generation; Ambika and Ambalika from the second generation; Gandhari and Kunti from the third generation; and Draupadi, Ulupi, and Bhanumati from the fourth generation. Though each generation narrates its story to the audience in the programme, this study will focus on Draupadi's narration only. Devi, Ray, and Karki employ Draupadi as one of the power narratives to explore a new meaning in the changing context of their society. The woman authors reframe Draupadi's myth in different ways to suit the ethos of Bengal in the 1970s, Odisha in the late 1970s, and Nepal after the second people's movement in 2006. Each author invents a unique way of framing the narrative to address the inequalities in power structures in their societies. This paper contextually reads the three texts to examine the goal of writing Draupadi in modern South Asian fiction.

*Keywords:* poetics of myth, agency, rewriting, revision, power relations

## Introduction

Modern South Asian literature has celebrated myths by reviving them from time to time in search of a new meaning in the changing social and political contexts. One of the most widely read, reread, and interpreted myths is the tale of Draupadi which has occupied its place in popular tales, folk hymns, poetry, and fiction. Bengali novelist Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016), Oriya novelist Pratibha Ray (1943-), and Nepali novelist Neelam Karki (1975-) have written from the Mahabharata the myth of Draupadi to address particular challenges of their respective societies in Bengali short fiction “Draupadi” (1978), Oriya novel *Yajnaseni* (1984), and Nepali novel *Cheerharan*[Disrobing] (2016) respectively. This paper analyses the ways of treatment of the myth in modern South Asian literature and the political goal behind it. To derive conclusions from the study, I have taken Gayatri Chakrabarty’s Spivak’s 1981 English translation of Devi’s fiction, Pradip Bhattacharya’s 1995 English translation of Ray’s novel, and Karki’s novel in Nepali for the analysis. The materials cited from Karki’s novel are my translation.

## Changing Contours of Interpretations: Rereading Draupadi

Modern South Asian literature illustrates multiple instances of writing the myth of Draupadi from the Mahabharata. As the most flexible cultural icon of contemporary times, Draupadi has emerged as a voice that adds meaning in times of trouble, suffering, and torture. In the most volatile transition of society, Draupadi allows people to view their reality from a different angle, preparing themselves to tolerate the tumultuous journey ahead in life. Mahasweta Devi’s 1978 short fiction reveals the quest of an Adivasi girl fighting against discrimination in Bengal in the 1970s by recontextualizing the scene of Draupadi’s humiliation in Hastinapur. Similarly, Pratibha Ray’s novel *Yajnaseni* (1984) presents Draupadi’s self-reflection on her journey. Neelam Karki’s *Cheerharan* [The Disrobing] (2016) also addresses the prevailing challenges of Nepali society where people fight for a share in the state and power sharing.

All three texts have drawn the critical attention of scholars who have primarily read the texts from the perspective of gender and the

subaltern people. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" deals with the challenges of Bengal in the 1970s. Subhranil Mahato analyses that the fiction "was written against the backdrop of the wild forests of Southern Bengal at the time of political insurgency in 1971. A messed-up time it was in the Indian political scenario. In Bengal, the growing disturbances among the peasants, labourers and tribal communities, got their direction to vent their anger with the Naxalite movement" (53). By recreating the context and placing Draupadi as a Munda girl fighting for her rights, Devi also expresses her solidarity with the downtrodden section of society. In addition to Mahato, Suresh Ranjan Basak approaches the short fiction contextually to explore the dynamics of the Santhal uprising. He reads Draupadi as an icon of public memory who reappears with renewed vigour. As he argues, "So Dopdi has to scrape the 'public memory' hard, not alone Vyasa's text, to make room for herself. As for Spivak's 'contradiction,' Dopdi fits comfortably into it, though it brings about a whole gamut of contradictions—ranging from societal to ideological" (332). As a cultural icon that sides with the oppressed in the story, Draupadi presents herself as a case, sufficient to challenge the traditional power matrix.

Sweta treats the garment as the major motif associated with the myth of Draupadi. In "Draupadi," she rejects clothes. Ved Vyas depicts Draupadi's quest to protect her honour by keeping herself in the clothes. On the contrary, Devi's Adivasi protagonist knows that a piece of cloth cannot give her any honour and protect her dignity. Piya Srinivasan contextually reads the story to see the modes of use of violence to silence the rebels. She writes:

I highlight how *Draupadi* becomes an allegory for constitutional injustice by exploring contestations of power in the use of law, voice and deployment of the body. Written at the intersection of state power and sexual violence, the story inverts the narrative order of violence by rewriting the script of the violated female body. It presents a radical feminism that challenges patriarchal complicity in state power and scripts narratives of resistance that come together to form a feminist theatre of justice. (n. pag.)

As the seeker of justice, Draupadi has to undergo tremendous torture as she is repeatedly raped the whole night. Srinivasan's argument implies the use of force to silence women in a patriarchal

order. In the like manner, Masihur Rahman also interprets the story through Foucauldian frames of power and knowledge as he analyses, “The spectacle of tying Dopdi to four posts alludes to tethering animals. This shows how the detainees are dehumanised. Dopdi is sexually exploited repeatedly that night to extract information. Her private parts became the site of violence unleashed by state apparatus” (4). The imbalance in power structure results in the victimisation of rebels in “Draupadi.”

Devi’s text has been read to explore the inequalities in Indian societies. Postcolonial interpretations still find traces of imperial order at the bottom of local and national feudal power structures. Ramyabrata Chakraborty argues that Devi’s fiction presents the drama between colonisers and the colonised. As he observes, Mahasweta Devi’s fiction depicts “the experiences of a tribal woman who is the by-product of class struggle in postcolonial tribal India ... Devi portrays in this story an ordinary wife struggling to make sense of her life as Indian tribal tradition clashed with modernity and a nascent nationalism eroded a colonial mentality” (195). He implies that the subtle roots of colonial power structure continue even after India’s independence in 1947. The local/national structure reproduces imperial ego and asserts it upon the Adivasis, thereby dehumanising the local people. Neluka Silva explores the use of patriarchy as a tool of suppression. As she argues,

To signpost the participation of women in the Naxalite movement as a recognition of their rights and a stride in “liberatory politics” is to ignore the male-centred underpinnings of the revolutionary ideology. By referring repeatedly to male voices, leadership and commands in Devi’s story, the narrator deconstructs the revolutionary rhetoric by foregrounding its phallocentricity. (58)

The colonial power structure that was reproduced even after the Independence joins hands with patriarchy to further employ violence upon Draupadi in Devi’s fiction. The imbalance of power is further illustrated through the issue of class. Bengal was going through a historical transformation in the 1970s when the tension between the high and low classes was at its apex. Mitali R. Pati gives political reading to the text as she argues, “Draupadi’s gang rape is symbolic of centuries’ old methods of brutal tortures being inflicted upon ‘rebellious’ low class/caste men and women in remote semi-feudal

agricultural communities in India” (89). As the social exclusion of certain peoples was continuously practised in Bengal for a long time, the Adivasi people rose to respond to the situation with arms in their hands.

Reading biopolitically, Pradip Sharma argues that the racist foundation of casteism has resulted in the most critical state of Indian society. He openly accepts that the Indian state has exercised biopolitical means to discipline the Adivasis. As he analyses, modern Indian polity has employed surveillance and killings to silence the people at the bottom of society (57). Sharma’s reading focuses on the Senanayak’s treatment of Draupadi. Sharif Atiquzzaman compares the situation in Tagore’s *Chandalika* to Devi’s “Draupadi” and observes the nature of atrocities emerging from casteism. As he narrates,

*Draupadi* is a story about Dopdi Mehjen, a woman who belongs to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. The landlords do not allow them to fetch water from their wells as they are untouchables. She along with her husband, Dhulna Majhi, murders wealthy landlord Surja Sahu and his sons, and usurps their wells, which are the primary source of water for the villagers. (177)

The excluded groups of people have certain types of responses that the government wants to control in society. In Devi’s rendering of myth, Draupadi stands vibrant since she holds the ability to write back and reassert her agency in society.

Like Devi’s “Draupadi,” Pratibha Ray’s Oriya novel *Yajnaseni* (1984) also recontextualizes the myth in search of a new perspective in contemporary culture through the classical narrative from the Mahabharata. Such reinterpretation adds a new meaning by drawing strong parallelism from the ancient context to the present. Shruti Das reads *Yajnaseni* to analyse the impact of patriarchy on the formation of Draupadi. She argues that Draupadi stands as a voice of protest who “writes back to patriarchy’s cultural and sexual domination of the woman who is supposed to bear all silently and passively. The narrative becomes subversive; addresses *dharma* or morals as used for the convenience of the dominant oppressor and exposes the ills of Hindu patriarchal culture” (72). Draupadi paves the road to liberation by stoically preparing herself in the most tumultuous times of her life. Mohar Daschaudhari makes a comparative study of Ray’s

*Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* to explore how each text recontextualizes the myth in the contemporary context. The study concludes that Ray and Bannerjee depict Draupadi as "a mover of destiny, a woman wronged by her husbands, her elders and yet she is not silent. Her voice is made audible, for the first time, through the re-writing of the epic" (178). Such readings assert that Ray's novel reexamines the inner contents of Draupadi's self in a new context in which Draupadi enriches the culture by revealing a new meaning.

Draupadi's struggle and tolerance teach us the relevance of such values in the modern world. She struggles to restore the honour that she has lost in the assembly of Hastinapur. Though insulted, she remains determined to regain the lost honour. Seema Dutta studies Draupadi to examine the upper limit of endurance of pain, torture, and humiliation in her. As Dutta sees,

She faces numerous trials all through her life but none of them could break her. With every insult, she grows stronger and becomes the strength of her husbands and even the kingdom. She is representative of *Shakti* who knows that to preserve one's respect when there is no other way but to stand strong and fight the injustice that is meted out. (183)

Born out of Drupad's *yajna* fire, she swiftly journeys through the upheavals in her life. However, she displays an extraordinary ability to tolerate humiliation and injustice when the disrobing happens at the assembly of Hastinapur. Ray's novel reworks Draupadi's self to reinterpret the context and address the subtle complexities in modern values.

Some of the studies also see the novel as an assertion of traditional, typical Indian values in modern times. Such studies focus on the issue of dharma, justice, and morality. For instance, Amit Kumar's research indicates Draupadi's sacrifice to restore dharma and justice in society. As he argues, "Liberty of the self, free will of thinking and inner self of Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* is crushed and she has been completely devastated while saving dharma for the sake of others and avoiding the identity of her own" (4688). Kumar upholds Draupadi's sacrifice for the cause of the age in which she helps restore certain lost values for the welfare of people. Beside him, Sanchita Choudhury's conformist reading attempts to establish

Draupadi as the ideal woman in Hindu society. She claims that “Yajnaseni, an epitome of prejudice and untold suffering, has been known for her intrepid actions taken to fight against the evil” (251). Choudhari celebrates Draupadi as the embodiment of Hindu cultural values. Pallavi Gupta and Swati Vijay argue that Draupadi and Krishna complement each other. Reading *Yajnaseni*, they conclude that “Draupadi who is helplessly in love with Krishna becomes an important instrument in his re-establishment of Dharma” (14). Reading Ray’s novel from the rightist position helps understand the reassertion of classical Hindu values in modern such readings assert the presence of traditional values in the novel, thereby claiming the reassertion of such values in the modern text.

Other studies have explored the inner content of Draupadi’s self through the perspective of gender. Such readings examine power relations in a patriarchal order in which the actors challenge the authority of the other. Sunal Sharma’s feminist reading of Ray’s Draupadi asserts that the principal contradiction of the Mahabharata arises from the tension between men’s attitude to using women’s bodies in any way they choose to. Analysing the position of Draupadi in Ray’s novel, Sharma writes: “The contradictory pulls of her seething emotions expressed in her lengthy inner monologues can be viewed as the emotive counterpart to the irreconcilable strands of a traditional mode of thinking and contemporary feminist ideology within the narrative of *Yajnaseni*” (143). Like Sharma, Silima Nanad also interprets the novel along the feminist lines. She concludes, “The picture of the woman that emerges from Ray’s presentation of Draupadi reassures us that the plight of woman has not significantly changed despite several high-sounding slogans such as woman empowerment, equal rights to woman etc. in a globalised society. Yajnaseni has always been treated in an undignified manner” (88). Both Sharma and Nanda agree that Ray’s novel reinterprets the myth of the Mahabharata through the contemporary critical lens of gender and feminism.

Neelam Karki’s 2016 Nepali novel, *Chheerharan* [The Disrobing] has also been read from a feminist critical lens. Bimal Kishor Srivastwa finds the contemporary Nepali context in the novel. As Karki draws her resources from politically disturbed times in Nepal,

she addresses some of the fundamental questions concerning patriarchy through Draupadi's disrobing. The study states:

Niharika depicts the central character, Draupadi, as a representative of the Nepali woman who experiences problems and sex discrimination living in a male-dominated society. She has to marry a person who meets the conditions set by her father. She also has to be a common wife for all five husbands under the order of her mother-in-law. She asks Arjun not to take her as water in a glass that anyone can drink, yet she has to negotiate. Draupadi objects to the rule made by her five husbands because the rule is made without consulting her. (15)

As a victim of patriarchy, Draupadi is forced to live by the expectations of the patriarchal order. Pratibha Paudel's stylistic study of the novel also reveals unique insights about gender in the text. Paudel states that Draupadi represents perennial suffering on the part of women under patriarchy. She illustrates:

Through the use of Draupadi, the novel states that thousands of women have suffered the pains of disrobing to this date. Draupadi presents that the women did not have the right to choose their husbands. The treatment that Draupadi receives from Jarasandha, Duryodhana, Kichaka, Jayadratha, Dushasana, and the like reveals the bitter reality that patriarchal society treats women as the object of sexual satisfaction only. (144)

Though Paudel takes the stylistic route to interpret the texts, she also agrees with Srivastwa's claim on Draupadi: the myth stands as a classic example of women's suffering under patriarchy.

Devi, Ray, and Karki have written the myth of Draupadi for different purposes. The prevailing studies have focused on recontextualization, reassertion of traditional Hindu values, and feminist interpretation. Devi has appropriated Draupadi in Bengal in the 1970s. Her Draupadi appears as a rebel who has chosen to fight against the state. Ray's Draupadi reviews the journey of her life as she falls on her way to heaven. The text emerges out of a letter to her spiritual comrade Krishna. In the fictional autobiography, Draupadi reflects upon her life on the whole. In Karki's novel, Draupadi organises the conference and presents her observations on various episodes in her life. Prevailing critical scholarship has interpreted the texts in the light of gender, patriarchy, historical contexts, assertion of Hindu values through Draupadi, and Draupadi's stoic way of life. However, the studies have not addressed the political goal behind



writing Draupadi in contemporary times. This paper departs from the existing interpretations of the treatment of Draupadi in modern South Asian literature by analysing three fictions from Bengal, Odisha, and Nepal to explore the inner motive of the goal and design of fiction. This paper reads the fiction in their proper context in which they address the historical challenges arising in society by spotlighting Draupadi in the centre stage.

### **Reading a Myth through Contemporary Lens**

The classical narratives of human life have resurfaced in modern life in one way or the other. The human interactions that have occurred at a particular moment in history have served people to understand similar kinds of situations and events. Similarly, myths transcend beyond the regularities of the quotidian world. As John S. Gentile defines, "Myth - as a term, as a concept, and as a field of study - is multivalent and ambiguous, and like its many narratives holds together binary opposites that enrich its study and enliven its discussion. Perhaps myth's major paradox may be that it can mean either truth or (particularly in casual conversation) falsehood" (80). Still, it serves life by helping to interpret the contemporary times. In this sense, a myth becomes a window for people to look into the classical world on the one hand and a world of present reality on the other. Myths become a lynchpin to hold present reality with the past. Often myths lose the power that they held once in the past. As Percy S. Cohen argues, "If myth anchors the present in the past, then prophecy anchors it in the future" (351). Contemporary readings of myths also add new meanings in the way they are interpreted and approached from a different point of view.

As a semiotic in the long chain of narratives, myth serves to observe the complete world and its power relations. The (im)balance in power structure results in an adverse impact on the regular lives of people. Since myth critiques social practices and relations, it also becomes a part of regular politics in life. Different theorists have examined the political functions of myth. As Robert A. Segal synthesises,

What of the politics of myth? Like Jung, Eliade clearly categorizes mythologies by nations, but also like Jung he characterizes myths in other ways as well, such as by religions. For Eliade, as for Malinowski,

myth traces back the origin of present-day social phenomena and in that sense bolsters them. Myth thus brings the sacred forward to the present. But surely myth also takes one out of the present and back to the past. Eliade thus interprets political hopes for future paradise, including that of staunchly atheistic Marxism, as really a hoped-for return to the pre-political, prelapsarian past. (618)

Myth bridges the present with the past by spotlighting the perennial issues of human concerns. Dignity, honour, and ethics have always demanded a new definition as societies progress, unfolding novel values. The political implications of such factors are revealed further as time progresses in society. This study reads the political implications of the myth of Draupadi as it resurfaces in modern South Asian literature and explores the factors that push it in a particular design.

### **Writing Draupadi in South Asia**

Modern South Asia depends on classical resources to interpret and understand the contemporary context through human narratives. Draupadi has remained one of the most reliable narratives of human suffering, helping various South Asian societies recover from the most grievous times. Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short fiction "Draupadi" (1978), Pratibha Ray's Oriya novel *Yajnaseni* (1984), and Neelam Karki's Nepali novel *Cheerharan* [The Disrobin] (2016) refer to a few representative instances of writing Draupadi in modern South Asia. The authors employ a new way of narrating Draupadi's tale in the modern context to serve the political goal in a specific context. Devi's Bengal was undergoing a historical transition in the 1970s. Ray sees social contradictions in the rules of gender in Odisha in the 1970s. The rules of marriage are differently set for men and women: women cannot marry and resettle again if their marriage fails. Ray treats the narrative of Draupadi to address the inequality of her society. After 2006, Nepal undergoes major political change, implementing a republican form of rule. To refer to the chaotic state of the nation, Karki retells Draupadi's stoic tale of loss and restoration of honour. To her, Draupadi unfolds the story of both despair and hope.

Draupadi appears in completely different forms in each of the narratives. Devi completely appropriates Draupadi in the local

context: the rebel girl from the Munda community retells Draupadi's life in her local context, where the tension ensues between her people and the state. Unlike Draupadi in the Mahabharata, Dopti Mehjan has not offended anybody by her choice. Devi's fiction highlights the structural victimisation of Draupadi as she reworks on the rebel self of the Naxalite movement. She murdered the upper-class "Surja Sahu and his son" and occupied "the upper-case wells and tube-wells during the drought" (392). Bengali Mundas were fighting against discrimination based on caste and class in the 1970s. They spoke against the exploitation of local feudal lords through armed struggle. In this context, Devi's Dopti Mehjan organises various activities to oppose the coercion of the local landlords (393). Draupadi and her husband Dulna employ guerrilla techniques to settle the issues with the feudal order. Devi narrates:

Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such warfare is the sacred duty of every soldier. Dopti and Dulna belong to the *category* of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow, etc. In fact, their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. Not all gentlemen become experts in the explosion of "chambers"; they think the power will come out on its own if the gun is held. But since Dulna and Dopti are illiterate, their kind have practised the use of weapons generation after generation. (394)

Devi's Draupadi emerges with full stature of agency: she does not raise questions only. She knows that change is inevitable and she has to realise it for her people. Structurally, the short fiction portrays an Adivasi woman as a modern Draupadi who fights to restore honour and justice to her people.

Unlike Draupadi in the Mahabharata, Devi's rebel seeks for the collective welfare, restoration of justice to all her people, and regaining the lost honour of her community. On the other hand, Ray's Draupadi falls on the way to heaven. The eldest husband, Yudhisthira continues his journey to heaven, asking his brothers not to look back at Draupadi. In the last moment of her life, she realises that her life was spent in vain. Ray pictures the plight of Draupadi in the following words:

What agonies did I not suffer for preserving dharma? I had thought that on the strength of my adherence to dharma and fidelity as a wife I would be able to accompany my husbands to heaven. Yet, I had but touched the golden dust of Himalaya's foothills when my feet slipped

and I fell! Five husbands –but not one turned back even to look. Rather, Dharmaraj Yudhishtir, lord of righteousness, said to Bhim, “Do not turn back to look! Come forward!” (3)

Draupadi struggles hard throughout her life, bearing all sorts of humiliation and slander in front of her five husbands. She hopes to restore Dharma-justice — in society through her sacrifice and stoic way of life. However, her husbands leave her in the most helpless state of her life as she falls on the way to heaven.

Karki’s Draupadi organises a conference to bring together four generations of women in the Mahabharata to share their stories in the largest possible forum. Satyawati represents the first generation; Ambika and Abalika tell their stories from the second generation; the third generation comprises of Gandhari and Kunti; and Draupadi, Ulupi, and Bhanumati lead the women of the fourth generation in the novel. Since Karki titles the novel after the disrobing in the assembly of Hastinapur and shows the presence of Asmita as the representative of her time, the author intends to discuss the loss and restoration of honour of the nation through the tale. After 2006, Nepal underwent the most nebulous time in the contemporary history of South Asia. Just like Draupadi, the novelist also seeks the best of the qualities for her nation. Draupadi wants five noble qualities in her husband: handsome, virtuous, strong, righteous, and noble. Krishna describes the fulfilment of her wish in the following words: “Krishna said, ‘Our Panchali will get her man as per her choice -she wanted handsome, virtuous, strong, righteous, and the noble man for herself. Certainly, she will get such person.’ He further added, “Don’t get scared, Yajnaseni. Your wish will be fulfilled” (275). Even though she gets five persons with the qualities, she remains critical about each of them.

Devi’s narrative directly presents Draupadi with her committed husband Dulna Majhi. Both of them fight to bring about change in their society. The Adivasi husband does not gamble with anybody: he knows he has to restore the original order in his society. The couple has to punish Surja Sahu in Bakuli because he refuses to distribute water from his tubewell at the time of drought. He excludes the untouchables from using water from his tubewell. Draupadi, Dulna, and their comrades surround Surja Sahu’s house at night to take action against him. Devi narrates:

Surja Sahu's house was surrounded at night. Surja Sahu had brought out his gun. Surja was tied up with cow rope. His whitish eyeballs turned and turned, he was incontinent again and again. Dulna had said, I'll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labour to repay the debt.

Dopdi had said, His mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll pull out his eyes. (398)

Ray and Karki present a weak Draupadi who waits for Arjun at Swayamvar. Besides, Ray and Karki have their interpretation of the test set for the suitors. Ray's Draupadi feels attached to Krishna who convinces her to wait for Arjuna. Ray describes the scene of the test in the palace of Drupada thus: "A lovely dais had been made for the svayamvar with a long pole on it. On this pole was a revolving disc. Along with the swiftly revolving disc, the picture of the target would be reflected in the water of a vessel kept below. For this, near the pavilion a large water receptacle had been made ready" (28). For Ray, the complexity of the test carries the utmost significance in the narration of Draupadi's life. Karki thus narrates the test: "There were notices in the golden letters, announcing, 'The one who will be able to shoot an arrow into the eye of the fish fixed to the revolving circle by looking at its image reflected in the pond below will marry Princess Draupadi'" (265). Unlike Devi, Ray and Karki still seek Draupadi's adjustment in the existing social order. Devi's Draupadi wants to annihilate the discriminatory order and start anew, establishing law, order, and justice for everyone in her community.

Devi remakes the rebel self in her protagonist, while Ray and Karki capture a rather docile self in Draupadi. Devi's Draupadi has been utterly rejected and pushed to the margin by the mainstream. She suffers the direct, physical assault: she has developed the coping strategies for such torture. As Devi remarks, "Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They countered him. When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, and your sex is terrible wound" (397). As an armed rebel, she knows the threats lurking ahead on her path. Ray and Karki model their Draupadi after the middle-class self. Ray's Draupadi was born as a mature youth from the Yajna. She is not trained in the ways

of the world in the usual ways. She begins to take an interest in the contradiction of society which looks typically middle-class in the modern sense. It takes a lot of time for her to understand being human and feeling human. As the critical mindset of her time, she critiques the mode of usual practices that reaches the core of society and critically views the contradictions lying therein (15). However, she does not oppose Kunti when she gets divided among the five brothers. As Ray narrates, “Overwhelmed with shyness I stood with head bowed. The elder brother was describing me in terms of a priceless object. My heart was thrilled with joy. From within, an easy but firm voice, their mother’s, spoke: ‘My sons, whatever you have brought divide it amongst the five of you equally!’ (55). As the daughter-in-law of a middle-class family in contemporary society, Draupadi fails to raise her voice against Kunti’s misunderstanding.

Karki’s Draupadi invites women from across the generations to have a conversation to revisit the Mahabharata. As a unique narrative strategy, *Cheerharan* presents women in dialogue, exploring their stories. Karki infuses middle-class woman’s self in Draupadi who accepts the things as they happen in her life. For instance, she accepts her second division when Sage Narad visits the Pandav Brothers and tells them about spending time with Draupadi in Indraprastha. They set a rule: one husband for a year. If anybody breaches the rule, he is expelled from the state to live the life of a pilgrim for twelve years (314). She secretly hopes that Arjuna will remain celibate during his exile from Indraprastha after breaching the rule (322). She is shocked and shattered when she hears that he married Ulupi (the Princess of the Naag) (326). Then, he marries the princess of Manipur, Chitrangada (326). Then, he marries Subhadra at which Draupadi weeps a lot (327). Though she has her spiritual companion Krishna accompanying Arjuna as well, she takes a long time to realise the ways of the world. Finally, she claims for her room in the palaces, refusing to change the room of her husbands. She demands a permanent room for herself where she can welcome her husbands. As Karki’s narrator says, “I requested the King, ‘From now on, there’s no point in going from one room to the other every year. So, grant me a separate room where I will welcome my husbands in my own room’ (329). Karki’s Draupadi believes that dialogue can resolve the issues

and help her understand the world better. Therefore, she waits for a long time to realise the essential nature of the world and the people.

Devi's protagonist has lived a life of humiliation, resulting from caste-based discrimination and exploitation at the hands of local feudal lords. She never seeks to protect her honour by keeping her body inside the garment. Instead, she rejects the last piece of cloth on her body. They countlessly rape her in the barrack (401) the whole night. As she rejects the sense of shame to challenge the authority of men and the state, "She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my clothes on me. What more can you do? Come, *encounter* me –come on, *encounter* me— ?" (402). The intensity of the challenge is never realised in Ray or Karki's version of Draupadi. In the game of dice, Dharmaraj Yudhisthira places her at the stake and loses her. She is dragged to the assembly and called a prostitute (Karki 361). Still, she says to Yudhisthira, "Who did you lose first –you or me?" (364). The defeated husbands cannot stand in Draupadi's protection. Draupadi appeals for justice in the assembly as Ray writes: "Again I said, 'I do not beg for anyone's pity. I demand justice. To protect the honour of women is the dharma of a king. Then does it befit the Kuru kings to insult the bride of their own clan? I wish to know: has my husband got the right to stake me after he has already staked and lost his own self?'" (238). Helpless, she prays to Krishna to rescue her (Karki 361) as the disrobing happens in the assembly. Kari further states that Draupadi frees her husbands from slavery through her power of reasoning. As Karki's Draupadi narrates, "I was the shield to my husband who had staked himself and me in the game of dice and said, "King, it is useless to think that the sin will be washed away by giving something to us. Still, if you are staggering on the path to justice for a while, please grant my husband's liberation from slavery" (372). Despite multiple instances of humiliation of Draupadi, Ray, and Karki bend on exploring the assimilationist self in the narrator.

Devi's Draupadi stands at the crossroads of Bengal's transition in the 1970s. She voices for change to bring about equality for her people. As an agency, she has prepared to tolerate all sorts of violence that can befall her body. Her Santhal husband does not stake her at

the game of dice: they are together fighting against discrimination. In Ray and Karki, Draupadi is treated like her husband's possession in multiple instances. Still, she cannot let herself free from the mould of her middle-class self. She negotiates with the changing contexts, fights against everyone in the assembly, appeals for pity, justice, and dharma, and finally frees her husbands from the life of slavery. Devi's Draupadi rejects the idea of shame and honour as middle-class constructs, while Ray and Karki's Draupadi celebrate honour. In both Ray and Karki, Krishna responds to the prayer of his devotee and rescues her from being disrobed.

### Poetics and Politics

Modern South Asian literature has written Draupadi's tale in various ways. This paper has taken three fictions from Bengal, Odisha, and Nepal. Each text has a unique narrative voice and structure. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (1978) responds to the Bengal's historical transition in the 1970s. The omniscient narrator sees and reports everything that happens in Devi's society. She rewrites the myth to project a sharp agent who chooses an armed struggle against the state authority. Ray's 1984 Oriya novel follows the structure of Draupadi's letter to Krishna, reflecting on her life. In a sense, Ray's *Yajnaseni* is presented as Draupadi's fictional autobiography in which she interprets the major happenings in Ved Vyas's Mahabharata. Ray's Odisha was undergoing a social transformation in the late 1970s when the author saw the need to revise the rules of marriage for women. Ray presents a classical example of suffering, shame, guilt, revenge, and endurance in Draupadi who has seen all shades of life. Similarly, Karki's 2016 Nepali novel, *Cheerharan* turns into a conference of four generations of women from Vyas's the Mahabharata, retelling their stories to Asmita. Karki attempts to use Asmita as a bridge between the classical and the modern world. Politically, both Ray and Karki employ Draupadi as the representative of the middle-class female self who swiftly modifies and revises rules of gender as the ethos of age changes.

Devi's Draupadi significantly differs from Ray and Karki's since she aspires to rewrite it at the underlying core of society. Ray's Draupadi does not have a revolutionary self: she aims at modifying the rules by revising them in favour of women. Ray has presented a



typical middle-class woman's self in Draupadi. Since Ray and Karki set their protagonist in the reflective mode of narration, their Draupadi reinterprets the events from her point of view. In both instances, Draupadi seeks to revise the social structure to restore Dharma. However, Devi's Draupadi rejects the prevailing ways of power distribution to rewrite new rules to create a just society.

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