

Chapter - 1

Words and Silences: Women's Probe into the Inscribed Constructs

Foreword

I have grown up with the internal assumption that being an Indian woman, the self is defined by dharma. This means that in one way, what roots me is dharma. The dharma that has already been written by some other. However, the grand narrative of dharma is very differing and contradictory as it has various definitions and enactments that have to be remembered and learnt. But as human beings, in our hasty paced lives, we even forget places and folks and so the big performances of dharma can not be our crux. Then what lies at the core, what roots us? Aren't they the small practices like a daily prayer at a particular time, a daily awaited talk with a friend. Tiny small errands that we do every day, it might be performing something big or it could be as effortless as draping a sari. Little practices, wishes and feelings that we do not need to reflect on, that are not incompatible, that do not overwhelm us, that we do not misplace because they lie within the daily routine of our lives and then, in turn, our words become those little things, the details of being, abandoning all the grand narratives and their 'isms' for the patriarchy, communities, religion, epics, media and academicians to pact with. We can then also say that the daily unwritten words lie at the core. They are the words which speak the inner silence and desires, words which we rehears every day, as we chant a daily prayer. These are the words which release Draupadi, Bama and every woman.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*

There is a deep cleft between beginning and finish, yet *Yajnaseni* begins with 'finis'. We are used to seeing a novel beginning with a beginning but here it begins with the

end of a letter addressed to the closest relationship of life, that is, a friend. It reads a desire to retreat within one-self instead of holding to the outside world of disorder and confusion. We have all read Draupadi as a figure of authority, but what if the truth is something different. Pratibha Ray through Draupadi helps us revisit and question mythology from a perspective that is not bound by a patriarchal bias. Placed in the age old *Mahabharata*, we meet a Draupadi who is not the iconic figure but a common woman whom we can easily reach out to. The story begins with the rearrangement of Draupadi's desire to read and express her life in her own words and language. It begins with a conflict between what is recorded about Draupadi and what is her felt desire.

Through the close analysis of the available evidence in the form of manuscripts, the scholars claim the composition of the *Mahabharata* in the period of 400 B.C. This epic has been translated into all the major languages of the world and have different versions in almost all the Indian *bhashas*. This one story through its widespread circulation has become an essential material in the construction of Indian consciousness. It constantly revolves in the Indian society in various ways like *shlokas* and prayers in temples, ethical lessons in classes, selected arguments in the judicial courts, moral teachings to diverse roles working in the society. Then considering its indispensability in the Indian life, it can be said that the *Mahabharata* is not about the episodes of a distant time but is a lived experience. Ray through Draupadi lays bare this important truth. Draupadi first releases the happenings of the *Mahabharata* from the dominance of past and places them in the easily accessible present. She says that even after everything has been written and engraved in the inexorable memory of time, she is left with a lot that is unspoken, "... it seems as though I have not been able to write anything at all" (1). Draupadi further discusses life to be a continuous process, which has no end and beginning, in turn placing her life in the postmodern world we are living in. Pramod K. Nayar in *Literary Theory Today* points out that there can be no

binding theory in today's world as every individual world is different (23). She plucks away her life from the one binding truth of primeval knowledge and places it amidst the constant flux of poststructuralist world where meaning comes out only through differences, "The skies have no beginnings and no end ... Even after relating everything, fulfilment is left" (1). It brings out the poststructuralist claims of language working as a system of signifier and signified where the signifier exists because of its difference from another signifier and thus, the difference has to be acknowledged. As language itself is a man-made construction the already written words about Draupadi can not be taken as her truth.

Draupadi repeatedly stresses the intact imprint of her narrated story, "... on the breast of the inexorable time" (1). It can not be denied that consciousness and experience together become the repertoire of knowledge. It can be looked as a production site for knowledge. The *Mahabharata* being the oldest primary text also serves a source of Indian identity. This identity is not merely a source to justify the individual being but to understand and see I as grand because of its omnipotent existence and reality and therefore, its revisions have to be viewed as the reflection of collective aspirations of societies or communities. The collective aspirations of a group of people code them into a structure. Ray points out the truth of these structures being created by some people. Draupadi agrees that two structures can fight with each other. But she questions, "... one who asks for nothing- with her such toying" (2)! She is furious at proclaiming her to be the reason of the most furious battle of Kurukshetra. At the same time, she expresses her helplessness to mend it highlighting her denial from these dominant structures of Purushottam, the supreme male power. She blames the Pandavas for leaving her alone at Mount Meru. She cries over her abandonment, "Not once did any of them look back" (1-2). She questions the rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas forcing the reader to trace its origin. Can the dragging of Draupadi in the assembly hall be the only reason or the origin of that ferocious battle?

She employs rhetoric to answer it. If she is not the reason then why has she been denied life, “... leaving me thus at death’s door” (2). Ray demonstrates Draupadi’s words emerging from her denial. This shows that the literature that has written Draupadi has emerged in relation to the dominant structure. This, in turn, puts in scrutiny the society that has been produced by the same literature. The investigation becomes even important as the society is understood to be the mirror to the cultural, social and symbolic wealth of that capital structure. Draupadi voices that today she will lay bare all the hurt that this literature has given to her.

Ray offers a different trajectory of the grand narrative to reveal the beginning of subversion. The most important contribution of this grand narrative to Indian life is dharma. Draupadi begins by questioning it. She believed in it and she adhered to it as dictated but when she fell off from the foothills none of her five husbands stopped to take her to the heaven along with them. She is more pained because the epitome of dharma commanded the rest of his brothers to continue their journey, leaving her behind alone to die. She makes the reader question the permanence of the concept of dharma.

From the *Rigveda* to the *Brahmanas*, that are the post-Vedic collections, to the *Upanishads* to the *Dharmasutras* to the *Mahabharata*, the discourse has been changing and evolving. From the world of rituals to uphold the cosmic and social order, dharma became synonymous to law upholding the social and political justice. Then *Upanishads* made dharma the governing principle encompassing the values like truth and justice and then we got *Grhyasutras*, *Saurtyasutras* and *Dharmasutras*, 500 B.C. books to explain the working of different types of dharma in the domestic and professional life. Finally as Adam Bowel in *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India: The Apaddharmaparvan of the Mahabharata* says dharma emerged to be the scale of every action of human (87). The various *parvas* of the *Mahabharata* can be seen as performative search of the intricacies

and struggles involved in the concept of dharma. However, these acts always had men in the seats of authority, they had the power to decide or loose. It was the world of dharma, the dharma decided, laid and fought over by men and the women became its prey.

Draupadi is worried about her fate in Kaliyuga. The people of Kaliyuga will mock her, they will question her chastity being the wife of five husbands. But who decided it? It was not Draupadi. Her body becomes a site of dharmic conflict, the dharma of sons to obey their mother, the dharma of a wife to obey her husband. She also exposes the multilayered silence, "... the heroine of Hastinapur, Draupadi, will become a condemned soul" (3). History has idealised Draupadi by labelling her the heroine of the *Mahabharata* but only to present her cruel and she also knows that some in Kaliyuga will idolise her to raise her to the status of divinity to silence any attempt against her fate. Draupadi then finally questions her friend, Vasudev, the almighty, the male creator about the fate that she did not choose at her will. Neither the supreme creator nor her protectors shared her human agony and pain and today from the same space of deprivation the courageous woman Draupadi who has also faced immense sufferings will write her literature from her blood, "Do not destroy my memory, do not give it into the hands of death. Only let me tell my story..." (5). The *Mahabharata* will now not be the story of Arjun, Yudhishtir, Kauravas, Pandavas, Kurus or dharma, it will be the tale of Draupadi's becoming.

Her text begins with the birth of Draupadi, unlike the great epic beginning with the narration of Kuru clan and its warriors. Draupadi is born from the altar of sacrifice. Her father has to take vengeance from Drona, a man has to defeat man and thus he needs a son, but Draupadi is also born along with her brother Dhrishtadyumna. She is not asked for from the sacrificial fire but is born from the altar and thus named 'Yajnaseni'. Instead of describing the dharmic purpose of Draupadi's birth, Ray first gives an elaborative description of Draupadi's' beauty. The lines expressing her physical charm are induced with

more passion than the prophecy at the birth of Draupadi revealing her purpose of the birth, that is, to avenge her father's insult. Ray's shift from Draupadi's beauty to the description of her birth presents a contrast between beauty and destruction. Then these two contrasting images fuse into one questioning the role of this beautiful Draupadi in safeguarding the dharma and this makes the reader all the more aware of the destructive forces of the dharma Draupadi is born to preserve. Draupadi trembles hearing the prophecy and it again highlights the emotional response of Draupadi set against the hard political agenda of the dharmic father. Helpless, Draupadi has to accept the verdict. Ray subverts the dominant reading of *Mahabharata* in two ways, one by contrasting life described as beautiful and dharma describes as something leading to destruction. Second, she locates Draupadi amidst the common Indian girls. Soon after her birth, Drupad offers Draupadi to the omnipotent lord, the Krishna, naming her on his name, Krishnaa. This definitely highlights the patriarchal authority practiced by fathers but Draupadi's joyful acceptance of this relation invokes romantic rendezvous enjoyed by every human being and thus seating the grand narrative in the line of popular culture. Ray uses one complete chapter to narrate the pain of love struck Draupadi. The internal conflict produced from the love for Krishna interestingly summons the many kings of the grand epic immersed in the heavenly promises of love forgetting their dharma. This juxtaposition not only belittles the glories of war but also questions the dharma of the kings. The Kuru king Shantanu was spellbound by the beauty of woman not once but twice. He even agreed to fulfil their conditions in the erotic lust neglecting the dharma of a king. This negligence also marks his desire to be carnal whereas Draupadi's love has a radiating innocence. She completely lost in the thoughts of Krishna, neither bothers about his family nor ancestry.

The Draupadi who is always remembered storming the assembly hall of Kurus is seen completely possessed by the beauty of love, she uses the images of nature to

describe her love. Unlike Shantanu, she has no lust to possess Krishna rather lying in a grove, she like an imaginative child tries to picture him through the different images of nature, ‘tamal tree’, ‘blue-black clouds’, ‘peacock feathers’ and ‘agastya flowers’. She and the nature imagery constantly collide, becoming one with each other. These passages uncover the deep rift between the world of arrows and this mesmerising fragrant world of greenery, innocence and light where an upper caste woman is happily playing and talking with her *dasi*, a woman placed lower in the social ladder. She does not have any want of the golden world of Hastinapur, she is just absorbed in the poetry-weaved fairy tale world of her prince.

Draupadi is also well read. She enthusiastically reads all the books given to her by her teachers. Poetry and various other sessions are organised for her. She loves discussing different subjects with scholars, “Attempts were made to quench my thirst for knowledge. But the thirst was limitless” (14). Draupadi is a learned woman. She is a perfect combination of life and intellectual ability required in the developing world. She understands that thirst for knowledge can never be quenched, she knows the quenching of thirst will make life stagnant, the true foundation of knowledge is from multiple vantage points. It stands in opposition the ‘Sabha Parva’ of the primary epic, where the entire Kuru clan sits dumb on the riddle of dharma.

Today is the day when Krishna is coming to the court of Drupad. Draupadi is glowing with passion and beauty, Ray delineates her youth through the images of nature. She uses poetical overtones to free the relation of Draupadi and Krishna from the bondage of dharma and what is lived by both Draupadi and the readers is pure delight. The freedom that emerges from the streams of pools transcends the pangs of the fate-bound patriarchal battles of the great epic. Draupadi’s desire and eagerness to meet Krishna is fed through her conversations with her sakhi, “Not me, it is this bird Nilmani, who is reciting his name! I

was just rebuking it” (17)! The inner and the outer landscape mingle into each other to reflect her intense longing. Amidst this colourful description, when Krishna enters, he first mentions the reason for Draupadi’s birth. He tells Draupadi that she is born to destroy the veil from this world and to establish dharma through her divine qualities. He breaks all the hopes that were springing from Draupadi’s heart. All of a sudden the raining clouds turn into ferocious voices of destruction. Ray does not even spare the Krishna. His grand motive is made to stand like a colourless giant overpowering the luxuriant bloom of Draupadi. Drupad agrees to Krishna and is happy hearing about Draupadi’s dharma from him. He is now sure of his revenge and requests Krishna to marry his daughter. There is a clear marker of subdued patriarchal violence in their conversation. Draupadi’s brimming heart is turned into the river whose waters can be harnessed to irrigate selfish purposes. The river has to be controlled and its course is regulated according to the requirement of the father and the lord Krishna to become the benefactor of humanity. Drupad wants Krishna to marry her so that his revenge can be assured and Krishna like a true politician suggested a ‘svayamvar’ for Draupadi, “I realised that Krishna was the dharma protector” (24). Like a plaything, her feelings are crushed in a second by the same person she had been longing for. She will be now won over in a ‘svayamvar’. A woman’s body that originated from the creative fire is turned into a battlefield to question the sanctity of such rituals like ‘svayamvar’. The selfish father is content knowing that the Draupadi’s husband will definitely fulfil his purpose.

Krishna makes it clear that Draupadi is born to bring complete annihilation of evil, but ironically through his *lila* hunts down Draupadi’s love. He tells her that he and Arjun are one. They share everything and Arjun does not relish anything without first offering it to him. His description of their bond makes fall Draupadi into an image of a body which can be pleased by both Arjun and Krishna. But Draupadi is not happy with this decision. She overturns this fate by accepting Arjun only as a part of Krishna.

Draupadi is excited about the Svayamvar, accepting Arjun to be Krishna, she is now happily prepared to get married to Arjun. Ray charts out extensive details of Draupadi's preparations. She does not give the details of the svayamvar challenge but describes the decoration of the hall extensively belittling the confront. Drupad has arranged for a tough challenge. Yet there is no description of the struggle that the warriors have to go through in order to win rather it is the inner anxiety of Draupadi to get married has been fascinatingly projected. The grandeur of the svayamvar is undercut by her worry at the chances of not being getting married at all. Her concern, "... should I remain unwed for ever, helping him in his religious duties, and safeguarding dharma" (29). Frustrated with her father, she blows off the entire discourse of dharma like a cigarette puff. Already aggravated, she dismisses the emotional sentiments expressed by her brother on their separation, "So what is there to weep about" (31). She overthrows all those emotionally over-loaded *bidai* scenes of the *Mahabharata* deeply rooted in the mind of every Indian girl. The *bidai* scenes which proclaimed not the promises of bright future as much the snapping away of blood bonds. Even after being rebuked, the brave Drishtadyumna born out of the sacrificial fire to fulfil the revenge of his father behaves like a comic jester and sits down with Draupadi. In a grief-stricken voice he starts explaining about Pandavas to her sister, Draupadi and Ray amazingly garnishes the scene with the tones of any Bollywood movie where a crying mother is worried about her daughter's fate at the new in-laws house. He briefs Draupadi about everyone: "... The blind king Dhritarashtra had no option but to declare Yudhishtir the Crown Prince" (31). His description of Kuru kingdom turns the legendary clan into an Indian family where the members fight for the head chair of their dining table.

Drishtadyumna, finally discloses the reason behind all this discussion. Like the nineties Bollywood neighbour uncle or aunty trying to reveal the news of the death of the

groom to his newly bride, the brother breaks the news of Pandavas demise in the fire of the house of lac, built by the Kauravas to kill the Pandavas through a trick. Draupadi instead of bursting into tears gets tensed about her marriage, whom will she marry now turning the entire event of age-old rivalry into a mere farce. She does not sob on Arjun's death rather gets worried about her marriage and prospective groom. She rejects the notion of marriage being an eternal bond. If Krishna could turn marriage into a pact so has Draupadi rejected it to make it her identity. She confesses the fear of remaining, "unwed virgin" (34). This completely washes out the dharmic concept of chastity, which denies the women to even talk about their sexuality and desires even till today.

A physical environment becomes a place only when mutual encounters and viewpoints get attached to it. It is the part of social relations, where communities of individuals exist together. Nonetheless, the inner space alters our insight of the outer reality. By the Talo Pali Lake in Thane was born Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a male. To prevent hurting her parents, while living with them, she could not express her desired sexuality openly. She had to dress like a man. But today she is Laxmi and everyone knows this woman celebrity. However, this state of being where she decides to exercise her pick of gender role is very hard earned. In an interview, she recalls that how she had once forgotten about her breasts implants and sat in her balcony. It created a mass frenzy in the neighbourhood. This shows a desire for freedom from the chains of gender, for inner space coexisting with the desire for belonging and being attached to a place. The incident also brings out the plethora of realities and gender spaces, existing together, side by side. The gendered private and the public cannot be kept separate but infiltrate into each other. The same places, after all, are the site where life happens, and that invariably involves both public, legitimate knowledge, and the private that is repressed, suppressed, and needs to be whispered.

On the same lines, Draupadi questions her father and Krishna that if anyone else wins her in the svayamvar, will her dharma as a chaste wife will remain intact? In Hindu mythology, Savitri is considered to be the epitome of a chaste wife, the one who followed the dharma of a wife even when her husband died by taking care of his parents and nursing his dead-body. This earned her the life of her husband back from the lord of death, Yama. Therefore, it can be said that chastity in the Indian culture is a sacred power which is beyond carnal discussions and here the supreme lord has himself declared the marriage of Arjun and Draupadi. This means if they now choose to marry Draupadi to someone else, then the breaching of dharma will not be her fault but will be decided by the male authority. Ray surfaces the fact that these features of dharma like chastity are not only constructed by patriarchy but can be moulded according to their conveniences. Ironically, it is Draupadi who request to stop the svayamvar in order to safeguard chastity but Drupad does not agree to that and the svayamvar is organised as planned.

Draupadi stubbornly questions her public display. She expresses her resentment against this ritual. However, she does not leave the space to highlight the irresistible charm she possesses for the suitors. The svayamvar begins and Draupadi is waiting endlessly for someone to win the challenge but to her disappointment it a Brahmin youth who finally wins her. She does not shy away showing her dejection. She is not the conventional princess. She neither walks coyly towards her husband to garland him nor does cry at her *bidai* rather casually flings away the advice of her father. She leaves Drupad without any tears. During the forest journey with her husband and his four brothers, Draupadi never misses a chance to enjoy the romantic moments with her husband defying the taboos of shame posed on an Indian woman, “Without hesitation I placed my hand in his arm” (51). Ray had induced colourless overtones when Drishtadyumna was mentioning the laurels of Pandavas but she gives many colours to the romantic adventures of Arjun, the garbed young

Brahmin and Draupadi. On reaching his home, the mother of five brothers commands them to share the offering they have got today. Ray uses this famous legend of Kunti dividing Draupadi among five Pandavas to highlight the darkness hidden behind the different interpretations of dharma which can even disrupt the ‘normative’ order of the world, ironically created by men themselves. It also reasons out the rationale of dharma, “ But a woman going to the bed at the same time with more than one man- how shameful and painful it was” (65)! Draupadi talks about various women of Kuru clan like Amba, Ambika, Ambalika. Bhishm, the elder son of Shantanu had vowed celibacy but then in order to fulfil his Kshatriya dharma, he won the three daughters of the king of Kashi for his old step-brother, Vichitravirya. The same dharma allowed him to get Vichitravirya married to both Ambika and Ambalika. He was not married to Amba as she was promised to another man. However, the king dies without producing the heir to the throne of Hastinapur and thus his two wives were forced to beget children by another man. These women have been abducted, married to the same person, forced to cohabit with a stranger. Sisters became wives to a same husband. Husbands left them in terrible situations without giving them children. These stories are narrated to highlight the power of male control to turn women bodies into ghettos of control and violence. Their bodies and identities are curbed by structures of male governance and thought. These structures do not only become the part of their everyday life but a base for their survival itself. It is only the women who are impacted by the customs, rituals, requirements and honour of the clan. However, the intimate connection that women have with these structures is crisscrossed with various factors, “Intimacy, separation, love and hate in married life are not guided by laws and rules” (99).

Ray then shows Draupadi performing the trivial conjugal duty mocking the larger purpose she was born to serve. She positions the elaborative report of the famous Kauravas and Pandavas’ rivalry in the bed chamber of Draupadi and Yudhishtir on their

first night, not only making the grand exploits sound boring but also presenting Yudhishtir to be an obsessed and lustful man, “The joy of having obtained you have stolen my sleep” (74). Like the eldest, all the other four brothers are equally charmed by her beauty, blurring the elaborative unique qualities they are born with. However, the most difficult phases of Draupadi’s life are also written. Draupadi had to give birth to the sons of all the husbands despite denial of many rights. It is always a woman body which becomes the site for sketching traditions and reforming them.

Soon after the marriage, Arjun leaves for Dvaraka and Bhim goes to live with his other wife Hidimba. Draupadi voices the feeling of jealous at Bhim’s visit to Hidimba. This presents a direct distinction to the heroine of an another epic, Atikal’s *Cilappatikaram*, Kannaki. She is one of the most respectable woman characters of the Indian epics. It is because even when her husband abandons her for another woman, she not only patiently waits for his return but takes an even better care of his parents. She understands the abandonment to be her lack without ever blaming her husband and these roles and norms written in these epics are still cherished by many in our society. Nabaneeta Dev Sen in “Alternative Interpretations of the Ramayana: Views from Below” also stresses the same point. She talks about how the great lord Rama is a construction to expound the ideal features of an Indian male and similarly Sita is constructed to make the Indian woman docile to its system. Nevertheless, Draupadi is not the one who will sit back to wait for her husband’s return. She is an educated woman who has a different mindscape. She leaves for Hastinapur with Krishna. After reaching Hastinapur, Draupadi proudly writes Karna’s fixation on her. She also tells how all the Kauravas are waiting for her with flowers in their hands. Her description registers the difference from the traditional setting of the warriors standing with bow and arrow waiting to frown at their enemies. Draupadi even being Pandavas’ wife is received with a lot of love. Karna was completely mesmerised by

Draupadi. While getting down her carriage, a thorn is stuck in her foot, the helpless Karna seeks forgiveness for it. This makes the text stand as the harbinger of even far-reaching changes in the Indian society. It also sketches how changes in the gendered spaces play a major role in the construction new cultural values. In the great epic, women were restricted to the roles of mothers, wives and sisters. The epic advertised this image of women to be the ideal image but in *Yajnaseni*, Ray shows that if a woman tries to claim space out of the domestic confines there can be a change in the ways of social structure. There is a vast difference between the gendered spaces written in the *Mahabharata* and *Yajnaseni*.

Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* was not asked about her wish in her marriage, she was not allowed to decide if she wants to be wife to five husbands. She faced all sorts of discrimination and was treated terribly by all the patriarchal figures, be it her father, friend, husband. But this Draupadi on reaching Hastinapur devices ways to live her life on her own terms, she seeks choices. She is initially apprehensive of the part of Hastinapur given to Pandavas, “There is not even a livable hut in Khnadav” (113). Khandav was the part of Hastinapur given to the Pandavas. She expresses the desire to be accepted and moreover treated like royal daughter-in-law, “Contentment could not be found even in the hut of Khandavprasth. I would find fulfilment” (113). She does not have any guilt of what she wants. She wants Krishna to transfer Khandavprasth into the lavish palace Indraprasth, as soon as possible.

During the construction of the assembly hall, Kunti one day asks Draupadi to visit her friend Radha. Radha is the wife of a chariator. Draupadi curiously questions about this bond between a queen and a *dasi*. Kunti answers her and Ray use the language of a whisper, conventionally associated with women to frame the answer. This gossip becomes more interesting for the readers than the construction of Indraprasth. What has always been revealed in the *Mahabharata* is the truth of Kunti and Karna’s relation, but in *Yajnaseni*

what is more fascinating is the way this reality is exposed. The description of Kunti announcing the truth to Draupadi rebuked the dominant ideology of shame interiorised in a woman. Had Kunti felt it to be her shame, she would have never revealed this truth to Draupadi. This also shows that Kunti has a soft corner for her son. She loves Karna the way she loves her other five sons. She breaks the norms of a queen to express the love of a mother, however lacking the courage of Draupadi she soon twists the fact saying that Karna is her dharma-putra. The sharing of this fact by a mother-in-law with her daughter-in-law makes the reader see the commonality of such instances. Ray also depicts the helplessness of woman who wants to claim and love her son but is not allowed to do so. She writes an episode in which Bhim mocks Karna, knowing this Kunti is angered at Bhim. But Karna, who has been presented to be stubborn in the Mahabharata, calms her down. Ray subverts the binary hierarchies of Kauravas and Pandavas to make the reader see if there is any difference between the two patriarchs. Ray releases women from the domestic fences of motherhood, the angered Kunti not only accepts Karna as her son from that day but also curses Bhim. She shares with Karna that how Bhim arrogance has been hurting her throughout her life. The adjectives of the *Mahabharata* have been shown swapping their places. Arrogance has been understood to be the trait of bad Duryodhana but here Bhim's own mother addresses him so. However, none is spared by Ray, the same Karna on getting the opportunity does not miss to make fun of Draupadi: "Karna's sarcasm pierced like an arrow. My heart began bleeding" (128).

The assembly hall gets ready and a big feast is being organised. Like the good daughter-in-law, Draupadi, serves the guest. Duhshasan mistreats her, he forcefully holds her hand a couple of times. This is another form of patriarchal violence unleashed on a defenseless female, however, it also questions the character of the people who fight for the highest throne of Hastinapur. It is not only Duhshasan who exploits her during the feast but

Duryodhan also. He is the eldest brother of the Kauravas. Draupadi could not do anything. She gulps this insult. Her condition has parallels to Karna's, who even after being invited to the feast is not eating the food with others. Kunti feels bad for her eldest son and asks Draupadi to take food for him in the guest house. However, here again, Karna insults her calling her an unchaste woman being the wife of five husbands. He refuses to take food from her hands. Draupadi's fate has been decided by the powerful agents of patriarchy yet why is she rebuked. She does not take this insult and satirizes his insult to be his lust towards her. She approaches Arjun for the help but he refuses to help her as during this period, Yudhishtir is her husband, so it is only his duty to safeguard the honour of Draupadi. Draupadi is treated as an object by both Karna and Arjun, blurring all their distinctions laid in the different versions of the Mahabharata. In contrast to Karna, Draupadi's marginalisation comes out to be starker. Ray pictures the violent faces concealed under the seemingly moral people. If Duhshasan and Duryodhan try to exploit her physically, Karna and Arjun suppresses her under their male ego. Draupadi is sure that even Yudhishtir will not rescue her, she can easily predict him, "He was a god and therefore, in one sense, like stone" (135). Draupadi slogs herself for everyone but she does not get sympathy from anyone. It also exposes the complexities of relationships but Draupadi's relation with Arjun and Yudhishtir seems to be having no roots. There is no hint of any hope in future also. Both of them seems to be dead against their relationship with Draupadi. The only time we can see the bond between them is during the nights. It is only the body of the Draupadi that is desired, her desires are not given any space. Kumkum Roy in "Unravelling the Kamasutra" talks about the legitimacy of sexual relationships between a male and female. She points out how women were always understood to be the objects of desire in the socio-sexual relations. The man could have relations with various women but how he accessed a particular woman became the yardstick of his social status.

She specifically discusses it as elucidated in *Manusmriti* and primarily points out two things. The men were permitted to enter into a relationship with any women, the offspring born out of such intercourse was considered legitimate, however, there is a condition of, “... more or less legitimate” (540) child. Thus, any woman could be easily subjected to sexual approaches at any time or activity. Considering this argument, Karna and Duryodhan are equally justified in exploiting Draupadi. Then the same concept of dharma that justifies the most devastating battle of Kurukshetra blurs all the differences between the Kauravas, Karna and the Pandavas.

In the following chapter, Draupadi questions, “... with five husbands and insulted by the Kauravas all through life, would I be able to lead a healthy life” (140)? Through this, Draupadi questions the appreciated relevance of bearing insults and accepting subjugation by Pandavas. One after another, Pandavas keep accepting the suppression at the hands of Kauravas, but does it make their condition better. The Indian consciousness has always sided with the silence of Pandavas. It has been praised since time immemorial but what good did it serve. Draupadi voices her fear of staying with such husbands. Ray brings out the pain of a woman who never decides such a life for herself and now neither the man who decided her fate nor the men who pledged to be her protectors are bothered about her life and honour. She has already revealed the intentions of Duryodhan to Arjun, but he does not act. Ironically, she is the chief queen of Pandavas but comes out to be the most unsafe of all. Bhim leaves no opportunity to give her pain narrating his and Hidimba's, his second wife, love episodes. Sahadev sleeps unbothered about her, Nakul is always immersed in his dance and music and Arjun in his scriptures, Draupadi is completely alone even after having five husbands. History and memory at times call her whore but the reality is she does not have the companionship of even one of her husband, “I was standing alone. On the corridor running along the closed bed-chambers of five husbands ...” (149).

But she still retains the innocence she was born with waiting for the years with Yudhishtir and Bhim to get over. Draupadi is not biased towards Arjun in her duties of a wife, she longs for him because he is the only one of the Pandavas who does not have a second wife. Ray delineates the pangs of Draupadi's separation from this husband, how helpless Draupadi felt the day when Arjun had come to Yudhishtir's chamber. Yudhishtir was lying in Draupadi's lap. Arjun came in to take a weapon, he did not even raise his eyes towards Draupadi and Yudhishtir yet Draupadi was left embarrassed to be found in another's arms by the man she loved. Arjun breaks the rule by entering into the chamber of his brother when he is in the company of Draupadi. Kumkum Roy in "Unravelling the Kamasutra", writes that a king had free space to cohabit with any woman but he had to be careful about not to enter into another man's house or letting another man capturing their woman (537). He punishes himself by proclaiming a twelve-year exile but because of four other husbands, Draupadi could not go with him. Nevertheless, even the same Arjun does not spare Draupadi from hurting, "If Krishnaa had married me alone then she would not have become Maharani ..." (168). She is tortured by all the five husbands in their own ways. In the absence of Arjun, Bhim forces her to spend Arjun's turn with him. Draupadi firmly refuses to obey his wish, however, the alternative is not flowery. She stays like a *brahmacharini* in a hut devoid of any luxuries for that one year. Ironically, when Draupadi is going through these tribulations during Arjun's absence, the latter marries more women presenting a direct contrast between the fate of a wife and husband.

Draupadi introduces us to Harita, Dronacharya's second wife whom he married to raise his son from the first wife. In fact, this woman is never treated as a wife by her husband. Even of being a devoted wife she is clear that Dronacharya is wrong in supporting the Kauravas. Ray not only questions the rules on the basis of which sides were chosen but also shows the sense of the futility of the virtues of a wife.

It is the time for Arjun to return, Draupadi is all excited. She dresses in the best possible jewels and attire and at this moment of happiness, Draupadi comes to know about his marriage to Subhadra, Krishna's sister. She is heartbroken to know that it is Krishna who devised this marriage. The only pure bond of Draupadi's life also finally gives her hurt. It was that one year that Draupadi has to spend with Arjun, she has been longing for this one year. But Arjun decides to spend the night in Subhadra's chamber. He tells Draupadi that is the revenge that he always wanted to take. The revenge of Draupadi going to the chambers of his brother again raising the question of Draupadi's fault.

Ray does not spare anyone not even the lord himself. Amusingly, in expressing Draupadi's anger, Ray makes her experience all those emotions and feelings that different Kuru princes have experienced towards her thus subverting the rules of desire as explained by Kumkum Roy. She is jealous of the beauty of Subhadra, she expressed anger towards Krishna. Ray uses Arjun to explain the difference between Draupadi and rest of his wives. He tells Draupadi that his other wives can never compete her in any of her virtues and thus she will always be the most loved of his, however, this also once again affirm the status of women to be nothing more than objects. Draupadi is shown intelligent enough to understand this tactic to be a political strategy.

Draupadi is shown preparing Subhadra for the first night of hers with Arjun. This subverts the conventional notion of jealous being the attribute of women only. If the five Pandavas can stay in peace with one wife then Draupadi also accepts Subhadra. She tells how seeing Subhadra made all her anger vanish in moments. Ray shows a kind of sisterhood developing between Draupadi and Subhadra. The way Ray describe Draupadi's fascination towards Subhadra's big eyes, make me recall the relation of the two sister-in-laws in the Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire*. Ruth Vanita in the "Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History", talks about homosexuality and the floating

boundaries of sex ingrained in Puranas. Mohini, the beautiful girl that Shiva becomes in order to charm Vishnu is not the only example of such relations. Shiva is attracted to Vishnu and the union of the two most powerful forces of the world results in the birth of Hariharaputra. Ray uses the Hindu mythology to show the floating boundaries of sex and gender.

Definitely, Ray brings out the firm selfhood that Draupadi has. Amidst the patriarchal society, she confesses her enticement towards Subhadra. However, Draupadi's fascination towards Subhadra, makes her realise her love for Krishna. She sees Krishna in the eyes of Subhadra and with all the power Draupadi confesses her love for Krishna. However, unlike the Bhakti tradition, this love does not remain at the level of mind and heart but is expressed in physical terms. The Bhakti tradition expounds intense suffering before the beloved can be one with the lover, however, every pore of Draupadi's body longs for Krishna. She has always been told by her father about the oneness with Krishna, it is she who failed to acknowledge its true significance, thus overturning the patriarchal judgement by its acceptance. She tells that how after leaving Subhadra in Arjun's chamber, she did not long for Arjun but just remembered Krishna thus altering the man- woman relation of a subject and object. She openly confesses this state of mind in front of Krishna. Ray sketches a romantic scene situation it at the backdrop of the same night which Arjun was spending with Subhadra. Draupadi uses clever arguments in front of Krishna to justify her feelings saying that as Krishna is Arjun's friend, loving Krishna will draw Arjun nearer to her. She uses the same skills of manipulation that Arjun had used to make understand her superiority over other co-wives to reveal her love for Krishna. She succeeds in doing so to such an extent that Krishna, the lord expresses his gratitude for accepting Subhadra as her sister. At the same time, she uses the same tactic to ignite Arjun's suspicion about her love for him, "For winning love what is there in this world that the beloved can not do" (215)? Draupadi

is finally very happy knowing that how many wives Arjun has, she will always remain the most important for him. She writes how happy and elated she was on knowing that Abhimanyu, despite being Subhadra's son, named her to be her mother when asked so by his teacher. Draupadi has now firmly become the centre of this narrative.

Chapter twenty-five of this text begins with the description of *Rajasuya yajna*. This *yajna* will be performed by Yudhishtir to legitimize his authority as a king. Krishna suggests Yudhishtir to perform this *yajna* so that he claims separate sovereignty from Hastinapur and will also mark the "establishment of dharma" (219). Ray shows that how Kunti's counsel could not help Yudhishtir to decide if the *yajna* should be performed or not. Yudhishtir already had doubts that the *yajna* could become the reason of a big war. Hastinapur is still the prime kingdom of Kurus and now by performing the *Rajasuya yajna*, Yudhishtir will be directly contending for another kingdom. It definitely will ignite Hastinapur. Yet on the advice of Krishna, he agreed to perform it.

After the *yajna*, Pandavas are invited for a game of dice by the Kauravas. Duryodhan is extremely jealous seeing Yudhishtir rising to the position of king. In the lust of overthrowing Yudhishtir he devises a game of dice with the help of his maternal uncle Shakuni. All the males are on their own ego trips. Everyone is selfishly running after their own happiness. He asks for the permission from his father and the ruler of Hastinapur, Dhrtarastra. Dhrtarastra refuses to give his permission but after much persuading from his son, he agrees to the game. It clearly shows the presence of all and only male figures in this decision. But all these scholar minds together could not see the complete disintegration of the Kuru clan in this game.

It is not about the matter of good over evil. Draupadi could already sense doom in it and therefore, she requested Yudhishtir to reject the proposal of the dice game. Yudhishtir also knows the dangers of this game. Yudhishtir does not want to go for the

game but his dharma binds him. He can not refuse to obey the command of his uncle and the king of Hastinapur. Interestingly, Hindu creation is in itself understood as *lila* or a game. This game is set up to decide on something that could have been otherwise decided by a war, the game will decide the rulers of the Kuru clan.

The Pandavas reach Hastinapur. Ray does not give the account of the game of dice rather when the game was going on in the assembly hall she devotes pages praising the beautiful hair of Draupadi. However, at the game Yudhishtir constantly losses. He first gambles away all the wealth, then the kingdom and his people, his brothers and finally after himself becoming the slave of Kauravas he gambles and loses Draupadi.

Draupadi is asked to bring in the court, she is now the wealth of Kauravas. A messenger comes and tells Maya that Draupadi has been asked to come to the court. Draupadi is in her month. A woman is prohibited to see even her own husband during this time yet Draupadi is asked to report in the court in front of the entire Kuru clan. Instead of the conventional reporting of Draupadi being dragged to the assembly hall, Ray writes about Draupadi's anger. She wanted to confront Yudhishtir. She refuses to be treated like a piece of property. She voices agony. Readers can witness the anger of revolt. She protests against the male hegemony.

The menstruating Draupadi is pulled by her hair and is violently dragged in front of the Kuru elders by Duhshasan. Heroism has always understood to be a male's courage to stand against the wrong and fight against human sufferings. However, Draupadi rebukes the entire Kuru clan openly for sitting silently on her insult. Ray draws attention to Kuru's inability to help safeguard the honour of their own family member. The elders of the clan sit patiently watching her disrobing. Draupadi alone fights for justice. She uses the dominant conventional weapons of the patriarchal society to fight against it. She questions the elders if it is right to expose a woman to the public during her menstruation. Women

during their periods are considered to be corrupted and contaminated objects. This myth is negated by the patriarchy itself.

None of her five husbands could do anything to save her from this humiliation. The most Bhim could do was again to take a vow of tearing apart Duhshasan's chest. Since time immemorial, the main reason for the difference between men and women is understood to be actions. Adam was given the punishment of work and Eve of labour. The first modern Western say put forth in the favour of women is counted to be by Mary Wollstonecraft in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). In this essay, Wollstonecraft writes about women's subjugation in the name of ignorance and innocence. She mentions about how men have used the mantra of women born weaker to be the tool for showing her to be intellectually weaker also. Patriarchy has cemented the biological variation into social differences. But Wollstonecraft firmly believes that enslavement of women springs from the lack of education. Therefore, she suggests and strongly recommends education for women to place them at the centre of knowledge, in turn making them the kernel of it. She champions education to be the strongest warhead of women to fight any and every battle against male governed ideologies (46).

Draupadi emerges out to be the perfect reflection of Wollstonecraft's words. When no one comes to her rescue, she acts, raising a clever question. The question revolved around the concept of dharma and legitimacy. It challenges her stake. She questions Yudhishtir whether he staked her before or after losing himself. Even the wisest sitting in the assembly could not answer this question. The biggest patriarchal weapon of being more learned is finally defeated by Draupadi. Her action eventually stops the disastrous game. It is because of her question and interruption that the so-called intellectual men of the hall understand various inauspicious omens. Dhrtarastra grants her three boons and Draupadi frees her husband through these boons. Draupadi's disrobing and violation help us see the

difference between the way Draupadi and Pandavas reacted. The most bravest five Pandavas could not save one woman with all their intelligence, physical prowess and dharma but one woman standing in the most humiliated state saved all five of them with just one question. It questions the relevance of dharma which leaves a chaste and sacrificing women like Draupadi humiliated by her own protectors.

Ray does not dismiss the existence of dharma but she carves the space where dharma can be defined in a variety of ways. Dharma can be seen as the device which maintains the order in the world but one can not negate the multiple different sides it exists with. The five Pandavas struggle to base their lives on the dictates of dharma but Draupadi raises the important question of merging self-integrity with the dharmic rules of society.

After Bhim's vow, Draupadi also pledges to keep her hair untied till she washes them with Duhshasan's blood. This vow asserts the equal importance of human beings in front of dharma, thus, bringing out the importance of self- survival along with the collective right. Through Draupadi, Ray tries to locate the space where human beings follow the righteous path but without sacrificing the right of the self to exist.

Yudhishtir and his other four brothers in the treatment of Draupadi have always applied the theory of *niskama* dharma, that is, where one does not enact or perform the duties in accordance to his individual desires. However, Draupadi's question further interrogates the entangled workings of this dharma. By asking who was betted first, she questions the firm hierarchical constitutions regulated by the *niskama* dharma. Nevertheless, She uses these same structures to pave her own freedom. Hierarchy does not allow anyone to budge beyond his location and thus a slave does not have the right to enslave anyone. Ironically she uses the same dharma to negate her subjugation that it justifies. Her explanation of dharma in the assembly hall also marks the inability of the Kuru elders to interpret the dharma they themselves have written. Considering the plight of

sacrificing Draupadi, Yajnaseni hints at the fissures located in the definition of dharma that promises eternal contentment.

Jasbir Jain in “Positioning the ‘Post’ in Post” argues that women freedom is a sum total of many stages and characteristics. It involves a thorough understanding of how our past has been paved, how historical interpolations have strengthened and weakened this delineation, how the power structures reflect this past and historical understandings of the patriarchy and then eventually all this reading has to be used to alter the present oppressive situations. However, the critical journey should though uncover the oppression but only to find freedom (83). Ray practices the same. Her Draupadi actively participates in the present ongoings of the assembly hall to overthrow these structures of women subjugation.

She also questions the feature of compassion that the great epic lays. War always brings destruction. This is the highest truth of every battle. Whether the battle of Troy or the battle of Kurukshetra, the history has witnessed the immense horror of bloodshed and dead bodies. Staking Draupadi in the game of dice which is no less than a battlefield interrogates the notion of compassion exposing the severity of patriarchal rules that considered women nothing but a piece of land. Ray implies that dharma can not be written or read from somewhere. It has to be put to test before being performed.

The Pandavas are set free to leave for Indraprastha. However, they are given exile for twelve years and invited back for one last throw. Yudhishtir accepts the invitation. Ray’s Draupadi becomes a trail breaking woman. She defies the stifling bounds that her husbands and society imposed on her being a woman. She questions the dharmic patriarchal authority and transcends the difference constructed in terms of gender, nonetheless, Yudhishtir by again accepting the invitation of dice game stakes her honour. Howsoever hard Draupadi struggles to come out of the slime, she is forced back into the mire of inflexible dharma. Yudhishtir says that because of his dharma he can not refute to

accept the invitation. He seems content with the freedom of Pandavas but he does not recognise the bondage he is chaining Draupadi into. The Pandavas do not realise that they are practicing what has been inflicted on them by Kauravas. Ray uses lord Krishna to justify the anger of Draupadi on it.

The Pandavas with Draupadi are ready to venture into the forests as the part of their exile. Kunti is still worried about the survival of her sons. Ray also shows how Kunti makes her sons acknowledge the humiliation that Draupadi had to go through in the assembly hall. She praises Draupadi for her stand but her main concern is the protection of her sons. Here she portrays all those women who try to achieve their social identities only through a perfect nursing of the domestic roles ordained on them by the society. She asks Draupadi not bear any hatred against her son, Karna. Draupadi promises to do so. Yet ages see her the culprit of the entire war who forces her husbands to wage war.

The Kamyak forest again marks the difference between the green natural world and the constructed world of the assembly hall. Draupadi dwells on the immemorial existence of mountains and rivers pointing a contrast between the artificial structures of codes maintained by the kings and these god created mountains and other natural features. The forest comes out to be the reality that is untainted by the brutality of wrath practiced in the courts. She talks about the difference between the sea and a river, and river, unlike sea, is not any culmination, its keeps running. This river is then compared to the throne which is fixed and unmoving. An unmoving throne can not irrigate the emotions of its kingdoms. Draupadi's imagination stands poles apart from the harsh throne of Hastinapur. It is only the river that can cultivate not the sea. This otherness of Draupadi is not the other rather it reveals the truth of the survival of the universe. The world of nature here symbolizes a promise, a promise of eternal beauty and life.

Ironically, The Pandavas are busy in the discussion of *kirtas*, these devils have always been residing in the Kamyak forest where the Pandavas will be staying from now onwards. Draupadi in the laps of nature is trying to regain life but the Pandavas are sure that they will not be able to befriend the *kirtas*. Their dharma of *kshatriya* has made them enemies to *kirtas*. Draupadi is also shown to be the image of 'Annapoorna', the goddess of food. She used to eat in the forest only after feeding her husbands. Ray makes think that who really believes in war.

Draupadi is the one who surrenders herself to the demands that have their causes outside oneself. She can not forget the birthday of her 'sakha', Krishna. She is all immersed in her imagination, trying to read the festivities that must be taking place at Dvaraka. On seeing her entrenched in thoughts, Arjun comes and questions her love for Krishna. His concern for Draupadi at this moment comes out to be nothing more than a sentimental display to access her love. Draupadi answers that she loves Krishna the way he himself loves Krishna, thus leaving him silent. At this place, Ray talks about Karna's vow to kill Arjun and also guru Dvaipayana promising to teach Yudhishtir the skills to defeat Kauravas. The guru questions Draupadi if she is satisfied with it as if putting the entire blame of the revenge on her.

We never see Draupadi asking for revenge, what she desires to witness is Yudhishtir's concern for her honour. It reveals the pain existing in the life of Indian women who from their childhood are understood to be protected by patriarchy, Draupadi by questioning Yudhishtir, is not trying to gain any individual rights. Her desire for Yudhishtir to act again questions the already written dictates of the society which makes the male counterparts to be the only support of a woman. Draupadi can now clearly see herself being reduced to the level of an object by Yudhishtir. She was never an equal in their marriage. For Yudhishtir, the concept of a wife is only attached to her body. Is it only

the duty of a wife to silently stand by her husband fulfil the cultural role of making sure that he has been fed. Like a responsible wife, Draupadi has always been there for all her husbands. Even after all the insults, she has experienced because of her husbands, she is standing with them to face all the miseries. However, her silent agreement to the guru's question somewhere hints at the severe realisation of losing her selfhood in playing the role of an ideal wife. Yet her mind is roving and noticing everything through the dense dark forests, uncovering from the trees, trying to read every single thought and working of the dominant society.

Draupadi still possesses the beauty and purity of nature. Arjun has to go to the Himalayas to get the divine weapons. Draupadi is distressed, she does not want Arjun to go. In his absence, she spends sleepless nights. The insult in the assembly hall could not stop her from experiencing the beauty of the forests but nights without Arjun still makes her restless, marking her holiness. She still experiences the threat of Arjun falling in love with the *apsaras*. She still stands human amidst the battles of wrong and right, devils and gods. Arjun's touch uplifted her courage and this is the Draupadi who has been blamed for the greatest war of humanity.

The following some chapters not only gives us the glimpse into the vast repository of nature but also in the forlorn heart of Draupadi. The scenes present a beautiful vision of life and love. Draupadi's' pangs have a close association with the images of nature which highlights the unbreakable dependence of human beings and nature thwarting the requirements of social systems to seat people in the position of the 'self ' and the 'other'. Draupadi's' paining heart gets recluse only in the natural splendour of Badarika. She experiences solace here because this is the place where Arjun began his journey for *swarg* from. Nature for Draupadi then becomes a living entity which responds to her condition. There is a coexistence of mutual respect and recognition between Draupadi and nature

standing stark in contrast to the hatred the cousins were experiencing in the assembly hall. This actually a moment of reversal. Draupadi can witness the wonders of nature which rein the agony of life and in this way she is able to turn round the harsh route of events by the merit of her emotional clarity. These hills reveal even the love of Bhim to Draupadi. He instead of tormenting Draupadi assures all the luxuries for her. The unity that is not achieved in the gilded courts has been found here. This world of Draupadi and Bhim is radically different from the world of Hastinapur.

Arjun returns to Draupadi. She is elated to see him, happy that he has returned from the mesmerising *apsaras* of the heaven. They move to Dvaita forest which has a dreamlike quality. Here are no demarcation of places and time. In the serene atmosphere, the conversation of Pandavas makes a sudden interruption. Yudhishtir is talking about Karna's vow to kill Arjun. The hallucinatory world is again overpowered by bloodshed.

Ray then shows Draupadi pouring her heart out to Satyabhama, Krishna's second queen. Nabneeta Dev Sen in "Alternative Interpretations of the Ramayana: Views from Below" talks about how in the oral tradition of India, women have been sharing their sorrows as sisters. Draupadi is highly critical about Yudhishtir and points out his lack of efficiency at times. She tells Satyabhama that there are chances when she has explained Bhim's statements to Yudhishtir. This shows that how a feminine say can also put things in the set of order. Satyabhama is left amazed at it. Ray helps the women readers to come together to understand 'woman-connection' with nature and her other sisters. Subhadra fascinatingly tries to study the success of Draupadi's complex married life.

The history of the *Mahabharata* has always laid importance on the life and battles of the male warriors. Their adventures, tribulations, doubts and success have been delineated at great lengths. The world sprang from their activities and performances, however, Ray in this chapter shows all these achievements to be dull in front of the

domestic quarters of Draupadi. She is a rare and happy wife of five husbands. Satyabhama is also the wife of a husband who has eight chief queens and many other wives but she is amazed at the intelligence and love of Draupadi which binds her with all her five husbands in one bond.

Draupadi in the assembly hall had challenged the existing concepts of authority and here in the forests while sharing her secret of binding all her husbands in one thread she assumes the same authority. However, she binds the new emerging features of authority that they do not come out to be new ideologies but draws a sense of belief. For instance, she says, one of the mantras to achieve this harmony is to take an extreme interest in the likes and dislikes of all her husbands. She uplifts and recreates the simple role of wife. She has a spirit of perseverance unlike Dhrtarastra, she is active unlike Sahdev, she values herself unlike Karna, she fasts unlike Bhim to maintain the balance of her body, she is intellectual, she has the emotions to understand another's plight, she has the courage to fight against wrong and all these characteristics together are fit to be the new ruler. But she does not want to be one. Ray turns the table, so it is Draupadi alone who can save the world from the impending war whereas Pandavas and Kauravas are the ones who want war at any cost. Arjun has vowed that he will not touch Draupadi till the time till he kills Karna.

Draupadi then narrates the incident of Karna coming to the Dvaita forest to kill the man-eater. During the killing he is bitten by a poisonous snake, Draupadi without knowing who has been hissed reaches for his help. On seeing Karna, she goes through various thoughts. She wants to save him but the second moment she remembers his vow of slaying Arjun. If he is killed, half of Duryodhan's strength will be ended and Indraprasth will belong to Pandavas. If he is not being saved today, Arjun will not have to hurt Kunti by killing him. However, irrespective of all these lucrative possibilities of the death of Karna,

Draupadi saves him. This shows that Draupadi is not only a strong woman but also knows the intricacies of what is right.

Now comes the last year of exile and according to the verdict of the assembly court, the Pandavas along with Draupadi have to spend this year in exile and if during this one year Kauravas will recognise them then the former will have to continue their exile for another twelve years. The four brothers go to fetch water and when they did not return even after a long while, Yudhishtir along with Draupadi goes to find them. The four brothers are lying dead near the lake of Yaksh as they tried drinking water without answering Yaksh's queries. Seeing all the four husbands dead, Draupadi is not able to control herself, however, she mourns the death of Arjun more than the other three. Yaksh, on the other hand, gives Yudhishtir an option to bring back one of his brothers to life. Draupadi prays in her heart for Arjun. This highlights her transgression of the patriarchal norms and also brings into light her firm and honest character.

Draupadi and the five Pandavas start serving at the court of Virat. Draupadi serves the queen disguised as a maidservant. The brother of the queen starts throwing advances to Draupadi. Draupadi complains Yudhishtir, but he asks her to keep herself away from the lust of the brother, Keechak. This again questions the role of the so-called male protectors. During a celebration the queen orders Draupadi to get wine from Keechak's room, Draupadi firmly refuses to do so reasoning Keechak's drunkenness at that time. But on a severe direction from the queen, Draupadi is left with no choice but to get wine from his room. She knows the consequences of it but in order to protect her unconcerned husbands from an exile of another twelve years, she enters into his room. Her doubts soon become reality, Keechak has been waiting for her. She manages to flee from his clutches and reaches the place where the king Virat and Yudhishtir are playing the game of dice. Yudhishtir keeps on playing the game even after seeing Draupadi in such a

state. This marks the utter helplessness a wife faces. However, Draupadi courageously speaks about Virat's failure as a king.

Even after the successful completion of the terms of exile, the selfish Kauravas are not ready to give Pandavas their deserved and therefore, a war is decided. Surprisingly, the Pandavas who were never bothered about the various insults and tribulations their women had to go through because of the Kauravas, today made those same insults the reason for the war. Ray points to the coward attitude of the Pandavas.

Ray in the mean time does not give us the proceedings of the war. Instead, there is featuring of the close feminine experiences of Draupadi and Kunti. In Chapter fifty-two, the night before the beginning of the battle, the Pandavas, Krishna and Draupadi sit together to discuss each other's weakness. Krishna and all the Pandavas confess their weaknesses. At this night Draupadi presents the bravest possible picture of a woman, however, she is not out for fighting the battle on the field of Kurukshetra. She, rather battles all that she has been bottling up since the day of her birth. She confesses her three weaknesses, the prime being the lord Krishna, the second is Kunti's sons and the third is Arjun. Ray, here subverts the conventional image of Draupadi in two ways; one she presents a woman who can speak at the conferences dominated by men and second she makes Draupadi transcend the boundaries of sexuality and religion which do not permit a woman to live life to the fullest. There is a sense of not being afraid of the reactions of patriarchy, of being free from the fear of the unknown, of embracing the right as well as the wrong, and of placing oneself uncovered and released without the steady want for protection and security. Sensuousness is also witnessed in its broadest sense. Romantic allusions marked between Draupadi and Krishna, and Draupadi and Arjun are not undercut. This treatment of handling the theme of love is revolutionary in a culture where sexuality has to be hidden in all spheres of life and even in the mirror reflecting it, that is, art. Ray does not give any account of the war and

rather writes those days in the same tone of any other day. The fight was taking place and here Draupadi is dreaming about her childhood life, her marriage, romantic rendezvous, playfulness. Ray writes about the fears and feelings experienced by the wives and mothers of Kuru clan. Amidst the horrible war, they are still standing one. Draupadi has lost all her sons. The enemies are dead. The revenge has been taken. The future curses have been hurled. No one is spared, neither the lord nor the common man. The dead bodies are being cremated yet no one is happy.

Parikshit is anointed the king of Hastinapur. The Kuru elders have already left for the forests to spend their last days. The Pandavas assigning the responsibility of Hastinapur to Subhadra leave for the Himalayas with Draupadi. It is Yudhishtir's wish to take Draupadi along with them. But Draupadi questions how the desire for heaven is different from any other desire. While following her husbands, Draupadi tries to read the significance of her life and then at this very moment, she suddenly slips off the mountain but the Pandavas do not stop to save her. Bhim tries to save her, but Yudhishtir does not allow Bhim to do so. Even after sacrificing everything for the Pandavas, Draupadi is blamed for being biased towards Arjun. The dharma bound brother, Bhim obeys his elder and leaving behind his mace followed his brother. This mace has become the symbol of the journey of Pandavas to heaven. Left alone, Draupadi could hear her *sakha*, her Krishna and she asks for five promises from him. In the first four promises she asks for different boons for women and humanity but in the fifth, she asks Krishna to promise her a rebirth. She does not want to go to heaven. She still desires and she desires to be born again. Draupadi asserts her identity of a human being by locating herself in the pattern of death and birth yet in separateness from the dictates of dharma. Draupadi highlights the multiplicity within the self. She proclaims that the real self is indefinable and can never be captured by one birth

or one identity. She says that no memory and no story can actually sum up an identity. This is the beginning. Draupadi has just been born.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Karukku*

Karukku is a mirror of the life of a Christian Dalit woman trying to unravel the paradoxes and questions, that riddles her community and self. This is the community and self which are barred from the centres and looked down by the people placed in the upper levels of the society. However, what interests me first about the book is its name itself. *Karukku*, the noun means a leaf. It is a palmyra leaf. Both the sides of this leaf have saw-like edges, cutting and dangerous to touch. Lakshmi Holstrom in the "Introduction" to *Karukku* mentions that this noun also means a kernel. Whether the cutting leaf or the kernel, both have their existence in nature. Nature has always been a rich source of our identity and by naming her autobiography, *Karukku*, Bama proclaims a journey to explore her life, culture and history that are recorded by the inexorable nature.

Autobiographies are the ways through which one not only tries to read the own-self but also introduce this self to the others. However, the first line of Bama's autobiography reverses the fact that identity can be named, for she has no nouns to introduce herself or her village. She just uses the most appropriate adjective to describe the Indian rural villages and that is, beautiful. Her village is invoked engulfed in one spirit of holy beauty but soon this serenity is undercut by the mention of various communities living there. The beautiful village has the reality of slavery and alienation. There is a clear juxtaposition of the undivided nature, and the demarcated communities and their activities. Nevertheless, Bama uses the same natural world to call upon the constructed world of differences based on culture, food, religion, rituals, history, legends, myths and practices.

Bama's nostalgia for her undivided village emerges in the description of *ghats* and the mountain range that surround her village. This mountain range seems to her like a mass of paddy, the most common site to an Indian eye. In the common past, the places were not demarcated by any human being rather derived their name from the different actions of the village. Marakkaa puucchi malai has been named so because of its semblance to stacked paddy. Vannaan paara has a tank and the Vannaan boys used to wash their clothes in that tank and therefore it has been named Vannaan paara. In fact, Bama points out how these different peaks encircled their village into oneness. But things have changed now, for instance, Vannaan boys do not go to the tank to wash their clothes. The unbroken past soon merges with the divided present symbolising the fissures creeping in the united self. On one of the peaks of the mountain, a temple has been constructed by the higher caste, Naicker community. Only the Naicker community worships in this temple. This temple has been named Perumaal Saami temple. This temple freezes a sense of division, suggesting a separation of the Dalits and their habitations.

The journey of Bama begins with the Dalit experience of problems that are never faced by the 'better-off castes'. Her people have to climb up on the mountains to collect the firewood. They make money by selling them. Whereas the people of the other caste have proper fields and wells and thus they can work comfortably on them all round the year. These people do not even face water problems as there are many ponds in their areas. The differences point to the fact of Dalits placed in separate settlements which do not share the confines with the upper castes. There is a Dalit self-assertion in the language of Bama when she uses the word 'our' to address the people of her community. She again brings the difference of Dalit location and their chronicles of pain and sufferings through nature. It also works as a metaphoric and symbolic language to not only highlight the constructed differences but also to picture the clever mind of the upper caste people to

preserve their economic superiority. During the rainy seasons, Bama's village becomes even more beautiful. There is no dearth of water as nature is benign enough to the people of this village. However, this generosity of nature is exploited by the upper castes for their own benefits making it a reason for the poverty of the Dalit people. As a natural course, the rain water accumulates in the ponds which lie only in the upper-caste areas and throughout the year helps them in their agriculture. In the rainy season, because of the heavy water flow, people could catch fishes in the earthen pots. A varied variety of fish flows in abundance, but because of the demarcated geography, the Dalits can afford to buy only the cheapest fish whereas the upper caste ate the best. Nature is generous enough to treat everyone equal, but the upper caste people do not even allow her community to bait fishes as the ponds rights are reserved with them. It also forms the understanding of the myth of the Muniyaandi shrine which has the story of theft attached to it.

In *Yajnaseni*, we have seen that mythology is constructed primarily on the lines of dominant ideologies. Bama rationally deconstructs these myths. She refers to the myth of Muniyaandi shrine where once a year, a grand festival is held. People donate large offerings on this day. On one such festive day, a man named Bondan who belonged to Bama's community not only stole the money from the shrine but also took the bells of the shrine. Reading this incident in context to the hunger that upper caste people subject the Dalits to, one can understand the reason of the theft. However, the people constructed a story of Muniyaandi walking down the street asking for his offerings to be returned. Bama does not write the source of this fabrication but the upper and lower class' people, together forcing Bondan to return the offerings reveal the Dalit consciousness to be completely immersed in the structures of these myths. Bama's use of this myth not only breaks the stereotype of Dalits to be born thieves but also exposes the upper castes' intentions of perpetuating myths to deny various opportunities of upliftment to the Dalits. Bondan is one of the oldest

members of the Dalit community and his fine robbery skills made him famous as *Bondan-maama* amongst the children of this community. He could do anything and everything. He was a brave man who could not only steal from the temple but also from the gardens of the landowners. He stole different fruits and vegetables from their groves for his livelihood. But he was afraid of ghosts. One night while trying to steal coconuts from a garden, he was tormented by a ghost. However, he was brave enough to cheat him and ran to another grove. *Bondan-maama* had learnt to survive. It was not easy to defeat him. Bama overturns the conventional line of the myths by giving Dalits the faces of human and animals are sketched in the images of the ruthless upper castes. One night in order to escape the caretaker, *Bondan-maama* had to jump into the boiling water and the moment he fell into the well created by the upper caste people for the Dalits, a cobra spread his hood to bite him. But the brave *Bondan-maama* not only kept the cobra at bay but returned singing happily. There were times when he was bitten by the same cobra, but that did not stop him. He just cut away that toe with the sickle and completed his raid. By narrating various myths attached to evil *Bondan*, Bama also questions the engagement of history in the construction of Dalit self in the image of evil. However, Bama cleverly uses the resurrection of this evil to puncture the old suppressed Dalit and constructs a new Dalit self which knows how to survive, she not only discusses the pleasure involved in stealing the food in such a manner but also praises *Bondan*, “Such a sharp fellow he was” (6).

The other interesting fact that Bama brings on the surface is the missing women. Whether they are the *Vannaan* boys or the little boys of Bama’s community waiting for the upper caste owner of the pond to leave, so that they can catch some few good fishes, women are never read. Thus Bama’s reading of the fissures between the Dalits and the upper castes challenges the non-representation of Dalit women in this history. Bama, a woman is successfully carving spaces for recognition and self-respect.

Bama talks about the divided and limited space available to their caste. The small bus-stand which stands at the village entrance is their end. She says that the bus does not take them outside that stand. It has both literal and figurative meaning attached to it. Their limitation to this stand shows that the formal State spaces and the respect attached to these spaces are not available to the Dalits. They are forcefully ghettoized so that they not only recognise their seclusion but also experience a sense of shame attached to their low-birth. There runs a stream beyond that bus-stand which fills with water only when it rains, highlighting their deprivation. This stream when is not filled with water, smells like a shit-field. It highlights the inhuman tortures that the Dalit body has to experience.

They stay in these filthy places. From here, Bama highlights the differences existing between the Dalit community itself. All of them do not share the same marginal spaces, some are located even below in the hierarchy. The Paraya caste lives near the cemetery and Bama's just next to them. Bama soon collapses the separation between the various low-castes and homogenises them against the upper-caste communities by showing the difference between the concrete clean progressive buildings like post-office, the church and the school standing firmly against the palmyra-thatched roofs. Definitely the image of the low-caste community that springs from this picture is a deprived entity but Bama has an understanding of the basis of this difference. She is quick to see the social system that helps to keep the caste system intact. She points the big school as the biggest difference between them and the Naicker's.

Bama knows that the lack of education contributes to the discrimination of the Dalits but by doing so she takes hold of the same agency that sanctions the discrimination. Through this agency, Bama places the community's powerlessness within the framework of the larger socio-political and economic actuality of the country. However, while giving the account of the in-community daily fights over water while standing in long queues, Bama

paints a lively picture of the community that lurks in the darkness of discrimination. The Dalit here is neither presented a hero nor a victim but there is a sense of identity which goes beyond the written and subverted identities. It is the strangeness of their names. The black faces of these un-plastered houses swarm the pages of the book. This space taken up by Bama makes the reader gain insight into the daily routine affairs of a Dalit life which shows their affairs to be as normal as ours. Someone is short tempered, the other is cooking, an aunty is grinding some exotic *masala*, Murugun is dark skinned but the friend is white, a girl is crying to swim in the well and the woman is chasing her cows. Through this detailed painting, Bama not only helps the dominant ideologies peep into the everyday life of the Dalits but the emotions of love, fight, anger, jealous are given a Dalit point of view.

Bama discusses her twenty-five years old neighbour whose nick name is Kaaman. He is always called so even when his real name is Maria- Lourdes. Kaaman does not have any work, however, he never refuses any one for doing their work. His nick name means ‘jack of all trades’ and he justifies it. Then one day suddenly he gets a job, and there are a lot of other regular and interesting thing about him. Bama claims that one can write an entire book on him, making him as normal or strange as anyone. This asserts that the Dalits do not have to be brought to the mainstream, rather they are already present there.

Bama narrates the tale of Nallathangaal. Nallathangaal and his elder brother lost their parents quite early in their life. The brother looked after her younger sister very well and married her in Maanaamarutai. Soon after the sister’s wedding, the brother married himself but his wife was not a good woman. Nallathangaal bore seven children after her marriage and at the birth of each child, she used to write a letter to her brother describing her troubles. But her sister-in-law never let the letters reach to her brother. One terrible day, Maanaamarutai got hit by a severe famine and now the loving brother himself went to rescue her sister and her children from the disaster. On returning to his village, the brother

asked her sister to go to his house and he himself went to the market to get some goods. On seeing the younger sister returning, the brother's wife closed the doors on her. When the door did not even open after knocking several times, Nallathangaal claimed that doors will open to prove her chastity. The door did open and the hungry children on entering the house pounced on everything they could find to eat. Seeing the pitiable condition of her children and the scornful attitude of her sister-in-law, Nallathangaal decided to commit suicide after killing her children. She brought the children out of the house and one by one started throwing them into the well, the little one tried to escape to a shepherd standing nearby. However, Nallathangaal caught hold of him and after throwing him into the well, drowned herself. The brother when got to know the incident from the shepherd, threw his wife into the burning kiln. Then he made the idols of her sister and her seven children, placed them on a shrine near the well along with the statue of the same shepherd and died himself. Till today, they all stand there in that temple. This episode discusses several facts about the Dalit community and identity.

It first summons the famous Tamil epic, Ilanko Atikal's *Cilappatikaram*. The epic narrates the story of a chaste wife Kannaki, who through the power of her chastity turns into an avenging goddess and purges a city from all the sins. The renowned king Cenkuttuvan installs the stone for the goddess Kannaki and institutionalises her cult. The story of Kannaki is set in contrast to the tale of Nallathangaal. The chaste woman of the Brahmin origin is transformed into a goddess by the gods themselves. Kannaki, is taken up into the heaven in front of the people. She is revered by all but Bama herself sarcastically writes that people do not even know if the tale of Nallathangaal is real thereby questioning the Brahmin spaces which deny the Dalit cultural structures.

The tale definitely is an instance of the Dalit economic tragedy. If the brother had sufficient resources, the accident would not have happened. It also brings out the third

misfortune that the Dalit body has to go through in this incident. This is the body of Dalit women. The sister-in-law is also a victim of the caste oppression. They do not have the money to feed her husband's sister along with the seven children. The financial crunch justifies her behaviour. Nevertheless, it is Nallathangaal's body which becomes the site of caste cruelty. Both the women become objects of the Dalit circumstances. They meet the harsh truth of the Dalit existence.

This incident also marks a stark beginning of the understanding of the concept of untouchability in the little girl, Bama. Such exposure to consciousness is also narrated by Ismat Chughtai in her famous short story, "Touch-Me-Not". Chughtai, in fact, shows how the courage of an lower class woman can instil the awareness of gendered roles in a little upper-class girl.

"Touch-Me-Not" is a story about the impact that stereotyping of gender roles have on a woman's sense of individuality. It deals with a woman suffering because of the version of patriarchal margins that are prescriptive and prejudiced. But Chughtai also shows how women can shatter the cast of gender stereotypes of their self. There are four women figures working in the narrative. Bhabhijaan, is born and brought up in the conventional patriarchal set-up where a husband is the head of the family and the wife is the subordinate. She is born to be humble and submissive towards her husband. Married in the defined space of a rich Muslim family, she has to embellish herself and follow certain decorum. Firmly located within a patriarchal context, her husband's desire and the requirement for a male child burdens her with repeated failed pregnancies and the final miscarriage ultimately denies every kind of identity and existence to her. Bi Mughlani represents the women in whom the power of the normative codes are permeated and rooted in the subconscious and the conscious self. They are not only the models of self-effacement and self-denial but become complicit in the victimization of another woman. The narrator of the story, who is

also the third woman figure, is a young girl through whom the reader not only interrogates patriarchal authority but also peeps into the determined surrender of women to it. The story hints at the beginnings of such a consciousness in her. Through her comments, the story asserts that the self-image of women has to modify from one of vulnerability to the critical examination of their subjectivity. An image of a tough, bright, meticulous, and ready to take on tasks woman, coming from a poor background emerges in the story through the pregnant peasant woman. She redefines the gender roles. She discards the patriarchal hypothesis and fractures the cast of domestic space by taking on the customary masculine role of being the provider rather than a receiver. She is self-assured and does not cry in self-pity, rather bravely gives birth to her child in the open boggy of a fast running train. Her critical assessment of the patriarchal system materializes from her lived experience. The story also hints of the class stratification within the women issue. It points to the fissures within the women issue. It seems to take a leap towards the formulation of a feminism that would be truly third world and not one that is limited to the dominant sections. The problems tackled here have moved outside the borders of household aggression and detention of middle class women anger against patriarchy. An autonomous space is seen budding where the welfare of women of diverse ethnicities are existing together.

Bama comprehends the most violent actuality of her life when she is in third class. She has been experiencing untouchability in various forms but yet has to know the term. She is going to her school, the walk from her home to school is hardly ten minutes, but because of watching various 'oddities', it took her half an hour. Bama is witty in using the term 'oddities' to enlist her daily sights. By doing so she questions the readers if Pongal offerings, merry go round, performing monkeys can be termed as oddities.

The displayed oddities of the lower-class' markets work as objects of curiosity. This episode ensures lower-caste slavery by highlighting the concept of the construction of

the other which seems to result from the mixed urge of exploring and exploiting the unknown. However, we can say that Bama uses regular things to present the other in an unusual different manner for and by an upper-caste eye. Every Indian has grown up seeing these sights then, how all of a sudden, these activities be regarded to be a part of one particular caste. These performances of the open space are inseparable from the Indian past that is now moving into ghettos. It is quite clear then, that being shudra is a state and not a caste as such. Amusingly, amidst these oddities, Bama places the campaigns of various political parties trying to get the votes of these lower caste people. She highlights the dubiousness working in the discrimination practices.

Bama writes that her enlightenment began from this day. Immanuel Kant in an answer to the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ suggests that the valour to use our own comprehension is enlightenment. The most significant aspect, according to Kant, is that our understanding, familiarity and ruling should assist us in conquering our immaturity and thus converting our surroundings into meanings. To desire this enlightenment, is to accept the fact that we reason out everything we confront. It hones our understanding of our own-self and the reality we face in daily routine. It also improves our humanitarian understanding of fellow beings.

Bama notices an elderly man of her caste and street walking with an oil- stained small packet. The man was holding the packet with its string and trying his best to avoid touching it. The man then politely handed over the packet to a Naicker who began eating from it the moment he got it. Bama first bursts into laughter seeing the way the man was handling the packet. All laughing, she narrates the episode to her brother and soon the laughter changes into annoyance because her brother reveals her the concept of untouchability practiced by the upper-caste Naicker against the Parayas. The Naickers will not let Parayas touch them or their food and that is why elderly man was carrying the packet

in that odd way. The incident plays an important role in producing the 'other' in respect to the normative Naicker. The 'other' who is the negative- other. It exists only in relation to the positive 'self' and therefore has to be ruled.

Markets scenes are the source to know the traditional as well as the popular culture of a place. Hence, for the high-caste readers they become the assembly point of the reflection of their existing wants and desires, and for the lower-caste reader, the unfulfilled wants and desires which can be questioned by the reader.

Bama inscribes many such occasions when the elders of her community are badly exploited by the Naicker class. Her elders treat even the Naickers' children with respect but these children call them by their names. The left-over that Naickers give to the lower-caste is considered as god's nectar by the elders of her community. Bama questions such disgraceful acceptance but her grandmother's answer highlights the materialistic obstacles encountered by the untouchables. She tells Bama that they can not survive without the alms given by the upper-caste. The dialogue articulates those silences which have browbeaten the Dalits since a long time. The conversation does not only show the Dalit within a realistic situation but also highlights the fractures. The fracture of Dalit acceptance of subjugation. However, Bama is intelligent enough to place this conversation outside the historical realm as by questioning the grandmother, she defies the usual Dalit feature of being all accepting.

The Dalit-self of Bama experiences a desire to fight against these dominant affairs and her brother shows her the first tool to start her struggle with. It is education, he recounts many lived occasions to show the strength of education. It has helped him carve out his self in the cast of fearlessness. It can help them live with equal dignity. He strongly asserts the significance of education to break free of unawareness. The Dalits have to

believe in their own self-worth and if they do that then transcending their streets will not be difficult.

Through education, the Dalits can build a healthier life for themselves and gain self-respect. From that day, Bama studies hard and stands first in her class. She here uses the device of first person narrative as a powerful tool. This device does not merely establish a sense of identification with Bama as contemporary as well as modern and post modern readers but also helps to undergo the pain and misery of the suppressed Bama, the educated girl who has to bear the inhuman atrocities of the dominant caste ideologies. Every insult that Bama has to experience transforms her body and gives a sight of that dominated land whose every inch of rooted traditions, conventions, rituals, thoughts, feelings and understanding is chained by the burden of raising its consciousness to the realization of its savagery and in turn, the need to civilize it.

She also points out the fact of violence that the Dalits like her have to face to obtain the basic right to education. When anything goes wrong in the class, Dalits are held in suspicion. The warden of her hostel reprimands them even when they are not at fault. She renders them unfit to race with the high-caste. Bama remembers the pain of being singled out as the first Dalit ever to get the best score. There is a strong upper-caste resistance to the Dalit education. Bama is also accused of theft and even the priest does not spare her from the hurt of her lower-caste status. Nevertheless, it is education which makes her see the discrimination and speak the truth, “We too paid our fees like everyone, yet... “ (20).

Bama learns the ways to answer back. She boldly carves out to be an individual who is not an extension of a Dalit male. Even the Dalit discourse of gender power refuses to include women voices. This comes well through the nuns whom Bama meets at her job after the completion of her studies. Like the Naickers these nuns are insulting towards Bama, they do not grant the female Dalit self any independence and agency. They suppress

both the Dalit teachers and the students. But Bama refuses to accept this subjugation and emerges out to be the favourite teacher of her students. She also takes stand against the authorities for their injustice.

There are now a handful of days for Bama to become a full-fledge nun but in one of her lectures, she is informed by her teacher-Sister that they do not consider *harijan* women to be prospective nuns, marking the unequal status that religion gives to Dalits. The religious norms are used to ostracise the lower-castes, "... we have a separate order ... " (25) for *harijan* women to become nuns. The Dalit women's powerlessness in terms of social, political and economic reality is the result of prejudices sanctioned by religion. Bama exposes these religious discriminations.

Bama constantly presents the Dalit self through the images of animals, for instance, she counters the nuns saying that she is not a cobra. Bama humanises the Dalits self through this tool of animal imagery as every instance reflects the Dalits to be more human than the upper-castes. On the one hand, the animal body used by the Dalit writer is to represent vigour and intelligence and on the other hand, the Dalit mind of Bama comes out to be critical and rational. She promises to bring a change where everyone is equally treated.

Bama also talks about the inter-caste troubles. There is a massive inter-caste fight between the Pallar and the Parayar. They both want to kill each other because of a ripe banana. It surfaces the truth of a strong self existing inside the body of the Dalit. The Dalit experiences inferiority complex and lack of courage only in front of the upper castes. The internalization of a negative self-image and the ensuing weakness is enacted only in front of the high castes but the same bowing self does not agree to the perspective of the other like him. This definitely shows that the self and the other are not permanent and constant identities. It still remains a fact that knowledge is power but this account of Dalit via a Dalit

gaze will open up the route to think if these fights are the symbol of hopeless, irrational, depraved, decadent, inhuman man or may be implying that Dalit has the power to save the dignity of his existence.

Bama regrets that they never had anything recreational to spend their free time, all they did was to keep repeating their monotonous activities. Among these dull daily task, Bama enlists a performance of married life by these children. They pick a special situation of a drunk husband returning home and beating up his wife. However, he is not spared for his act as police come and beat him up. This brings out the hidden reality of a helpless Dalit woman. The statement symbolically speaks of her a dependent housewife. The Dalit men tortures his wife the same way as he is in the web of power relations.

Bama further elucidated the never ending poignancy of the life of a Dalit woman. They fight the toughest battles, the battles of seclusion with-in their own caste also. The lower caste grown up girls are not allowed to play on the streets. It is doubly hard for them to set free from the orthodox, valueless standards and imprisonment of isolation because of the fear of the society. Their economic condition do not permit them to immerse themselves in the sanctioned pastimes of a girl however, like the grandmother understanding the left-over to be the nectar of the gods, lower caste strictly adhere to the restrictions of the upper caste patriarchy.

This also reveals that Bama is not only speaking from the base of authority. Her licence to comment comes from the lived reality. Bama presents a range of incidents to compare the boundaries of the two genders of their community, where the boys are free to run and laugh, the girls of her society make themselves content with the gossips at the water taps.

She writes about Uudan, one of her community member beating his wife daily near the community hall like an animal, "... as if she were an animal ..." (61). As discussed

Bama has abundantly used the animal images to bring out the Dalit experience, nonetheless, this incident of Uudan treating his wife equal to an animal dismantles the theory of Dalit community existing as a whole. Uudan never wanted to marry this woman who is his wife now, he was forced to do so by her father and uncles. Bama through Uudan presents the stark reality of diversity. Uudan could play flute very well and he also enrolls himself in a school at an elderly age. Ironically, in doing so he is satirised by his own wife.

There is another incident where a man named Pavulu used to sing well. He and his son used to perform, dance and earn money with a women's troupe. The two instances create a space for multi-sensory experiences and also show that homogenizing women and forcing them to strictly hold to the doctrines of being a conventional feminist can be a self-defeating task. This can also be seen in relation to Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*.

The novel is a story of an Indian middle-class woman, Jaya. She is an educated wife. As the novel opens we find Jaya analysing her life. This life has chained her into the patriarchal ordained roles of a wife and mother. She has spent her life fulfilling the wants and needs of her husband. One sudden day, Jaya starts feeling curbed by these roles and finally comes out of the confines of patriarchy finding a self existing in opposition to the roles of wife and mother. She affirms that she will not let this self be wounded, however, she does not leave her prescribed duties. She could never gather the courage to see life outside the structure of marriage, even when she decodes her individuality.

This is something that Bama negates in the picturisation of Uudan's wife rebuking him and women troupe performing with a man to earn money. The entire point of feminism, she argues is for a woman to be free, to be who she is and who she wants to be, thereby, also differentiating between women's and feminist writings.

M.K. Gandhi in "Ethical Religion" gives details about the laws of ethics. He says that whether one follows a religion or not, one has to adhere to the laws of ethics to be

good to himself and others. He also questions the features of ethics. He says that ethics help an individual to act in accordance to right and wrong. This right and wrong can be understood through the co-existence of the present existing self and what it ideally should be.

Bama shows how even the religious authorities fail to achieve this. The entire village after the festivities of *Pusai*, goes to the priest of the church with big offerings. However, these people return dejected at the merciless behaviour of the priest who does not share anything from the offerings. He just makes a mark on their forehead. They also have to give offerings to the Mother Superior. She is equally revered by the people of Bama's community. Nevertheless, she not only imitates the priest but also rebukes them for not bringing bags to carry the gifts. The disheartened people are shown to discuss these insults. Communication among people is necessary to strengthen a society. Bama also understands the truth of the Dalit's depravity.

Bama secures a good score in the public examination of eleventh year. But her parents do not want her to study further because of two reasons. One is the financial crunch and the second reason is that it is hard to find a match for an educated girl in their community. Ironically, we see in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* that the middle-class woman Sujata is made to study to get a good groom. However, education plays an important role in unchaining Sujata from the bondages. Bama starkly highlights the difference between the two women. Yet, it is not wrong to say that whether education or no education, both are the ways of patriarchy to chain women.

However, Bama is sure to study further.

Noor Zaheer in *My God is a Woman* brings out the invaluable role of education in women's liberty. Safia is a Muslim girl who is always kept secluded in the veil of *pardah*. However, admission in Allahabad University channelizes the hidden store of

Safia's energies. The courageous spirit of individuality chained by the *purdah* gets a chance to breathe and do wonders through education. She comes across various opportunities to further strengthen her mind, for instance she attends many seminars on progressive and women writers. However, like Bama, she also faces hard struggles in the form of people like Sadaqat Rehmani who are strict believers of women inferior. He is sure that even education can not uplift women as they lack the natural capability of understanding. However, Safai dismisses such false claims by making him aware of different achievements that women are claiming. Education not only helps her to understand the true meaning of equality and liberty but also helps her attain it.

Once enrolled in the Allahabad University, Safai never looks back. She not only refuses to submit to patriarchal dominations but also throw away the deep rooted patriarchal norms.

Bama also has the full realisation of the potential of education, though she states the problems her parents had to face sending her to the college. After finishing her public examinations she along with her mother once goes to meet the nun who taught her. The nun on the onset, expresses her concern and sympathies on the financial crunch of Bama's parents but then instead of helping them, asks her mother to sell her earrings for Bama's education.

The nun becomes the face of the same upper caste people who try to subjugate Bama and her community. Even on being refused to study further by her parents, she fights for her right. She does not have the right social accessories for the college, yet Bama is not embarrassed at any point in time. She confidently takes admission in the college and walks to the class in her ragged clothes.

Bama has the discerning consciousness of born equal. This societal knowledge or rather the understanding of the grim reality of the anti-woman society, along with her

will power, helps her act like a karukku and she releases herself from the roasting enclosures of patriarchy. Bama faces horrible experiences of depravity. She being teased by the upper-caste because of her tattered clothes and satirised for not having a silk sari for the College Day yet. she successfully completes her B.Ed. and takes a sharp step to cut through the hardships and subjugation.

Bama exposes the sham of the nun convent. The nun convents are understood to be the recluse of everyone who is deprived according to the 'normative' codes of wealth, caste, gender. But on entering the convent Bama gets to see a completely different reality. She sees that, instead of practicing equality between different classes and castes, the authorities are just concerned about the children of the wealthy people. The church, that has been asking for big offerings all over these years from the poor people of Bama's community, is flowing with all kinds of luxuries.

Bama feels cheated in two ways; one because her people have been fooled since years and second, the convent does not fulfil the promise of taking care of deprived people and children. Like the Brahmin codes, the church also applies the Christian ethics on the untouchables. In midst of this chaos, Bama describes a young girl who is conscious of this suppressed state. The girl chooses to be exploited at her home rather here in the convent, that is, she opts for the conventional ways that subjugate women. She knows where she comes from and what is expected out of her. Bama is wonderful expressing these falsities present in the garbs of religion. By doing so she highlights a common face lurking behind every religion.

Noor Zaher in *My God is a Woman* talks about the repercussions of the *pardah* system working in Islam- the Muslim religion.

In a Muslim society women have always been kept in *pardah* believing that it is a protection against the unwanted attention from unknown men thereby keeping them

safe from sexual harassment. However, the irony is that this *pardah* between men and women gradually becomes a device to segregate them and ensure the continuation of the subordinated role assigned to women as it confines the entire world of women to *aangan* or courtyard. In the guise of protecting women from the dangers of the outside world, the *pardah* serves as a cover to prevent the light of enlightenment and learning from entering into their mind. It secludes women from the experience which is derived through the exposure to the outside world.

The reality of the convent takes Bama to a nostalgic travelogue. Travel is departure from one place to another, going from place to place. It is a movement from one space to a new one and in the process of going from one place to another Bama charts huge gaps between what she has seen and what was taught to her by the Church. She remembers coming consistently first in the test of Christian scriptures. On one such occasion, the priest gave her a five paisa coin and Bama was overwhelmed to the limit of heaven. She wanted to show the coin as the symbol of some big achievement. Her trip is a measurement of ideological spatial dialogue. Ironically, the same prejudices have been voiced by William Blake.

William Blake wrote "The Little Black Boy" (1787) when the Christian missionaries started to teach their gospels to the blacks. The poem is an effort to free the country from racial prejudices. The innocent black boy is a victim of society's racial discrimination. The black child sits underneath a tree with his mother who gives him hope of being loved by both the God and the white boy one day. Blake in the poem attacks the institutionalized Christianity, those Christian missionaries who try to justify their own cruelties based on racial discrimination by defining them as a form of love inflicted upon poor black people by the God (69-70).

Blake in an another poem “The Lamb” talks about how Christianity is an all-embracing force in this world giving hope, leading to joy, protecting the children against viciousness. Yet, the lamb is vulnerable and can be easily devoured by lion, symbolised by the priest of the churches (64).

Such stories are also weaved to Bama and her people. If they dare to do anything against the dictates of the church preached by the nuns and the priests there, then the Devil will enlist their name and show it to the God. These false tails have strongly chained the people of her community in fear. In order to avoid entering into the bad books of the Devil, they can do everything, good and demeaning told by the sisters and the priest. In the name of the God, the nuns and the priest unleashes physical abuses also. If anyone dares to commit any mistake, he ends up getting being knocked by the church authorities. Bama, is once knocked very hard on the forehead for forgetting a line of the prayer. It is a custom being slapped by the priest on the day of confirmation service. Bama now laughs recollecting such events. Thus one can say this trip or nostalgic travel is a kind of metaphorical journey with a symbolic significance that defines the writer’s view and relationship to the existing and the new spaces.

The will to knowledge is at times tied up with the will to power. Bama clearly reads the nuns’ and the priests’ exploitation of the knowledge of the caste discrimination as a necessary constituent for subjugation. They fill each moment of the lower caste life with their preaching and activities. Morning prayers, the way to eat, what to say, how to sleep, the right books to read, everything is monitored in the life of the lower-caste people, “Everything became a matter of routine drudgery” (102). But deception could not work on Bama for a long time. Every lack paves a way of hope and Bama questions the lack of a direct communication channel with the God. She realises that the God can be met through

inner peace and nature. This realisation fails the teachings of the nuns and the priests and for a brief period she gives away the desire to be a nun.

Bama has already explained the important role of education in the life of the Dalit women, but this very education coming from the authority is revealed to be flawed. Bama joins a boarding school which works for destitute children, however, she soon comes across the fact that instead of knowing about the world, the Dalit children get to learn about their lacks. They are taught that the Dalit-self can never overcome these lacks.

Mills and Gale in “Researching Social Inequalities in Education: Towards a Bourdieuan Methodology” give a detail explanation of the same. They say that education is a repertoire of comprehending life. However, the values that this repertoire contains are announced by one particular class. By class, they mean a group propounding a particular set of ideas. Bama overcomes such education by understanding the importance of lived and floating experiences.

Bama starts reading the scriptures carefully. They give her the understanding of a loving God, who never oppresses rather cares for the oppressed. She realises that they have been listening to a false God, created by the priest and nuns who are selfish, materialistic, corrupt, pessimistic, and restrict the desires of the poor. The noble God advocates selflessness, humanitarian spirit, meekness, kindness, innocence and tenderness.

Stuck in the world of hatred, Bama begins reading various women writers. She understands that progression can be achieved only by inculcating the values of kindness, imagination, humanitarian love and passion. These values give you strength to fight against every kind of oppression. They give you the awareness required to defeat the false reasoning of the nuns and the priests, and strength to forge a new world of self respect.

Bama’s condition also summons Derek Walcott’s “Names” and “The Sea is History”. In the first poem, he rebukes the colonised for being indifferent in recording their

history and then in the second, ironically questions and reprimand the coloniser for taking advantage of this inexperience (108-9, 111-3). The convent authorities did the same with Bama's community. Bama emerges into the symbol of the purging rage of the Christ by breaking the chain of thoughts imposed by the convent authorities to forge a meaningful humanitarian world.

The tribulations are not only limited to the world of convent. Bama finally leaves the convent, and enters into a new world. This world is different from the earlier two, the world of her divided streets and the world of the high-caste convent. Nonetheless, the difference is only in the terms of new geography. Bama gets a call for an interview and she answers it. This is a call from a school by high-caste Nadars. In this expensive world, they offer her four hundred rupees leaving Bama with no other option but to leave the job. She discovers the other practiced ways of secluding her community. Being a woman she faces other problems also, if in her world women are subjugated by the household work, in this, "... all sorts of men gather around her ..." (119).

This world makes Bama understand the importance of will and physical strength. No one to depend on, Bama has to handle everything on her own.

After Bama becomes a nun, the Provincial troubles her a lot. She is forced to transfer from one place to another. And where ever she goes, she faces her old enemy, discrimination. If one place is not ready to accept her as a teacher because of her caste, the second is not ready to talk to her because of the same reason. Finally, she decides to run away forever. However, it is not an escape but a beginning of "... a life that is useful to society" (131).

Bama finally asserts the importance of both love and experience. One should have the experience and reasoning to be aware of the evil and corrupt forces enclosing the selves but there should also be a heart which can stand for everyone, appreciating the truth

of individuality. Bama "... stands firm with a fierce anger that wants to break down everything that obstructs the creation of an equal and just society..." (138). A Dalit woman on her own will, understanding and strength, is sure to fulfil her resolution.

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