

Breaking the Boundaries of Timeframe: A Narratological Appraisal of Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*

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Abstract

Storytelling is an art that keeps in mind the interest of the audience. So to keep them engaged, the storytellers, calculatedly make significant changes in the linearity of the plot of their narrative. This disruption in the temporal order of the narrative is an interesting aspect of the study of narrative devices employed in novels. The study becomes more worthwhile when it is based on a retelling of one of the grandest narratives in literature – the *Mahabharata*. The paper attempts to make an appraisal of narrative time in the novel *Yajnaseni*. The study is concerned with the unusual narrative structure in terms of time of narration employed in the novel. Many theorists such as Genette, MiekeBal and Ricoeur have proposed a scientific application of time in narratives. The concepts introduced by them have been used here as a framework to explore the mode of presentation of time in *Yajnaseni*.

Keywords:: timeframe; temporality; narrative; linearity; chronology;*Yajnaseni*

Introduction

Writers are often able to foresee the extent of influence their works are bound to have on their readers. Further, if they have based their work on something that has been reworked in millions of ways in different languages, they experience enormous pressure to have their version distinguished from all the available retellings. This leads them to deliberately manipulate the *fabula* to suit their intent. This can be done by consciously altering the form and narrative devices from the base plot they draw their material from. All this is done because the perspective put forth in the text is important for the reception it gets from the readers. These preliminary observations set the context for this study.

All stories are set in a certain timeframe, which is revealed as part of the setting, right at the beginning. The study of the timeframe of any narrative is important because all narratives are unique in terms of their 'temporality'. This is a technical device used to produce a suitable response from the readers. Temporality is achieved through "deviations in sequential ordering" in seemingly chronological narrative (Bal, 99). Bal examines these deviations and points out:

Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention, it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides (Bal, 99-100).

Some of these deviations in temporality form the basis of the study taken up here. The text chosen for study is *Yajnaseni*, an Oriya novel by Pratibha Ray, translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya. This fictionalized retelling of the *Mahabharata* has been written from the perspective of the mythological heroine, Draupadi. In her unique style and language, interspersed with philosophies on life, Ray attempts to delve deep into the psychological plane of the protagonist. The novel is one of the many retellings of the epic in different languages, set in different regions of the vast Indian Subcontinent. These retellings try to decipher what else might have taken place apart from what has been stated in the complex bulk of narratives that form the epic. There are innumerable such openings in the structure of the epic that can be explored and developed further in the imaginings of each of these revisions.

Analysis of the Time frame in *Yajnaseni*

Ray chose Draupadi as the protagonist of this novel in spite of her belonging to the epic time period, because she “has a dialogic consciousness that breaks the barriers of epic time. Her narration achieves a unique novelistic contemporaneity” (Rath, 18). In the Afterword to her novel Ray further clarifies: “Draupadi is a challenge to womanhood, the embodied form of action, devotion, and power” (400). There are innumerable things left unsaid even in the gigantic narrative of the *Mahabharata*, regarding this woman who is projected as the direct cause of the war and the consequent ruin of the clan. Hence some of the revisionist fiction on the epic, including *Yajnaseni*, revolve around her and justify her decisions, glorify her sacrifices and in general make her a persona acceptable and relatable to the contemporary society. She also has a unique place in mythology right from her nubile birth out of fire of a *yajna* to that of being the common wife of the five great Pandavas and also the dazzling princess whom every prince coveted during her *swayamvara*. Though being instrumental in bringing about many big changes in the lives of her husbands and that of others through the war, she has not won the recognition that she deserved. In *Yajnaseni* her character and motivations have been explored thoroughly so that the voice of this heroine of the *AdiParva* comes out like a contemporary woman.

The uniqueness of this novel lies in the way Ray manipulates time, stretches it, and condenses it to create a discourse structure entirely different from the epic that she has based the novel on. This analytical approach to narrative time in the novel is an insightful way to understand the overall impact it produces on the readers and how it stands apart from the other revisionist versions. Just as Faulkner begins his short story *A Rose for Emily* with the funeral of the protagonist and then goes into analepsis mode to reveal her past, Pratibha Ray begins with the final part of Draupadi's life as she awaits death on the mount Meru. In the end lies the beginning. Probably that was the reason for her to begin the novel at the end. “*Finis*”, your dear *Sakhi*” says an exhausted Draupadi, as the concluding remarks of the long letter she claims to be writing with her own blood to her beloved benefactor Krishna in this epistolary novel (Ray, 1). Ray experiences and conveys the depth of agony Draupadi must have felt when she had to stand helpless at many points in her life with so much of callous injustice towards her. The letter reveals all that pain in her interior monologue in it.

In the throes of death even as she is about to lose her consciousness, she tries to assess the events in her life in flashback mode attempting to answer many of the questions her life

raises: "But after writing finis it seems as though I have not been able to write anything at all. The long-drawn tale of life brimming with tears and laughter lies fluttering like a blank scroll on the breast of inexorable Time" (Ray, 1). The letter itself draws attention to the fluidity of time just as the narrative makes smooth transitions from past to present and vice versa. The pages of the book form the space for assessing the events of Draupadi's life even as the narrator attempts the same in her letter. It also explores the temporality of life and the concept of time as eternal, without any beginning or end:

Therefore in this insignificant letter what final word will I be able to set down? Even after relating everything of life the last word is invariably left unsaid. After all has ended, the auspicious beginning remains. Beginning of what, and whose end? That which is creation is annihilation. Inauguration is itself dissolution – that is mighty Time, eternal and infinite (Ray, 1).

The treatment of time, or the temporality of the narrative is of importance here, as it determines the mechanisms in the plot that differs from the usual plot structure of the epic. While in original epic that serves as a template for many of the revised versions, the great battle of eighteen days is of central import. That war was the ultimate climax of the whole epic and what comes after that is of not much consequence or interest. Hence the epic battle is described elaborately, with even the preparations for it described minutely. In contrast, Ray gives little importance to this war and so the amount of time dedicated to its depiction in the novel is also limited. The turbulence in the minds of the protagonist and her close ones are the focus of the novel rather than the physical warfare in Kurukshetra. In one such reference to eternal Time she says: "Time was invincible, infinite. Eighteen days were so insignificant in it, so ordinary. Like the blinking of an eye, how swiftly was the horror of the eighteen – day war swept away in the current of time!" (Ray, 371)

The story time starts at a point where Draupadi followed her husbands to ascend Mount Meru towards heaven, when she slips and falls. As she remains motionless on the ground, the others walk away callously. This generates a quick flash back to the past, with no specific point of reference, when she had dedicated her entire life to the welfare of her husbands. Now it is revealed that those who walked away were her husbands. In this way the narrator takes time to expose one after another, details of her identity. It is only at the end of the first chapter that the narrator's identity is completely revealed.

From this moment of Draupadi's fall on Mount Meru, there is a leap back in a long-drawn *analepsis*, starting from her strange birth during the *Dwaparayuga* when the Kurus and Panchals ruled over their kingdoms. The narrator's earliest recollection of her life is that of her birth from fire along with her brother. In stating the reason for her birth from fire, the narrator summarizes the friendship and rivalry between her father and Drona, the great master of Archery. Though there are innumerable such side plot like the story of Drona, Ray makes aesthetic choices in her attempt to highlight Draupadi's perspective. Here too, the incident gets stated because of its connection to her birth from fire. The movement of discourse time here varies from very slow to very quick. In a website of the University of Hamburg on the topic of narrative time Landa explains:

Narratives move forward, in an indexical way which signals the passage of time. But this is only the general rule, and they may suddenly jump back, against the direction of temporal progression. They may also jump forward, interrupting their normal pace, or move in a variety of speeds in one direction or another, compressing or expanding the narrated time (2005).

This fluidity of time has been captured very well by Ray in this novel, where the narratives paces forward in a variety of ways. The birth of the narrator being of great importance, has been dealt with in an elaborate manner. Ray has used the concepts of 'stretch' and 'pause' as proposed by Genette in his *Narrative Discourse*, to draw attention to the appearance and beauty of the protagonist - "Even tree leaves were stilled for some moments. The fire flared silent, flickering. Perhaps mighty Time stood still at that moment" (Ray, 7).

This is in contrast to the traditional narrative of the epic where the narrator is in no hurry to unfold the turns and twists of the story, rather narrates in a slow pace with descriptions and digressions. In Ray's tale the focus is on Draupadi alone, consequently the events that have direct concern with her life get treated in detail, in contrast to those that have little bearing on her. Retellings like this one are interested in the individuality of their respective homodiegetic narrators. Ray makes her protagonist unique in several ways, one of which was the prophecy at the time of her birth that said that she was to avenge the insult of her father and preserve dharma on the earth.

The eighteen books of the *Mahabharata* have been compressed into this epistolary novel with a single perspective. This inevitably led to the shifting of focus from the central events to those that gain importance for the perspective presented here. The life of Krishnaa is shown to be an extension of the divine being Krishna, as the narrator harps on their sublime relationship time and again. This being of central importance to the narrator and his role in saving her from being assaulted in the Kuru Assembly, their relationship has been treated elaborately right from the beginning till the end. The narrator mentions being woken by her pet blackbird Nilmani reciting the name 'Krishna! Krishna!' many times over. She is annoyed by this repetition by the bird and chastises it. She blushes on hearing that the lord of her heart Krishna is in the guest-chamber. There is very slight progress in the story here with many descriptions. This incident is similar to many others where Ray treats her devotion to Krishna in depth in the form of 'scenes' and 'pauses' as Genette calls them.

A large sequence of events of the growing up years of the narrator has been quickly summed up to reach the point of her *swayamvar*. So the narrative jumps from the event of her birth from fire to the result of her *swayamvar*. She knew from the beginning that the greatest archer of the whole nation would win her in the contest. This reference to later events in the narrative has been termed prolepsis by Genette. Soon after this Krishna provides an analepsis going long back to the ancestors of both Arjun and himself. As quickly as the story jumps forward to anticipate the wedding of Arjun and Draupadi when Krishna mentions that Arjun would be the right one to win the hand of Draupadi in the *swayamvar*.

The elaborate arrangement for the *swayamvar* is described in many pages. First about the impossible task set for the archery contest so that none other than the finest of Archers could win, then about the pageantry and pomp throughout the kingdom. There is no forward movement of the plot. Hence this can be considered a pause.

"After all, if I had no role in what had already occurred and what was going to occur, where was the cause for anxiety?" (Ray, 34), asks Draupadi when she heard of the dreadful fate of the Pandavas burnt to ashes in the forest with their mother. Most of the actions in the narrative are summarized in the dialogues of the characters even as there are elaborate descriptions of the setting for the *swayamvar* even up to the seating arrangements, the festivities, and the turbulence in the mind of the narrator with her eyes brimming with tears thinking of the fate of the Pandavas. "The sixteenth day of celebration" (Ray, 35) – it took this long for the contest

to begin. Even minute details have been noted here as when her astounding beauty was on display, a swarm of bees came over to form a veil to protect her from lustful eyes- "only they could feel how painful it was for a woman to have her beauty on display in an assembly hall" (Ray, 39).

A slow description of the contest and its effects on the audience and herself, the arrival of Karna causes some amusement. Here too long passages are describing his appearance and actions, then the question of his birth and parentage, the sadness in his eyes –"this picture of crestfallen Karna filled my heart with compassion and sympathy" (Ray, 43). She reasons in her mind that after Karna's insult, it will be her turn to be insulted. The narrative switches to the arrival of Arjun dressed a Brahmin youth along with descriptions of the youth and the protests by the onlookers. As her wedded life begins she hopes to lead a harmonious life with this youth whom she considers her Arjun. "But was there any life free from conflict? And then my life, the life of one born of the spark created by the friction of wood and fire – how could that be complete without conflict?" (Ray, 47)

The long walk through the forest to their home helps the couple to get to know and complement each other. In this long scene, the husband and wife discuss the predicament he and his brothers underwent. Draupadi now takes note of the four brothers of the mendicant Brahmin. She does not, however, notice the striking similarity between them and the well-known Pandavas. She pauses to describe their features and appearance. With their mother's command to marry Draupadi, all the brothers are forced to obey her command to retain their dharma. As the brothers and mother discuss this matter in this scene, Draupadi's mind is wallowing in anguish and tumult. She had every reason to rebel and stand for herself, but she put it aside again for the sake of dharma. This part of the narrative is significant for the explaining the circumstances for her polygamous marriage to five brothers. Ray gives it the treatment it deserves by presenting the dialogue between the brothers and the conscious thoughts of Draupadi simultaneously.

The responsibility of deciding in this regard falls on Draupadi as the elders kept shifting the responsibility to each other. Later generations "would call fallen women having many men, "Draupadis of this era", making me the butt of scorn. What would they understand of the situation in which Panchali became the wife of five men?" (Ray, 60)

After long rounds of discussion even in the presence of Krishna, Draupadi finally decided to marry all the five brothers. "All events of my life were similarly dramatic. From that

day till the last instant of my life, I would have to appear in five roles" (Ray, 63). In a simile, Vyasa compares Draupadi to the thread that holds together the flowers in a flower – garland meant for the deity: "I became the subtle thread for keeping the five brothers bound together, whom no one could see; whose pain and anguish no one would know; word of whose torment would reach none" (Ray, 68).

Most of this section consists of resolving a dilemma. Hence the story doesn't move forward quickly because here everyone's opinion in this regard is gathered, while there is a terrible conflict in the mind of Draupadi and gets resolved by the interference of Vyasa. This point of the story resolves the dilemma in the mind of the protagonist and so has been treated in detail, though it slackened the pace of the narrative

Time has also been dedicated to make Draupadi accept her unique position in her own culture and console herself by comparing her fate to those of women who had a similar fate. She begins an analepsis of all the great women in history who suffered like her - Sita, Savitri, Amba, etc. Coming to the fate of Ambika and Ambalika begetting sons by other men because their husbands died early and childless, she thinks that the mockery these women had faced was much greater compared to her fate. Her conflict was resolved when everyone agreed to the condition that she would be the wife of one Pandava for a year.

There comes an invitation to the Pandavas to return to Hasinapur. Again a foreboding thought enters her mind: "How did I know that as the flag of my good fortune was flying triumphantly, unseen fate was silently laughing...Had I not returned to Hastinapur, so grievous and shameful a drama would never have been enacted with my life" (Ray, 105). Here there is a stretch and a pause together because the incident of the arrival and grand welcome accorded to the Pandavas and their newly married wife is elaborately described while interspersing the thoughts that arise in the narrator's mind at that time. She remembers thinking sadly and feeling empathetic to the charioteer's son, Karna. Maya recalls the incident of Karna's insult at her Swayamvar, Draupadi felt sad for him. "My heart melted with sympathy for this cursed hero. A shadow of sadness darkened his face" (Ray, 109). This part turns out to be a pause where the importance of empathy is outlined. Prathibha Ray uses many such pauses where the narrator not only describes the setting but also philosophizes about many matters. A discussion follows on the kind of men women like to dwell upon or have in their life. It proceeds to the description of a minor incident: the way Karna threw a bouquet of roses at

Krishna's feet and the thorns making her feet bleed. She felt as if he was giving vent to his agony when he was insulted at the swayamvar. The novel dwells on such minor incidents rather than astounding incidents to make this a psychological novel.

There are many instances of ellipses so that many major incidents are just touched upon and elaborate on those that highlight a certain slant of the story. The point that is given importance in the description of the welcome accorded to the Pandavas and Draupadi was to show Karna's reaction, not the one hundred Kaurava brothers or the five Pandavas. Once the narrator completed mentioning the part concerning Karna she leaves out the rest as ellipsis.

It is noteworthy that Ray chose to elucidate in detail the intricate design and architecture of the palace at Indraprastha. Interspersed with this description she makes connections between different parts of the story. She connects her insult by Karna with the analeptic account by Maya about the competition to decide the greatest warrior among the princes. Even while they used to be taught by Guru Drona, Karna faced neglect while attention was showered on Arjun. So now he felt this was the moment of vindication. Thus the story goes back in order from the Pandavas arrival in Hastinapur to the construction of the palace. The planning for the festivities while the narrator gets stuck with the thought of why they needed to invite Karna and back to when she visited Karna's home and further back to the competition among the princes, while nothing more is said about what happened at Hastinapur or what were the arrangements for the festivities. Again there is a pause to explain the role of Krishna as an empathetic friend in her life, his suggestion that they have a picnic, and a description of the forest.

In *Yajnaseni*, Pratibha Ray chooses to elaborate on the heartaches and passions of Draupadi. So she indulges in self-inflicted sorrows when she waits for the long twelve years of Arjun's exile to end. The period of twelve years has been dealt with in a detailed manner with much effort to fill in about her feelings for Arjun. There is another scene in which Draupadi is saved by Karna from drowning in a river when she was sporting with her friends. There are many dialogues in this scene when she is insulted by Karna and Dussasan. Later the narrator tells us that eleven years of Arjun's exile have ended now and that he has reached Dwaraka where he would stay for another year before returning to Indraprastha. Meanwhile, Sakha Krishna has reached Indraprastha and was resting on Arjun's bed. Enchanted Draupadi saw Krishna as Arjun on the bed and kept standing in front of his bedroom the whole night. This has been summarily mentioned by Krishna. Krishna also hints at the forthcoming marriage

between Arjun and his sister Subhadra, by telling Draupadi that he is going to gift her a friend who will help in reducing the burden of her household chores.

Months and years go by without any mention of incidents while all her five children are born. The next incident looked upon is the arrangements for the *RajasuyaYajna*. The preliminary arrangements are summarized while the discussion among the participants is presented as a scene. Later what happens during the *yajna* and the beheading of Sisupal is presented as a discourse summarized.

The prophetic words of Vyasa, "Many inauspicious events might occur in the coming thirteen years" (Ray, 226) fill everyone's minds with anxiety. The discussion about the children of the Pandavas is presented as a stretch. A great disaster was about to happen – the invitation to play the game of dice at Hastinapur which Yudhistir finds irresistible. In the next scene, we come to know that Draupadi is in the inner apartments of Hastinapur and the game of dice is progressing in the assembly hall. Her mind was anxious to know the result of the game, whereas Maya makes many explicit comments on many of the unpleasant happenings soon to come. After this, there is a very short summary of the way Karna lost his golden armour and earrings by donating them to Arjun's father, Indra.

In Yajnaseni, Draupadi points out that she is indebted to Karna for saving her life. Her heart is weighed down with the burden of debt. In return, she gets a chance to save Karna's life when she was in the Kamyak forest with her husbands during their exile. Duryodhan had come to the forest to tease Pandavas and show off his wealth. Karna had been wandering along the lake when he was bitten by a poisonous snake. When she gets the news of someone lying unconscious, she rushes to help him. With her powers, she summons the snake and makes it retract all the poison injected in the body of Karna and thus saves his life. Thus her debt is repaid.

Arjun's *swargarohan* or his stay in swarg (heaven) in Indraloka learning dance and music is dealt with as if it was very natural for a person to stay in heaven for some days and then return to this world. All those years of exile are described in a very elaborate manner. At many places, the discussion among the characters is presented as scenes that have the same discourse time and storytime. The narrator compares the eighteen-day war to a wave in this metaphor. "The eighteen – day current of the time – ocean obliterated everything. Everything

11

was destroyed. In the ocean of great Time, a small wave, the battle of Kurukshetra, rose and disappeared. The war was over" (Ray, 371). The battle is not described minutely as in other versions. It is only the deaths of those that mattered to the narrator, such as, Abhimanyu, Karna, Dristadyumna, and her five sons find mention here.

The unbearable loss of her kin combined with her own sense of feeling worthless makes her life difficult to endure. Her life after their return to power in Hastinapur has been dealt summarily in the novel. The narrative comes full circle in the end when the narrator again refers to the fact that this is a letter that she wrote to her beloved Krishna. Coming to the end of this letter she declares that there is no ending, because at the end everything starts all over again. Time being the only eternal constant.

Conclusion

In the plethora of retellings of the Mahabharata from a variety of media available now, the same events get re-presented from various angles, allowing for innumerable possibilities to emerge. In a similar vein, the study of these specimen have also ranged over a wide spectrum applying all the literary theories in vogue. In this scenario, making another relevant study on the literature on the epic is like distinguishing a drop in the ocean. Still, an attempt has been made here to analyze the impact the mechanics of time in the narrative has on its effort to break the traditional structure of the epic. Ray has made significant changes in the plot structure and character construction to give them the psychological depth she wanted them to have. Her motive was to represent and comprehend the mind of Draupadi from a deeper level than has been attempted so far. "Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, devotion and power", Ray reasons in her 'Afterword', that made her choose her as her protagonist. By giving up the aura surrounding her, demystifying her characters, Ray is able to naturalize the presentation of the epic as a novel that appeals to her modern readers too. The treatment of time in the novel played a significant role, as is evident in the study, in helping her achieve this.

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