

## **Myths across Culture: Portrayal of Women**



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### **Abstract**

This paper falls into the criteria of feminist revisionist mythology which aims to interpret the way women are looked upon and represented in Eastern (Indian) and Western (Greek) tradition through the myths and epics. Using feminist perspectives from the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett and anthropological and cultural framework of Structuralism from Claude Lévi-Strauss, I have analyzed the portrayal of the female characters in the epics *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* which come from two very distinctive cultural and literary traditions. The first portion of the dissertation gives close readings of the epics in order to explore the lives and roles of women. The second portion studies epics and myths as bearer of strong cultural practice and influence. The findings are manifold and different than expected. Strong dynamism can be seen in the female characters other than objectification and subjugation.

## Introduction

And I a smiling woman/ I am only thirty/ And like the cat I have nine times to die  
Sylvia Plath

Inspired by the biblical story of Lazarus, Sylvia Plath wrote the poem “Lady Lazarus” giving it a new feminist dimension known as feminist revisionist mythology<sup>1</sup>. My paper is inspired by this new thought of looking at existing myths from different perspective. In the introduction to the book *Myth and Meaning* Claude Lévi-Strauss, the cultural linguist said on the concept of myths that “[they] get thought in man unbeknownst to him” (Lévi-Strauss 1). With this Lévi-Strauss implied that, mythologies enable us to have a lateral approach to a particular observation related to cultural context. Lisa Tuttle, a feminist author has defined feminist theory as asking “new questions of old texts”. My paper takes its central premise from this idea of Lévi-Strauss and Tuttle’s notion on texts and meanings with an aim to re-read some of the well-read epics in Western and Eastern tradition with a view to reevaluate gender issues in them. I will explore how myths transmit culture and can work as strong catalyst to cultural understanding. In this paper I will discuss how myths can function as a methodology to study human behavior and culture and its role in feminist perspectives.

Kirk defined Myth as “a term used for stories regarding actions of Gods and humankind that later on becomes tradition” (as cited in Morford and Lenardon 3). J A Cuddon in his book *Dictionary of Literary Terms* explained the term myth as “a story involving supernatural beings and explaining how a particular thing came to exist” (408). Mythologies have always been interesting to its connection to the history. Myths have appeared as recurring theme in Literature across time. From Theban playwrights to Modern day writers- all have been inspired by the existing mythologies; from Sophocles to Euripides, Homer, to modernist playwright like Eugene

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<sup>1</sup> Feminist revisionist mythology reviews myths rooted in male perspective through the feminist lens (Mathew 150)

O’Neil, T. S. Eliot and Rick Riordan, they have all incorporated different myths in their works where myths become emblematic of universal human experience.

In this paper, I worked with *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* which represent two distinctive cultures; the Eastern and the Western. *The Mahabharata* is an Indian epic and also a religious manuscript for the people of Hindu religion. The second text of my thesis is Homer’s *Iliad* which is based on the famous Greek myth of “War of Troy”<sup>2</sup>. Both of them can be read and addressed from multiple perspectives, cultural reading and contemporary understanding. Narain in the article “Resurrecting the Mother in Mata Hidimba” has wrote that “*The Mahabharata* is famous for its closest mythological reflection of our own times and every possible human situation can be found in this text and also, it makes no attempt to idealize its characters and does not hide anybody's faults” (1680). Cuddon agrees with Narain on this thought, he also wrote that “Epics embody the history and aspiration of a nation which is why they are of national significance” (225). The incidents, rivalry, alliances and the ordeal of fate that were shown in *The Mahabharata* still exist in present times. The relationship of daughter in law and mother in law, the controlling power of a mother and a wife, in a son and husbands life are situations that still exist in modern times. The other reason for choosing these epics as primary texts is that they have strong female characters who act and respond independently in various incidents. Epics are said to portray history of the nation of a particular time or period, this is the reason why it holds a special position in literature.

While the story of *The Mahabharata* of fourth century BC persists of eighteen chapters, this thesis will closely look at the first ten chapters, from marriage of Goddess Ganga with King Shantanu till the end of the Kurukshetro war. I will juxtapose this epic with *Iliad* by Homer dated back to eighth century BC. *Iliad* is known to be the story of great war of Troy and the valour of

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<sup>2</sup> The ten year long war between Greeks and Trojans existed as a myth. Homer wrote *Iliad* by being inspired from it.

the warriors like Achilles, Agamemnon and Hector. While it is known for its glorification of war in the start, it ends with a lamentation over the loss of human life and spent forces. In this paper I have attempted a reading exceeding these ideas as I feel that heroic warfare and exhibition of masculinity has often foreshadowed the other aspects of the epic, the contesting gender relationships and role of women in the plot. The same can be argued about *The Mahabharata* too. The role of Goddesses (Hera, Aphrodite, Thetis and Ganga), Mothers (Thetis, Clytemnestra, Kunti and Gandhari), and Wives (Helen, Andromache, Hera, Gandhari and Draupadi) had greater impact than is generally acknowledged. Discussion will incorporate the Feminist theories from Simon De Beauvoir and Kate Millett. In the last chapter the theory of “Structuralism” will be incorporated to show how there is a similarity of the treatment towards women in them and how they also exhibit dynamism despite coming from different culture and region.

About the treatment of women in literature Simon de Beauvoir wrote in her book *The Second Sex* that, women in mythologies are “the elementary silence of truth” (143). She tried to point out that female characters have not been given the scope to speak in literature because they might expose the unpleasant truth of the society. So, these epics have issues to be explored. In these epics the portrayal of women is often traditional and they obliterate other aspects of feminine identity, like free will and individual desire. We can consider Gandhari and Kunti’s predicament regarding motherhood in *The Mahabharata* as an example. Having a male child and being the female parent to the heir is depicted as having a prize. These characters do not have any existence outside the tip of traditional role of motherhood, wife, daughter and being sexual prey.

However, there are moments in these epics when these characters seem to go past the traditional roles. For example, in *The Mahabharata*, it is seen that Amba is given a boon of



destroying the indestructible (Bhisma) by the celestial realm. Although this practice is not consistent and complete but the female characters are given power and authority to rule over the men at times. In both the epics the natural feminine qualities were used to belittle the female gender.

In this paper I will explore and compare the characterization of women in mythologies in light of *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad*. It can be said that generally female characters are treated like objects, placed at the periphery of the plot. For example, in *The Mahabharata*, the eagerness of Kunti, Madri and Gandhari to embrace motherhood is only to win the title of Rajmata, so in this case the traditional role of a mother is being projected as a prize. Motherhood was the only probable way for them to contribute to their families and country. Even in the Greek mythology we see that the character of a loving and caring mother and wife Clytemnestra has an opposite side of being a vindictive wife who takes revenge for her daughter's death. So, the women in mythologies are mostly portrayed as either positive but timid or as powerful but negative.

The method that I would use to close read and analyze both the text is "Feminist Methodology" and "Structuralism". The feminist criticism that is widely known today is the result of 1960's women's movement. This movement first recognized the importance of the images of women that were being promoted by the authors in literature. Later in the 1970's the major concerns of feminist movement was to show how cultural mind set maintained sexual inequality" (Barry 116-117). This paper too will look at the issue of male writers presenting female characters as Barry says. Sandra Harding in her book *Feminism and Methodology* says, "Feminist methodology or criticism focuses on three dimensions of women, the most important dimension being victims of male aggressiveness" (4). These perspectives will be used to reinterpret female characterization. Harding also said that "one of the distinct features of feminist

criticism is it generates its problems from women's experiences" (7). In my paper likewise I have chosen important experiences for women like marriage, motherhood, sexual relations, and role in the war and politics to evaluate their position.

Claude Lévi-Strauss on the other hand in "Structuralism" has said that "human minds have certain universal characteristics. Due to these common traits in human minds, they think in the similar pattern despite of their social and cultural background" (Kottak 70). This idea can help us better understand the issue of intertextuality.

My paper will be another addition in feminist revisionist mythology and show how myths can be used to define human action through the window of feminism.

## Chapter One: The Lives and Role of Women in *The Mahabharata*

This chapter will close read *The Mahabharata* and from the incidents that took place in the story I would try to reach to a conclusion about the behavior and treatment towards women in the Indian Mythologies. This epic is divided in total 18 *Parvas* or in English *Books*. For better understanding I would include English translations of the name of the *Parvas/Books*. The sub-chapters of the Parva/Books would be called Chapters. The number of the chapter will also be given with the name in the footnote. The English translation of name of the Books/ Parva's is taken from the website Wikipedia. I have translated the names of the chapters in English for better understanding. I will analyze some main issues that were present in the epic and determine from them whether they present empowerment or freedom of women or they covertly pretend to do that. Each issue is present in the heading and then it is analyzed in the body, then a conclusion is deducted from it.

### 1.1 Issues Regarding “Consent” to Marriage

While I was reading the epic, I felt that women in *The Mahabharata* were given respect and were positioned higher than I expected to be, example of that is Bhishma's discourse to Yudhishtira's question regarding behavior towards women and the position of a daughter in a family. When the Kuru Prince asked Bhishma to say something about women his reply was “the lineage is destroyed if the daughters and daughter in laws are upset due to the ill treatment of their family and daughters should be regarded the same as the son” (Anusasana parva 5046)<sup>3</sup>. From Bhishma's view regarding women, it could be assumed that in the ancient Indian society women's choices, decisions and emotions were given high priority and they were considered

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<sup>3</sup> Anusasana parva (The Book of Instructions) is the 13<sup>th</sup> Book of *The Mahabharata*. This book contains the question-answer between Bhishma and Yudhishtira about principles of life, Kingship and duty. This book also gives instructions about Artha and Dharma (Money and Religion).

equal of a male. But a question also arises from Bhishma's statement that if the position of women was so secured in the society then why it needs to be ordered and emphasized. The impression of this statement is that from an overt view it will be thought that the women were given the full freedom and respect in the society but originally their freedom was restricted and their position was also related to their father or male counterpart. The famous and grand self-choice ceremonies (Sayamvara) mentioned in the epic are the examples of restricted freedom. Self-choice ceremonies takes place so that the bride to be could choose her future husband but the females never get to choose their preferred partners throughout the course of the book. Two self choice ceremonies which has significant role in the first volume (Book 1: Adi Parva, The Book of the Beginning) is an example of it.

First ceremony was of the daughters of king of Kashi Amba, Ambika & Ambalika's and the second one was of the daughter of King of Panchala's, Draupadi. Both of these self-choice ceremonies decide the fate of the events in *The Mahabharata* in a larger view and also have importance in terms of feminist light and the question of consent. In the self-choice ceremony of the daughters of king of Kashi, Bhishma abducted all the sisters so that Vichitravirya could marry them. The noticeable fact here is that the sisters were not abducted by their future husband, Vichitravirya but his brother. Also whether they agreed to marry him or was forced to marry him is still unknown. Because despite of being Prince of Hastinapur, Vichitravirya was just a child, not matured enough to be a husband and fulfill the duties of a husband. Ambika and Ambalika were married to him because they were won by Bhishma and no other man would accept them due to that. The eldest sister Amba told Bhishma that she was betrothed to the King of Salya and she would have chosen him in the ceremony. Hearing this Bhishma sets her free but King of Salya refused to accept her. Because she was won by Bhishma which made her the property of Bhishma

and King of Salva could not accept a woman who was another person's property. Although Vichitravirya ultimately married and possessed Ambika and Ambalika, he did not have the same caliber as his brother or the other princes attending the ceremony but he still possessed the sisters because he was enforced upon them and won for him.

Another important self-choice ceremony was Draupadi's, the daughter of Panchala. Drupada was also known as Yajnasena, who "always cherished the desire of bestowing his daughter on Arjuna, the son third son of Pandu and Kunti, begotten by Kunti and Indra (the God of Sky), has accomplished skills in archery. But the King never spoke of it to anybody. And the margin to pass to marry Draupadi was the to gain the level of Arjuna in archery" (Book 1: Sayamvara Parva, 370)<sup>4</sup>. So even if the ceremony was called "self-choice", the mark or the target to be reached was set before by the King himself not by Draupadi. The first person to sting the arrow correctly was Karna. It proved that he was worthy of Draupadi but she refused to marry a person of the lower caste. This declaration of Draupadi disappointed Karna. Although he was originally the son of Kunti and Arka (the Sun God) but Kunti did not keep him with her. Because Kunti was unmarried when she bore Karna, she threw Karna into the water. Later on he was saved by the husband of Radha, of the Suta caste and named Vasusena, later known as Karna. Despite of being born in the same manner as the Pandava brothers Karna was treated inferiorly because Kunti never accepted him. This was one of the major reasons that Karna was always on the opposing side of the Pandava's. It is clear that caste was not the main issue for Draupadi's family because they did not refuse Karna, but an aim was already set by the King prior to the

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<sup>4</sup> Sayamvara Parva (Chapter of the Self- Choice ceremony). It is the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of the Beginning (Adi Parva). This chapter gives the description of the elaborate Self-choice ceremony. And how Arjuna & the Pandava Brothers won Draupadi.

ceremony. That aim was that his son in law has to possess great archery skills like Arjuna or it has to be Arjuna himself.

Another important point is apart from Karna, Arjuna was the only person successful to sting the bow but Draupadi was forced to marry all Pandava brothers together. She was not forced directly into marrying by physical violence but she was forced to marry them with the oath of family duty. When Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna were in a fix about Draupadi marrying the Pandava's, a story was told about how it was preordained in their previous birth. It was fixed that Draupadi would marry five parts of five gods who were the reincarnation in the "region of Man where salvation is ordained to be difficult of acquisition". In simpler words earth, this is a place for man where redemption is not easy to attain (Book1: Vaivahika Parva, 391)<sup>5</sup>. After hearing this story both of them agreed to marry Draupadi to the Pandavas and make her their common wife. Second point to be noticed is that in the entire conversation between Draupada and Yudhishtira on Draupadi's marriage, Draupadi's voice is not heard. There was no one who thought to take Draupadi's opinion about her marriage. Draupadi only agreed to marry the Pandava brothers because this was the only way she could marry Arjuna. He was the only person of the brothers whom she actually loved and wanted to marry. Even later chapters bear the predicament and marital struggle of Draupadi as she tries to reconcile her emotion and duty as a wife.

Even though there are self-choice ceremonies in the book but still the power of force and abduction was given a higher priority in *The Mahabharata*. During the self-choice ceremony of Amba, Ambika and Ambalika Bhisma said,

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<sup>5</sup> Vaivahika Parva (The Chapter of Marriage). This is the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Beginning (Adi Parva). This chapter accounts Draupadi's controversial marriage to the five Pandavas with details on their marriage ceremony.

“ Sages have said that, that wife is dearly to be prized who is taken away by force, after the slaughter of opponents, from amidst the concourse of princes and kings invited to a self-choice ceremony” (Book 1: Sambhava Parva 219)<sup>6</sup>.

This is giving the message that the woman who is abducted or taken by force and through the means of killing other opponents is the best form of possession expected from men. So, we see that the entire cultural idea of sayamvara as an emancipation of women’s consent is over rated. And this practice validates violence and killing. Similarly, Kate Millett’s book *Sexual Politics* has an entire chapter entitled “Force” where she shows that “Patriarchal society relies heavily on ‘force’ in order to establish male dominance” (23). This dialogue is an example that there are instances when males fail to dominate the opposite sex and that is when they rely on force or violation. Use of force in a patriarchal society is a strong patriarchal practice which ensures complete submission from women.

The supposed consent to marriage issue can be stretched in the case of Gandhari too. She presents another example of confinement to us. As Dyer in the chapter titled “Stereotyping” in his book *Gays and Films* wrote “because of stereotyping, people never look past the label and it narrows our mind, stopping thinking differently”. This is why the moment Bhishma heard about her blessing, he could not look pass the label of her being the provider of heirs and was immediately thought of as a suitable bride for Dhritarashtra. Vyasa wrote “Soon after Bhishma heard from the Brahmanas that Gandhari, the amiable daughter of Suvala, having worshipped Hara (Siva) had obtained from the deity the boon that she should have a century of sons. Bhishma, the grandfather of the Kurus, having heard this, sent messengers unto the king of

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<sup>6</sup> Sambhava Parva (The chapter of Possibilities) is the fifth chapter of Book 1. In this chapter, the birth story of Pandu & Dhritarashtra and their marriages are narrated.

Gandhara” (Book 1:Sambhava Parva 236)<sup>7</sup>. For Bhisma the only important matter was to secure the Kaurava dynasty and the best way to do that was to marry one of the Kaurava prince to Gandhari. Although later on because of the lineage, fame and manners, she was married off to Dhritarashtra, in the beginning Gandhari’s parents were not in favor of the marriage because of Dhritarashtra’s blindness. The point to notice is she was not once asked whether she wanted to marry Dhritarashtra, a blind person. When Gandhari knew about her prospective husband, she also chose to blindfold herself to show respect and empathy to her husband. It seemed very interesting to me while I was reading it. While searching for any covert reaction in Gandhari, I came across an article. In that article the writer opines that this action of blindfolding herself can be more than just devotion. Kahlon interprets this as a “silent but a strong protest in opposition to the power games and the forced marriage” (532). Gandhari’s blindfold pointed that the women could not have any opinion or desire of themselves. They had to place duty over desire. The covert choice of blindfold was a symbol of the injustice done upon her and the “rage because of that injustice” (7)<sup>8</sup>. So, despite being an intelligent and beautiful girl of a well known dynasty Gandhari was married off to a person who was inferior to her in terms of eye sight as well as wit. The example of her wit could be the suggestions she gave to Dhritarashtra about controlling their sons. Also she advised Duryadhana to give Panadas their share of the Kingdom and not to enter in a war with them. Because she was well aware that the result would not be in the Kauravas favor.

## 1.2 Sexual Liberty

The sexual freedom of the women is another issue that needs to be closely looked upon because they are repeated incidents in the epic. There were several examples which might lead us

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> The name of the article is “Mahabharata through the Eyes of Women”.



to the conclusion that there was no significant restriction on the women, in having polygamous relations and multiple sexual partners outside marriage even without marriage. The only thing that did matter was the “chastity” of the woman. They would remain chaste because the intercourse does not take place because of their personal needs but on the request of the saintly deity or in Satyavati’s case on the request of an ascetic Brahmin. It is written in *The Mahabharata* that “any connection between a man and a woman without lust or during the menstrual season is not wrong or forbidden” (Book: 1, Adivansavatarana Parva 130). So the how a woman could have polygamous relationships and still be considered as chaste is already clarification in the book. Another noteworthy detail is one of the prime condition to remain chaste woman has to beget a child after having any relationships. In both Satyavati and Kunti’s case, both of them beget a child so the condition of remaining chaste is fulfilled. The story of Krishna –Dwaipayana Vyasa’s birth in the Chapter of “Rise of the Original Seed” (Book 1: Adivansavatarana Parva 127),<sup>9</sup> Parasara saw beautiful Satyavati rowing the boat, he wanted her embrace but Satyavati was still unmarried and chaste. Thus she said to the great Rishi “by accepting your embraces my virginity will be sullied. And if my virginity is sullied, how could I return home?” (Book 1: Adivansavatarana Parva 127). After hearing all that she had said, the *Rishi* told her that she would remain a virgin even if she accepts his offer. Similar incident occurred in the story of Karna’s birth in the aforementioned mentioned parva or chapter. When Kunti in mere curiosity uttered the Mantra that was told to her by Durvasa and summoned Arka (The Sun God), she was not ready or in desire of a physical relation but Arka insisted. He told Kunti that since she had called him, she had to satisfy him. God Arka promised Kunti that, she

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<sup>9</sup> Book 1 is the Adi Parva (The Book of the Beginning). Adivansavatarana Parva (Chapter of Rise of the Original Seed) is the fifty-ninth chapter of the volume. In this volume the stories regarding Birth of Vyasa, Karna, Dhritarashtra, Pandu, Pandava’s and the Kauravas are given

will not commit any “sin” by accepting his wish, meaning that Kunti will still remain chaste. In both these cases the girls were doubtful about having a physical relation with the male person, but they agreed to consent because they were convinced, assured and was insisted that their “virginity” or “chastity” will remain untarnished. Question may arise that if polygamous relation without marriage was accepted then why did Kunti threw Karna in the river. The answer is maybe the physical discourse that caused Karna’s birth was not emotionally accepted by Kunti herself. The relation was not forced upon her but also there was no emotional attachment. For this reason she was not emotionally attached to Karna herself and this lead to her decision of abandoning Karna.

The question is why virginitiy or chastity was so much important for the existing society and the females themselves. From birth a girl is told that virginitiy is the only property that she has. They are psychologically influenced into believing that the virginitiy is their most prized possession. This is the reason both Satyavati and Kunti agreed to fulfill Parasara and Arka’s desires if their virginitiy was intact. A man always wants to marry a virgin girl to satisfy his male ego that she is not touched by another male. According to Beauvoir “myth of virginitiy reflects, a male’s hesitation between the fear of being in the power of uncontrollable forces and to wish to win them over. The very powers that are frightening in wild beasts or in unconquered element became qualities valuable to the owner able to domesticate them” (*The Second Sex*, 184 -186) Beauvoir means that any force or element that is unconquered is the most gratifying for any master because he could master it by conquering it. And men seeing themselves as masters of women, they want to conquer woman’s chastity or virginitiy in order to control them. For a male person a virgin girl is like an animal, who has still not been subjugated. So it is satisfying for a male ego to think that by taking the girls virginitiy, he has command or dominance over the girl.

Whereas if the girl has already lost his virginity then she is considered another person's property and therefore possessing her hurts the male supreme ego.

Another prominent example of a male controlling female sexual desire is the relation between Pandu, Kunti and Madri. Pandu in his walk among the woods killed a deer who was serving his mate. The deer was originally a Brahmin, who while dying cursed Pandu that "When, approaching thy wife lustfully, thou wilt unite with her even as I had done with mine, in that very state shalt thou have to go to the world of the spirits" (Book 1:Sambhava Parva 246)<sup>10</sup>. Due to this curse Pandu was forbidden to have any sexual contact with his wives or else he would die. Hearing this curse Pandu decided to adopt Brahmin (Brahmanacharya) and live in the woods with his wives. The noticeable fact is that Pandus wives, Kunti and Madri were not cursed and they did not want to adopt the lifestyle of a Brahmin nevertheless because their husband was took the vow, they were accepted to follow. Kunti and Madri while living with Pandu did not have any physical contact with any male person. Though Kunti knew the incantation (mantra) to call Gods, she did not use that to satisfy her needs. But when Pandu understood that he would die without leaving any heir behind and because of that he could not enter heaven, Pandu wanted Kunti to bore him a son from a different man (Book:1 Sambhava Parva, 250)<sup>11</sup>. Even if Kunti begets Pandu a son from a different man, the baby would still be considered as Pandu's child because apparently there are eight kinds of son whom could whom a person could call his. The second kind was "the son begotten upon one's wife by an accomplished person from motives of kindness" (Book 1: Sambhava Parva 250), at first Kunti was not ready to agree with Pandu but on his insistence Kunti agreed to have polygamous sexual relation and bear Pandu a son.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

After bearing Pandu three sons, each with great intelligence and power Kunti did not want to have any more children but Pandu wanted more heirs. So Kunti rejected the thought by saying “The woman having intercourse with four different men is called a *Swairini* (heanton), while she having intercourse with five becometh a harlot” (Book1: Sambhava Parva 259)<sup>12</sup>. This statement is very ironical because Kunti already had physical relation with five men and also to keep her words, her son forces Draupadi to marry five men. The perplexing part is that Pandu agreed with Kunti even though he wanted more children but in the risk of losing his wife’s chastity, he remained silent. The point here is Kunti’s physical desires or relations were in a way tied or controlled by Pandu. When Pandu adapted the lifestyle of Brahmin, his wives followed, then when he wanted to have children, the wives followed as well. There was no choice left for the woman but to obey them.

In *The Mahabharata*, only male’s do not dominate the sexuality of women, women also dominate other female’s sexual orientation. And the power to control who another woman has relation to, is a symbol of dominance. Just like Pandu had the chosen the sexual orientation of Kunti, Satyawati chose the sexual orientation of her daughter in laws, Ambika and Ambalika. When Vichitravirya died without leaving any heir behind, Satyawati took the responsibility of giving an heir to the Kuru dynasty. She asked Bhisma first to beget children with Ambika and Ambalika but he refused due to the oath he had taken, then she called upon her son Vyasa to give heir to the dynasty. Ambika and Ambalika was told that, they would beget children with Bhisma but when that did not happen, Satyawati did not think to inform her daughter in laws also to tell them about Vyasa. Instead she just ordered Vyasa and sent him in their chambers resulting in unwanted reaction from Ambika and Ambalika which bore negative impact on their sons.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

Dhritarashtra was born blind and Pandu was born pale. If Satyawati had foretold them about Vyasa and taken their consent then the begotten heir would have been much more worthy of the throne. But Satyawati being the mother in law thought that if she would notify them about the change and take their permission then she would automatically demean herself in stature so enforced her decision on them to confirm that her position is still above her daughter in laws. As Kate Millette said that “patriarchy sets one woman against another” it results in one enforcing herself on another. In the case of Satyawati, she enforces herself her dominance by choosing Amba and Ambalika’s sexual partners.

### **1.3 Motherhood as a Determining Factor for Women**

Beauvoir writes in the book *The Second Sex* “Women are always defined by their Glands and Womb”. This statement stands true for each girl of every social and cultural background. It has been always expected that a girl after a certain age will get married and give birth to children and become a complete women. But the in rare occasions the female chooses motherhood or in most cases it always has been chosen by their male counterpart or the family. Simone De Beauvoir in the chapter “The Mother” of her book *The Second Sex* stated that the usage of precautions during any physical relation was not enforced and women were prohibited to abort the child. Abortion was prohibited because it was considered unsafe and risky also because it was prohibited in religion. Beauvoir argues that instead of enforcing, if the women were given the right to choose motherhood then they would have fully appreciated their child. And with the mother fully appreciating her child, he would lead a better life then he/she was and many lives would be rescued from being destroyed. This traditional role of “mother” is played by the women in the epic *The Mahabharata* also but as said, the choice has not been theirs wholly. And because the motherhood was not fully desired Karna was thrown in the river and grew up in a

Shudra family. If Kunti was ready for the motherhood, instead of being forced, then she would have accepted Karna lovingly as her own child. Then there would not be any rivalry or bitterness with between him and the Arjuna and Karna would have a equal life as his brothers and Kunti would have lived together with all her sons.

Also *The Mahabharata* reveals the existing competition of the Queens of becoming a mother. Gandhari was so sad and shocked to hear that Kunti had bore a son that she almost cuts open her belly to give birth to her child. This action almost ruined her chance of motherhood. Again in Kunti's case she refused to give the mantra to Madri for the second time. She was afraid that if she does that Madri will beget more children than her therefore demean her position. So the choice of motherhood became a source of competition for them.

#### **1.4 The Position of Women in Family and Parenting**

From the earliest era and till now women are playing the usual role of homemaker in the patriarchal society. But as homemakers but not earners of a family, their position is always underneath of a man. Sharada Sugirtharajah in her article "Hinduism and Feminism" writes that "the hierarchical relationship in a family is related with the age, gender and seniority" (100) this means that gender is not the only thing that gives a person a higher position in a family. There are several incidents that prove that the senior female member is always treated with respect and dignity in *The Mahabharata*. An example is, in Udyoga Parva<sup>13</sup>, Duryadhan went to Gandhari to seek blessing for the upcoming war, despite knowing the fact that she did not support the war and wanted Duryadhan to give the Pandava's their proper share (Book 1: Udyoga Parva 2023-2026). Also five Pandava brothers wedding Draupadi to be their common wife only because their

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<sup>13</sup> Udyoga Parva- the book of Effort. It is the fifth book of the epic, in this book preparations of the war is being taken by the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

mother said so, is also another example of senior woman being respected by the family members.

But in a family the husband and wife did not have the same amount of respect. A wife does not achieve the same amount of dignity and respect as her better half. After the self choice ceremony when the Pandava brothers brings Draupadi home, Kunti advised her about the chores of the house, she told Draupadi to divide the eleemosynary like “first to feed the Brahmins then to the guests then to divide the most of the foods in five parts and then to keep the rest for her and Draupadi ” (Adi Parva: Swayamvara Parva 382). So it is clear that the ritual of women of the house serving and eating the very last was a tradition going on for a long time or it could also be said that this incident from *The Mahabharata* could be a start of this tradition. In both ways women are being forced to belief that they are beneath their partners which is why they could not eat together.

Another important point is that Vyasa mentioned was “Kuru princes lay down with heads towards the south. And Kunti laid herself down along the line of their heads, and Draupadi along that of their feet” (Book 1: Swayamvara Parva 383). This clearly tells to position of a wife in a family, beneath the husband, if it was not then Draupadi would have laid down beside them.

Parenting act as a reason for the Kaurava princes to have gone to the dogs. In the Kaurava family, we do not see Dhritarashtra acting as a powerful father figure. The only person who had the courage to point out Kauravas wrong doing is their mother Gandhari. This is another noteworthy criticism on Vyasa’s writing that; he showed that sometimes only a strong mother figure could not control their sons actions. And if there was an enforcing father figure of Dhritarashtra then maybe the Kaurava princes would not have gone haywire.

### 1.5 Objectification and the Episode of Undressing of Draupadi

“She is defined and differentiated with relation to man” (Beauvoir xxii). This quotation of Beauvoir is a sample of how women are treated in *The Mahabharata*. In such a vast epic with so many diverse topics, Vyasa did not give the women any space to grow as characters. There is no description of childhood, family and proper background of the main female characters. Draupadi or Gandhari or Kunti suddenly comes into the story with a brief mention about their birth or childhood when their respective male partners needed a heroine to move for further into the story. The male were the “Subject” and the female were the “Object” in the story.

One of the major examples of objectification is the episode of undressing Draupadi. The episode could take place because Yudhisthira put her at stake in the dice game. The markable thing is Yudhsthira who was known as “Dharmaputra”<sup>14</sup> put his wife and brothers at stake without thinking of the consequences. Although Yudhisthira lost his brothers and himself Shakuni and the Kauravas were, they were not offended by as the way Draupadi was. When the episode of undressing was taking place, there was no one in the court who voiced against the action. The act of remaining silent during the episode shows the notion of “Voyeurism”<sup>15</sup>. Laura Mulvi in her book quotes that “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” (4). This quote portrays the sexual desire of the Kauravas and other people present in the court. The act of undressing Draupadi was giving Shakuni the active

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<sup>14</sup> The son of the religion or a person who could not do anything unjust and undignified or against religion

<sup>15</sup> The act of looking at people engaged in intimate behavior, sexual act or actions considered to be private in nature



empowered role and Draupadi the passive role. The others remained silent because they were taking pleasure by seeing a helpless women getting undressed. And as Mulvi said this gaze was styling Draupadi according to their own male fantasies. Mulvi also quotes that “in the patriarchal culture female stand as a signifier of the male’s fantasies and obsessions. These fantasies are fulfilled by men by imposing them on the silent image of women”. Draupadi was a intelligent and witty girl. She rescued the Pandava brothers from slavery under the Kaurava brothers. The quote of Mulvi points out that despite being a clever girl, because of the act of undressing, the image of her remains as a weak and silent woman who is present to fulfill a male’s fantasies.

### **1.6 Role of Women in Court Politics and the Kurukshetro War**

The Kurukshetra war is infamous for being battle among brothers for Kingship and also for being one of the most bloodshed. But sadly in this famous war, the women characters did not played any significant roles. Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi did not fight with their sons and husband to save their dynasty. But each of them played their part before and after the battle to make the result or effect of the battle as positive as possible.

Kunti was always in favor of war that is why during the thirteen years of exile she always insinuated Yudhishtira that “Kshatriya’s arms are his great powers and that in a state of war many friend go and take side with the enemy but a King should not be saddened by it also that the grief of killing should not overwhelm the King because it is necessary” (Book 5: Udyoga Parva 263- 265). This dialogue convey that Kunti always knew that the Pandava brothers has to fight for their own right and many of their dear one’s would be on their opposing team so they should be prepared for it. But the Pandava’s biggest fear was Karna, who had skills equal or better than Arjuna and in his hands maybe her son would die. Knowing this Kunti went to talk to Karna, to tell them that he is Kunti’s son and Pandava’s are his brother, so that Karna would fight in favor of them. But Kunti failed, even after disclosing Karna’s true identity, she returned

with Karna's promise that Karna will not slay any one of the Pandava brothers except Arjuna and Kunti will always remain mother of five sons" (Book 5: Udyoga Parva 281-282). It can be said that Kunti provided a moral support to the Pandava brothers and tried to help them with the resource that was in her hand.

The role of Draupadi is the most silent in the Kurukshetra war than any other woman in *The Mahabharata*. The first hint of the great war came through the insult of Draupadi after the dice game. When Draupadi was being insulted Bhima took the oath that "would slay these wretched sons of Dhritarashtra, making slaps do the work of swords, like a lion slaying number of little animals" (Book 2: Sabha Parva 137)<sup>16</sup>. This incident did take place in the war and the sons of Dhitarashtra was slain in the hand of Bhima. So the insult that was done to Draupadi became an epitome of the result of the war.

There is no direct role of Ulupi and Hidimba in the war as well but they are not even present as a moral support in the war. Their only role was that they bore children from Arjuna and Bhima who were asked to fight the Kurukshetra war. Iravat was the son of Arjuna and Naga Princess Ulupi, he was conceived and given birth when Arjuna was living thirteen years of Brahmin. Iravat and his mother were abandoned by Arjuna after his birth and he grew up in the Naga land with his mother. But he was summoned to Indraprastha (the kingdom of the Pandava brothers) to fight in favor of the Pandava brothers. The incident is similar for Ghatotkacha, he was the son of forest demon Hidimba and Bhima. Hidimba fell in love with Bhima seeing that he was protecting his mother and brothers in the middle of the night in the jungle. Therefore she wanted to live with Bhima, so Kunti and Yudishthira made a deal that she will only stay with them until she begets a son. And after the birth of Ghatakkacha, she left with her son. But when

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<sup>16</sup> Sabha Parva is the Second book of the epic. In this book the Pandava brothers returns to Hastinapur with their wife Draupadi, Shubhodra and their children. In this book they lose their share of property to Duryadhona in the dice game and Draupadi is insulted. Also they go to their thirteen years of exile.

there was a possibility of war Ghatakkacha was summoned to fight. And sadly in fight with Karna, Arjuna used him as his shield and he lost his life. For these two women the only role was to give a son who will fight the war.

The most important role a female plays in the war is Amba, who is known as Shikhandi, son of Drupada. When Amba was rejected by King of Subha, Shalya, she went to Bhishma asking him to accept her. But because of Bhishma's vow he could not accept her. So Amba decided to take away her life but on the verge of death Lord Kartikeya gave her a boon that she will be reborn and Bhishma will die in her hands. It could be said that this is a way to empower women, because Bhishma had his father's blessings that "Death shall never come to thee as long as thou desirest to live" (Book 1: Adi Parva 218). But women were being empowered then why did Amba need to be born as a male not as a female with skill to kill Bhishma. As Kalyanov wrote in his article that through Amba's story *The Mahabharata* tells that "Women's personal freedom was not forgotten in that society. She had personal freedom and a noble role to play in the governing of the society (13). But the question is if the women did have noble role to play then why did she resurrect as a male to take the revenge of her previous birth. In this way *The Mahabharata* is enforcing the idea that to take fulfill any desire of a female, one need to be born as a man because as female's many desires will remain unfulfilled.

From the incidents analyzed in the mentioned points, it could be easily said that although there were some strong female characters present in the epic *The Mahabharata*. The writer failed to give them proper credit and significance which is why they remain in the shadows of their male counterparts. And we could conclude by saying that the female were characterized to work as shadow politicians but they can never assert their role in the forefront.

## Chapter Two: The Lives and Role of Women in *Iliad*

*Iliad* is an epic that circles the great war of Troy and the heroes of the war. The story of *Iliad* starts with the ninth year of the ten year long war and ends with the death and burial of Hector. It is renowned that the war of Troy took place because of the most beautiful Helen and her lover Paris, Prince of Troy. The incidents that takes place before the epic starts is, Helen daughter of god Zeus and queen Leda is married off to Menelaus, who is also declared King of Sparta. While Helen was living a happily domestic life with Menelaus, Menelaus went to Troy and returned with Paris who was a guest of his. Then Menelaus had to leave for Crete leaving Paris to be attended by Helen. Helen seeing the most charming and handsome young man fell in love with him and returned to Troy with him. Although many say that Helen was kidnapped by Paris along with the other possessions he took from Greece.<sup>17</sup> When Menelaus returned home and knew about the incident he declared a war against Troy and started his journey towards Troy with his army which included his elder brother Agamemnon, the great warriors Odysseus and Achilles.

Due to the reason that the dominant content of *Iliad* the heroes, Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector and their contribution to the war, there is very little focus on the females. Because of this reason I will add incidents that happened before and after the war to analyze the three main female characters Helen, Andromache and Aphrodite and two less important females Chryseis and Briseis.

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<sup>17</sup> The background story is popular Greek myth and I have taken it from Dictionary of Classical Myths (7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

### 1.1 Role of Women in the Trojan War and its Pretext

Although the war was fought because of a woman, the females were not directly involved in fighting the war. Apart from the Goddesses the Queens and the wives of the heroic fighters were mostly spectators of the war. Even the actions of the Goddesses were limited to planning and plotting to change the course of the war or directly influencing some other character to work for them. In the epic the male deities like Ares to fight in the war but the female deities are never seen directly fighting in the war.

The woman whose role is most significant is Helen of Troy. She was married to Spartan King Menelaus and then she was charmed by Trojan Prince Paris into eloping with him. Homer emphasizes on Helen being the cause of war by mentioning the incident more than once. Homer wrote in Book 2 of the epic *Iliad* “Helen for whom so many of her countrymen have died on Trojan soil, far from their own fatherland” (Book 2 ll. 161-162)<sup>18</sup>. Then again these lines are repeated in Book 2 emphasize that Helen is the only reason of the war, “Helen for whom so many of her countrymen have died on Trojan soil” (Book 2 ll. 171-172). Further both Greeks and the Trojans understands that both sides are losing their fighters drastically and have a chance of losing the war and most tragically dying. This is the reason that Kin Priam’s adviser Antenor asks Prince Paris to return Helen which will end the war but Paris refuses directly. Homer wrote in *Iliad* “Antenor spoke, Enough is enough: let us give Helen back to Agamemnon and Menelaus, along with all the property that came with her... Paris replied, I will not give up my wife” (Book 7 ll. 350-360). However Paris did agreed to return the loot that came with Helen but it was not accepted by the Greeks. The only reason Helen is given so much importance is that

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<sup>18</sup> The epic *Iliad* consist twenty four chapters. Each chapter is known as a Book.

stands as a symbol of honor and dignity. By eloping with Paris Helen has harmed Menelaus's honor and by giving her back Paris's dignity will be demeaned. Odysseus's speech in Book 2 is an example of it; he says "It would be humiliating... If we return home empty handed" (Book 2 ll. 298). So the pride and honor of both sides is Helen.

The astonishing part about Helen is that she was not knowledgeable about the course of the battle or about her family after she came to Troy. When Helen did not see her brothers' Castor and Pollux in the battlefield, she thought that they were too ashamed of her whereas the sad part is that they were dead. Farron in the article "The Portrayal of Women In *Iliad*" wrote that "This lack of knowledge also shows that she was completely cut off from her family and also that she is shameful for her deeds" (2). Also She was not aware that Menelaus and Paris decided to have a duel and prize would be Helen, she was informed by Iris disguised as Laodice, her sister in law. Helen was feeling shame and helplessness by seeing the devastating battle but she is not seen speaking about her innermost feelings. She weaved her feelings in a cloth instead of telling it to someone. By showing Helen weaving her thoughts, Homer symbolized the restrictions that are imposed on a woman. A woman has the free will to think and feel anything but she is not given the freedom to put her feelings her thoughts in words.

Andromache is the wife of Hector, the famous war hero, she is probably the only female character who had no direct relation with the war but suffered the most. She would not have gained anything if the Trojan's won the war but she had lost the most in the battle. Her father and seven brothers were killed by Achilles and then in Book 22 of the epic *Iliad*, her husband also dies. Later on when the Trojan's lost the war she was taken as a concubine by Neoptolemus and her son Astyanax as a slave. Throughout the epic the readers never see Andromache as a perfect housewife and a devoted lover. Her only concern is her husband and her family. She asked

Hector several times not to be so much involved in the war but to lead the soldiers from a safe distance. She said “Hector, you are father and mother and brother to me, as well as my strong husband. Stay here and don’t make your boy an orphan and your wife a widow” (Book 6 ll.430-432). But Hector convinced that he would die a heroic death rather than live like a coward consoles her and rejoins the battle.

Aphrodite, the goddess of love is the hidden reason of the war. She bribed the Trojan Prince Paris to declare her to be the most beautiful. And the bribe was the most beautiful female in the earth whom was Helen. The story goes like this “In the marriage ceremony of Peleus and Thetis, Eres tossed an apple and told it is for ‘the most beautiful present’ hoping to start a strife. Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, each though, she deserved the apple thus it created a conflict among them. Paris, Prince of Troy was ultimately chosen to for the judgment. When he was asked to choose the most beautiful among the three Goddesses, he asked for a bribe. Ultimately Aphrodite gave the most desirable bribe “the most beautiful woman” and won the title... She also insinuated Paris into attracting Helen and charmed Paris into looking much more handsome and gorgeous to Helen than he originally was.<sup>19</sup> Due to the reason that the war started because of her, she was always on Paris or Trojan’s side. When Paris was having a duel with Menelaus and was about to lose, Aphrodite saved him. Homer wrote “Menelaus would have hauled him off and won unutterable glory, but Aphrodite, who saw what was happening and broke the strap made of leather... and whisked him away... and put him down in his own bedroom” (Book 3 ll. 375-385). She was always on the Trojan’s side and rescued Paris because Paris declared her the most beautiful among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Aphrodite returns to the battle field to save her son

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<sup>19</sup> The background story is popular Greek myth and is taken from Dictionary of Classical Myths (7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Aeneas from any lethal weapon; “she threw her white arms round her dear son and drew a fold of her shimmering robe in front of him, to protect him from flying weapons and any fatal spear” (Book 5 ll. 315-320). After wounding her Diomedes also rebukes her by saying she should be happy with playing with the weak female mind and she should leave the battlefield. When she returns to Mount Olympus, she is told by the other Gods including Zeus that she should not interfere in the Battlefield and that her task is regarding love and marriage.

Other two female deities whose presence was prominent in the battle field were Athena, God of Wisdom and Hera, God of Childbirth. Both the Goddesses were in favor of the Greeks because Paris did not “declare them the most beautiful”. But they did not fight the Trojans directly only helped the Greeks by power plays or by giving them ideas for battle. When Greeks were being brutally killed by the great warrior Hector and War God Ares, Hera and Athena saw that the Greeks may lose the war. That is why Hera asked for Zeus’s permission to enter the battlefield and drive Ares off the battlefield. Supreme goddess asked “Father Zeus will you be angry with me if I give him a severe beating and chase him from the battlefield... Zeus replied, Not at all. Further asked her to take Athena along with her” (*Iliad* Book 5 ll. 762-768). Athena took part in the war but only till Ares had been wounded. Although she did not hurt Ares herself, instead she insinuated Diomedes to attack him so that he deserts the battlefield. In Book 7, after a teeming glory in the battlefield, Achaeans started to lose the battle again. That moment Athena comes down to Ilium from Mount Olympus in order to save the Greeks. But she meets the war god Ares in the battlefield who was a Trojan supporter and wanted them to win. That is why both of them come to a truce that they would trigger a duel between Hector and a Trojan soldier so that the battle ends for that day (115 ll. 20-30). In the duel between Hector and Ajax which was initiated by Athena and Ares, Ajax, warrior from the Achaean army started to lose and everyone



was drove into the ship by Hector, Hera put the thought in Agamemnon's head that the Greeks have to take action or they would lose. This is why Agamemnon went to the ships to remind the soldier why they had come so far and also to boost their moral to go back to the battlefield (134 ll. 220). Athena is seen fighting Ares and Aphrodite and Hera is seen insulting and attacking Artemis because they were helping the Trojan's to win. Then again the female deities never attacked any human fighters from any of the sides. They only fought the other Gods if they hampered the chances of victory of their supported side.

From this close reading it could be easily deciphered that the female's played a very short role in the war whether they were the humans or the divine deities. Famous Helen and Andromache, whose lives were closely linked with the result of the war, did not have any say in the war. The most famous deities whom were the indirect reason for the starting of the war did directly involve in killing and slaughtering the opposite sides. Their involvement was limited to fighting with deities of opposite sides and playing tricks.

## **1.2 Women as War Prize**

The epic *Iliad* opens in the ninth year of the war. In the opening the readers find Chryses, a priest of Apollo has come to the Achaean base to ask for her daughter. In exchange of her daughter he had promised many expensive gifts. When Achaeans attacked Thebe, his daughter Chryseis, along with many other girls was captured. Chryseis was given to Agamemnon as war prize and another girl name Briseis who was the princess of Lyrnessus and daughter of Briseus. Both the girls' family held a powerful position in the society but still they were subjected to being concubines of the war heroes just because they were from the losing side.

Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis because he thought it to be an insult upon him to give up a war prize even though he was promised enough gifts in exchange. This is why he took

Briseis back from Achilles. This was the utmost insult Agamemnon could inflict upon him and after this incident Achilles sheds tears and asks his mother for revenge of this insult (Book 1 ll. 350-360). Most of the girls after being held they did not had any control over their own lives. Briseis's crying after Patroclus has fallen in the war field is analyzed by Weils as a "Portrayal that the slave women could not even cry for themselves, if it is not a loss of their masters also" (as cited in Skinner 10). Also each time Achilles mentions her as his to be wedded wife, he does not say it because of his emotions foe her but because he thinks that she is perfect prize of the services he has provided (Book 1 ll. 167).

The irony is that the woman for whom the great war is being fought is not even being as a lady or a queen, every time she is compared and spoken of as a war prize. Farron wrote in the article *The Portrayal of Women in Iliad* "each case she is lumped together with the possessions that came with her from Sparta to Troy" (2). Her fate of whom to marry was decided by her father. Menelaus was chosen for Helen because Helens sister was already married to his elder brother and He had money and power due to his brother. Menelaus did not have anything of his own not that would match Helen, appearance or kingdom (Bell Par. 10). Then her eloping with Paris was decided by Aphrodite herself because it is said that Helens father was cursed by Aphrodite that his daughters would be adulteress.<sup>20</sup> Then it was being decided by Menelaus and Paris that with whom she would live with after the great war by a duel which ironically Helen was not even aware of.

### **1.3 Women as Sacrifices**

In the epic *Iliad* it is written that many times sacrifices were made to please the Gods. First time sacrifices of animals were made by the Greek army to please God Apollo, so that he would forgive the Greeks for insulting his priests. The second time sacrifices of animals and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

prayer was made to God Athena so that she would help the Trojans win the battle. But the most shocking part is that in the very beginning of the war sacrifice of a girl was also made for a fortunate start of the journey by the Greeks. It is said that when the Greek armies were preparing to sail for Troy but the course of the wind was not favorable. This was the time a prophecy was made that if King Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia then they would have a very fortunate journey. This is when Agamemnon sent for his daughter saying that she is to be married to the great warrior Achilles but originally she was sacrificed for the war. This incident is clear indication that female were considered to be in the same category as the animals to be sacrificed.

### Chapter Three: Uniting and Untying them

“if you examine the structure of a large number of short stories to discover the underlying principles that govern their composition...principles of narrative progression...or of characterization...you are also engaged in structuralist activity if you describe the structure of a single literary work to discover how its composition demonstrates the underlying principles of a given structural system”

-Lois Tyson

This quotation of Tyson coincides with the theory of “Structuralism” given by Claude Lévi-Strauss. This theory has been used by different disciplines to reach a broader perspective on human cognitive experience. The theory rests on Lévi Strauss’s belief that “Human minds have certain universal characteristics which originate in common features of the *Homo sapiens* brain. These common cognitive structures are responsible for the similarity of thought pattern in people regardless of their society or cultural background” (Kottak 70). This theory suggests that each and every human mind has a set of common characteristics and tends to think in the same way regarding a few fundamental issues, such as Good vs. Evil, Right vs. Wrong (70). These issues remain similar in every society and culture across time. Lévi-Strauss’s theory has helped me to reach my conclusion as I unite and untie the experiences of these women. There are interesting similarities and thought provoking difference in these two great epics.

Lévi Strauss wrote that although Structuralism is a linguistic theory it can also be used for literary analysis (4). He mentioned that just like in a linguistic break down of a word linguists can find phonological, syntactical and semantic similarity, in the similar way if we break down the incidents that we find in the myths we will find similarity in them too. Again, in the chapter “The Meeting of Myth and Science” from the book *Myth and Meaning*, Lévi-Strauss gave another dimension to the idea of “Tabula Rasa”<sup>21</sup> by Plato. Citing Plato’s idea Lévi-Strauss argued that our mind is an empty slate and it is filled by the social and cultural experiences. He

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Tabula Rasa’ is a term coined by Plato. The term means that initially human mind is an empty slate. But slowly in incorporates thoughts and ideologies according to its experience.

also says that from an overt analysis the myths may seem to be totally different from the other but when broken down, it would be clear that myths include similar incidents and point of views (9-10). In this chapter I will discuss the thematic parallelism on treatment and portrayal of women and women responding in different ways in *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* with the view of Lévi-Strauss.

Before I look into the thematic similarities and differences in *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* I will talk about the issue of intertextuality in epics and myths. Because of the intense resemblance in terms of theme and style it is often difficult to determine the root. The story of Sati Savitri from *The Mahabharata* exists in Bangladeshi folklore under a different name “Behula Lakhindor” found in *Mymensingh Geetika*<sup>22</sup> and also in *Bengali Myths*<sup>23</sup>. In both of these stories the readers find the female protagonists challenging the decree of God by fighting for their husbands’ lives. In Greek myth, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is also of the same pattern. In this myth also Orpheus travels to the underworld to resurrect his dead wife Eurydice, so the mold of these stories is almost same. Then again, Sita from *Ramayana* needed to be saved from the demon Ravana and Persephone was also abducted by Hades as found in Greek mythology. Also Europa, daughter of Agenor, the Phoenician King was kidnapped by Zeus to ravish her. Zeus in the form of a bull kidnapped Europa and stayed in the island of Crete. She was the first Queen of Crete and bore three sons. Once more we see the similarity in the stories of the myths residing in different continents.

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<sup>22</sup> *Mymensingh Geetika* is a book containing popular folk stories of Mymensingh region, it is compiled by Sri Dineshchondro Sen.

<sup>23</sup> *Bengali Myths* is written by T. Richard Blurton, a curator of British Museum. In this book he compiled many mythologies of Bengal region of Hindu culture. He compiled the story of Goddess Kali, the childhood and adulthood God Krishna.

Intertextuality also raises the question of overlapping of themes in epics across culture. In both epics marriage by force and physical coercion to ostracize women appear many times. The marriage of Helen and Menelaus in *Iliad* is thought to be forceful in many reading. Helen's father wanted Helen to marry Menelaus not for compatibility but for the value of dynasty (Bell Par. 10). *The Mahabharata* has several incidents of forced marriage. Two of the most prominent was Gandhari's marriage to blind Dhritarashtra and Draupadi's marriage to five Pandava brothers. In each case the consent of the bride is not taken to consideration. They are wedded to the grooms whom the parents think are suitable or are beneficial for the families.

Both epic contained a heroic battle which was fought for honor and justice. The noteworthy part is both these wars were instigated if not by women but because of what had happened to them. In *The Mahabharata*, the public shaming and harassment of Draupadi at the hands of the Kauravas was the main catalyst of the great war of Kurukshetra. Again in *Iliad*, the great battle of Troy was fought mainly between Menelaus and Paris because on the question of reclaiming Helen and Honour. It is interesting to note that women may not have individual position in the family and in the court and their personal honour need not mean much, but they represent honour of their fathers and husbands. Draupadi was emblematic of the honour of the Pandava brothers and Helen signified it for the Spartans

The writers of *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* did not treat the female deities in a special way. In *The Mahabharata*, Vyasa did not differentiate between mortals and celestials while characterizing them. The deities and mortals had their own voice in their limited sphere. While marrying King Shantanu Goddess Ganga only condition was that Shantanu will never question her actions. And when she threw her Childs in river, Shantanu never did question her about it. Then when Pandu asked Kunti to give the Mantra to Madri for the second time and also

indirectly proposed her to have more children but Kunti refused. Pandu never asked justification for this decision but quietly accepted it. So for this epic the behavior towards women are same whether they are Goddesses or humans. On the other hand in *Iliad* the treatment varies. More space is given to Goddesses than the mortals even though the central of the story is a mortal, Helen. When Aphrodite saves Paris from his duel with Menelaus and brings him to the castle Aphrodite orders Helen to take care of Paris and to have a physical intimacy with him. This exemplifies that despite being the central the mortal women were given less importance than the deities and the deities were more dominant in *Iliad*.

Although in *Iliad* the female deities' lives are not very much different than the mortals. Zeus is not a devoted husband. He has to be spied upon constantly so that he does not perform any adultery. Even if he is always watched by Hera but still he finds a way to escape. In the epic Hera had to trick Zeus into sleeping so that he could not oppose their decision. Also we see that no matter which side the female Goddesses supported, they wanted to help them directly or indirectly. But they could not do so freely because Zeus had forbid them. So the immortal women in *Iliad* could not practice their free will despite being Goddesses and to some extent their position was not very different from the mortal women.

Objectification of women also unites *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad*. In *The Mahabharata*, it is repeatedly said that, "a person's wife is his most cherish possession" not a partner or a friend. Even in the dice game between Yudhisthira and Shakuni, Draupadi was considered as Yudhisthiras possession. In the similar manner Helen is tied several times with the treasure that Paris took from Sparta. She was always considered as a commodity that holds the honour of the

Greeks. Also the incident of Chrysis and Briseis<sup>24</sup> show that females were considered as the best gifts not as companions.

The women in *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* strive for autonomy. Though their attempts of subverting male dominance and patriarchal regime are not entirely successful and discontinued at times, the effort is clearly visible. Amba voiced her desire to marry the King of Salya despite being abducted from her Self choice ceremony by Bhishma. Helen who was not happy with her marriage also chose to marry and live with Paris in Troy. But the signifying fact is these attempts to voice their own rights and choices resulted negatively. Therefore acknowledging a women's own desire by herself is projected as destructive. Amba who voiced her desire to marry King of Salya was ultimately rejected by him and later on Bhishma also. These rejections led to her painful suicide. And Helens choice of eloping with Paris is always told as the reason the great war took place and a dynasty faded. Christopher Marlowe referred Helen to be "the face that launch'd a thousand ships /And burnt the topless towers of Ilium" (13.90). He connotes Helen as an object of beauty who was responsible for ruining Ilium's empire and dynasty. This is ultimately a negative indication of women's self-choices.

If the women's experiences in *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad* are juxtaposed then we would see that Homer had often obliterated the experiences of women in *Iliad*. Women are greater victims of war fought to flaunt masculine physical powers and to enforce them upon women. Andromache, wife of Hector suffered the most because of losing the Trojan War. Her husband was fighting for the Trojans and she knew that if Hector dies and the Achaean army wins, her life will be devastated. But Andromache was not at all bothered about the course of the war. The surprising fact is when Hector dies during the war, the lamentation of his wife, father even Helen is heard however there is no lament of Queen Hecuba on her sons death. So Homer silenced the

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<sup>24</sup> The girls who were given as prize to Agamemnon and Achilles.



ultimate force of love whom is the mother in *Iliad*. On the contrary in *The Mahabharata*, when Gandhari heard that all of her sons had died in the Kurukshetra war she was silent but all her motions were empowered by Vyasa. She was so much hurt and enraged by hearing that, that she was able to burn Yudhishtira's toe even with a blindfold over her eyes. This is a clear message that although Gandhari was never in favor of war but she always loved her children and even a mothers silence could be the most raged is portrayed by Vyasa in *The Mahabharata*.

Dhritarashtra, the blind king acts as physically and morally sightless person having done nothing to control his reckless sons and rectifying their actions while Gandhari remains strong in her position. Gandhari the mother of Kauravas, never let her emotion as a mother come between the just decision of her" (Alam 1516). The example of Gandhari being just is, she the mother of the Kauravas. That is why she could easily side with them. But she never acknowledged their choice of fighting with the Pandavas. She stood by her opinion that her sons were doing the wrong thing. On the other hand in *Iliad* Andromache and Queen Hecuba do not voice out any opinion about whether to fight against the Spartans or not. When Hector came to meet Andromache in the tower, she said to Hector that he did not need to go in the middle of the war but simply dictate the soldiers on what to do by remaining in the side. She said this because she had lost her family already and she did not want to lose her husband. But Hector hushed her saying that she is a woman, therefore she need not to give any opinion on how to fight the war.

The story of *Iliad* and the incidents happening before and after the war had great impact on the lives of Helen and Andromache's life. They were never in the center of the story; they remain in the periphery throughout the story. Andromache and Hecuba are put in the periphery of the storyline. On the contrary some of the women in *The Mahabharata* remains in the center of the story. Kunti and Draupadi had acted as the thread binding the five brothers together. Kunti

accepted Nakula and Sahadeva after Madri's death and became the mother of five Pandava brothers. Draupadi also acted as a uniting force as the common wife of five Pandava brothers. Therefore they always remain the center of the five brothers.

From the breakdown of the mentioned themes in both *The Mahabharata* and *Iliad*, we see that Lévi-Strauss was correct in his theory. The position of women and the treatment towards them in both epics are almost the same. The revelation came that two writers of two completely different social and cultural backgrounds have put their female characters in the same situation. Moreover, the way those female and their male counterparts respond in those situations also remains almost similar. Another surprising fact is that in both these epics the women remain in the grey area. They are never completely subjugated nor completely autonomous in each theme. However, I find that women in *The Mahabharata* were given more space, dynamics and voice compared to *Iliad*. This came as an astonishing element because it is always thought that women in the East are always more dominated and dependent than the women of the West.

Morford and Lenardon in their book *Classical Mythology*, wrote that Bronislaw Malinowski had said "Myths act as charters of social customs and beliefs" (11). This statement overlaps with Claude Lévi-Strauss's belief that "History could be interchanged with myth because both of them portray the same purpose. Which is providing information about past social beliefs and norms" (36). In the light of these statements, we can say that the incidents, beliefs and treatment towards women in the myths portray the reality of the women in their respective societies. The women of the earliest era were subjugated in terms of motherhood, family, dynasty and marriage. These myths and their literary forms remain as evidence of it. The conclusion could be drawn from these analyses that although the women in the West were

given more power as female but in both the East and West civilization the female were created and seen inferiorly to men.

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### Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction of my paper falls under the category of feminist revisionist mythology, and in my paper I looked on the literary forms on two renowned myths from feminist perspective. I tried to show diverse ways of women being portrayed in myths. In doing so I came to the conclusion that the portrayal of women in Eastern literary tradition is surprisingly more invigorating than expected. Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Amba are very strong characters placed at the central of the conflict and solution of the epic *The Mahabharata*. *Iliad* on the other hand is centered on Helen's epic beauty and its' aftermath which changes the course of fate of the Trojans. Also I have tried to analyze if there was any noticeable difference in treating women in the Western and Eastern culture with the help of Claude Lévi-Strauss

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