



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Second-Cycle Degree Program

in European, American and Postcolonial Language and Literature –
Literatures and Cultures Curriculum: English Studies Path (LM-37)

Final Thesis

**The Role of Women in Epic Narratives: A Comparative
Study of the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata***

Supervisor

Prof. Federico Squarcini (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy)

Assistant supervisor

Prof. Krešimir Vuković (Charles University, Czechia)

Prof. Emma Sdegno (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy)

Graduand

Nilasha Das

Matriculation Number 898262

Academic Year

2024 / 2025

The Role of Women in Epic Narratives: A Comparative Study of the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*

Abstract

What constitutes a woman character in ancient literature? Who is she within the epic narratives of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Iliad*, being a goddess or a maid? While Greek and Indian epics have been academically compared (e.g., Gural, 2001; Properzio, 2009), and gendered venues have been explored (e.g., Doniger, 1997), there remains a gap in analysing women characters, particularly in the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*. The latter, in particular, deserves further investigation. To analyse these characters, I applied a modified framework based on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which examines subjugation, objectification, and otherization—themes deeply embedded in both epics. These narratives define male heroes as the central “selves,” prompting an exploration of how femininity is constructed and maintained within these boundaries. My approach also included introspective reflection, acknowledging my own positionality. My research suggests that women in these epics exhibit agency beyond the male-driven narrative structures. Rather than passive figures, they actively shape the plot, operating as subjects rather than mere objects within the male-centric “glory economics” of these texts.

Keywords: *Iliad*, *Mahābhārata*, women, goddess, feminism, gender

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Chapter 0 – The Production and Reproduction of Glory | 1 |
| Chapter 1 – Introduction | 3 |
| Chapter 2 – Helen and Draupadī | 9 |
| A) Birth | 9 |
| B) Marriage | 13 |
| C) Resilience through difficult times | 17 |
| Chapter 3 – The mighty men and the sources of their powers | 28 |
| A) Kuntī | 28 |
| B) Thetis | 31 |
| Chapter 4 – The subtle maneuvering of the narrative by the female drive..... | 36 |
| A) Divine sacrifice and War prizes | 36 |
| B) Goddesses | 40 |
| Chapter 5 – Modern Interpretations and the Impact of the Epic | 47 |
| Conclusion | 56 |
| References | 58 |

Chapter 0 – The Production and Reproduction of Glory

The Iliad and *The Mahābhārata* both revel in the experiences of women and men, expressing themselves through the pen of the poet, giving a reflection to the imposition of character traits brought into these epic works from outside of the scope of literature – the women and men presented are as many characters in their respective story lines as individuals worthy of judgement on the merit of their acts and their psychological or social dispositions. As Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* puts it, "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players". I would like to approach these epics and their women characters in a way kind to this quote, reviewing the pieces as a living reflection of the society they emanate from. In understanding and grasping of the way that men relate to women in the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*, I turn to Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

In chapters to follow, we will discuss how women are subjugated, dealt with as property, otherized, and treated in many fashions by the men in their narratives. The otherization, as De Beauvoir comes to understand it, is way for the structural male (I use this term here to refer to the man-form, not to the man-particular, to avoid unnecessary essentialisation of the non-existent "One Male") to attain and develop the integrity of his "self" and to retain economical superiority.¹ I believe that it is through this moulding of the other that they achieve glory, the highest sense of the "self", for one fears not to achieve it and fall into oblivion, or worse, ignominy. This palpable fear can be felt throughout the epics. This glory then becomes an article of an economy of the "self", a material produced on the backs of "the other". The man is as important as the woman here, because what feminine means is produced and reproduced by both: a woman becomes a woman by the virtue of her agency that is limited by the hero. De Beauvoir argues that contemporary marriage is an oppressive institution allowing for women to properly enter society,² so women characters in the epics of the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata* enter the story in relation to men, to properly establish themselves in the narrative.

The question then is, given this dependence, is there a path to independence? Do the women characters find ways in which they outperform their structural barriers? Do the women characters overcome the barriers set into the narratives by their authors? Can the

¹ DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex*, p. 159.

² DE BEAUVOIR, *The Second Sex*, pp. 415-416

women become subjects of their own? These are among the questions I attempt to answer in the next chapters of my thesis.

It is worth noting that the analytical outlook I have chosen is not solely connected to the work of Simone De Beauvoir. In the pursuit of the questions burning on my mind, I have decided to critically approach the analysis in a standpoint rooted in my positionality, in the way in which I understand the characters to be somewhat reminiscent of what relates to me as a woman. I hope to present a critical as well as an introspective review while remaining *fair* to myself and the reader.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis attempts to unravel the world of the women characters in arguably two of the biggest epics in human history: namely the *Mahābhārata* and the *Iliad*. I will attempt to critically analyse translated versions of these two works through the lens of feminist perspective. The aim of this introduction chapter is to familiarize the reader with the *Mahābhārata* and the *Iliad* by briefly explaining the basic background of these two epics.

The *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramayana* are two of the most important epics of Indian literature. In this paper, we will primarily focus on the *Mahābhārata*. Both epics, like the *Iliad*, follow a tradition of oral poetry that relies on the recitation of bards. As is common for oral epic poetry tradition, it is impossible to recognize one single person as its author. As it is a piece of performative art, bards had the freedom to add verses to the original narratives to make them more entertaining, they had the creative license to show their flair of poetry by embellishing it in order to make the words come to life. This has resulted in the epic poetry being collection of verses authored by different bards and its true authorship has been debated by many scholars,³ but the Indian folklore tradition has granted the authorship to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana (Vyāsa), an immortal brahmin and the grandfather to the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. He is briefly present in the narration himself and plays pivotal roles, like begetting Vicitravīrya's children and saving the royal line from dying out.

The narration of the epic poetry as we know it today has been recited by the bard Ugrasravas at the behest of brahmin Saunaka at a brahmin gathering in the Naimishi forest to perform a twelve-year Sacrificial Session.⁴ Ugrasravas recites this royal lore based upon the recitation of sage Vaiśampāyana at the Snake Sacrifice of King Janamejaya. Sage Vaiśampāyana in turn was a pupil of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana and heard the poetry of the Bharata from its composer (Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana). It can be easily discerned that the transmission of the epic narration has gone through three generations of bards. This transmission through various reciters, as previously mentioned, resulted in the increased number of verses. Ugrasravas proclaims at the beginning of the *Mahābhārata* that Vyāsa composed the Bharata in twenty-four thousand couplets, but as we study the text now, we can see that the *Mahābhārata* has grown to a narration of a hundred thousand verses. Under the influence of various agents, the

³ HILTEBEITEL, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 32

⁴ BUITENEN (ed. and tr.), *The Mahābhārata: 1 - The Book of the Beginning*, p. 22.

Mahābhārata has gone through several phases of changes. In the three generations of transmission, the *Mahābhārata* can be said to have gone through the initial stage of expanding the story from within, being mythologised, and then finally getting brahminized.⁵ It is difficult to pinpoint the exact year for the origin of the story, but scholars have theorized for it to have been between the eighth and ninth century BC. Materials had been actively added to the *Mahābhārata* till 400 BC, and the text has worked as a living library, collecting new additions, and integrating them into the story. The *Mahābhārata* consists of eighteen books called *parvans*, and these *parvans* are further sub-divided into various chapters.

In the first book of the *Mahābhārata* (*Ādi-Parvan*), the background of the story is set nicely and plainly. It introduces the reader to the conflict between the Pāṇḍava brothers and their cousins, the Kauravas. The narrative is paced well between the eighteen books. To present a basic outline of the story, we should start with the marriage of Kuru king Śaṁtanu with the goddess Gangā. The goddess drowned her first seven sons in the river, but when it came to the eighth one, Śaṁtanu intervened. That son would be called Bhīṣma. King Śaṁtanu wanted to marry Satyawatī as his second wife, but she would consent only under the promise that her son would become the king. This would lead Bhīṣma to take a vow of celibacy, but unfortunately Satyawatī's two sons would die childless. To prevent the Kuru line from dying out, she requested her son from out of wedlock, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana (sage Vyāsa), to impregnate her daughters-in-law. This led to the birth of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pandu, and Vidura, who did not receive the same status as his brothers, because his mother was a maid. Despite being the eldest, Dhṛtarāṣṭra was unable to become the king due to his blindness. Pandu stepped up to the role but soon he found himself cursed by a sage while hunting in the forest. This forced him to leave for the forest with his two wives. Due to this curse, he was unable to sire any children, but Kuntī, his first wife, gave birth to three demi-gods using a special chant which she knew. She also shared it with Pandu's second wife, and she had twins. These five brothers would come to be called as the Pāṇḍavas. On the other hand, Gāndhārī (Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife) gave birth to a hundred sons after a prolonged pregnancy, and these hundred sons would be called the Kauravas. These cousins would then go on to be embroiled in a constant state of conflict till the matter escalates to large scale war. Ultimately, Yudhiṣṭhira (the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas) would sit on the throne of Hastinapur.

The story revolves heavily around familial relations, and the development of the narrative relies on the relationships within the royal family. In the entanglement of the

⁵ BUITENEN (ed. and tr.), *The Mahābhārata: 1 - The Book of the Beginning*, p. 23.

struggle for power and love for familiar bonds, a beautiful narrative unfolds, capturing complex human nature. The main heroes of this story are the Pāṇḍava brothers, but in the grander scheme of things, it would be unfair to recognize just them as heroes, because if we were to do so, we might need to rethink our definition of “heroism”. The Pāṇḍava brothers are indeed victorious at the end and claim the kingdom, but several other characters deserve to be put on the proverbial pedestal as well by the virtue of their acting in a heroic manner, not just on the battlefield, but on the battlefield of everyday life. Some of these characters are women and people lacking royal status. Their sacrifices are comparable to the ones of their male counterparts. In this thesis, we will primarily focus on the women characters and analyse their principal roles in this epic story. The female characters are not as predominant as the male ones, but they weave in and out of the story, embroidering a delicate fabric of male directions towards action or inaction when need be. Their presence can be easily overlooked at the first glance, but upon further inspection, a deeper layer to the storytelling takes shape.

The *Iliad* is primarily focused on the glory and anger of Achilles, but the irony of this epic story lies in the fact that Achilles is present only briefly in the narrative, almost comparable to Helen’s presence in the same work. They are the two main characters of the *Iliad* and the narrative *lacks* them, which presents somewhat of an analogy to the story itself. The *Iliad* is said to have been composed sometime in the Archaic period of Greek history, before 630 BC.⁶ This epic poem has much to do with national identity, but it also establishes a goal of tackling the idea of how humans become heroes by achieving glory on the battlefield. The similarity drawn between a hero and a human, a person lacking in the heroic *sui generis*, can be seen as an attempt to re-interpret demi-gods through the lens of their human activities.

As Richard Martin says in his introduction to Lattimore’s translation of the *Iliad*:

To begin with, most of the linguistic forms in the *Iliad* come from a later period. By extension, the concerns of the poem are most likely not those of the original fighters at Troy but of a society - or multiple societies – generations later that looked back to the Trojan War as an important symbolic event, perhaps for the very foundation of their own communities.⁷

Here, Richard P. Martin briefly summarises the *Iliad*’s effect on the Greek society. Why does this particular epic create such a huge impression from ancient to modern times?

⁶ WEST, *The Invention of Homer*, 1999, p. 364.

⁷ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, 2011, p. 3.

The answer might not be simple, as its impact can be attributed to many underlying factors, but the glory and victory on the part of Greeks against the mighty Trojans, can indeed be a founding element of Greek national pride.

The *Iliad* does not narrate the whole story but only recounts a few dozen days in the tenth year of the Trojan War, since the core plot of the story had been shared through many generations, preserved in their collective memories. Since this was not a written text and it was propagated through speech, it possesses a distinct synergically human *colour*, as it had been subjected to the imagination of generations of people. This could only be possible because of the highly vigorous storytelling in Greek culture where bards and performers acted out their poetry and songs for their respective audiences. This speaks to the rarity of the writing medium, since the most common way of informational propagation and/or preservation would have been performances.⁸ I will return to touch on this later in the fifth chapter of this thesis.

Homer, a bard himself, an extremely poor one, in wealth, but not merit, travelled from one city to another to earn money by performing his epic poems, or so does the traditional narrative leads us to believe.⁹ This long-standing tradition of ascribing the epic to the Homer-character might be just a product of an antiquated consensus. M. L. West argues that enough doubt can be cast on the single authorship of The Poet, in reference to other epic works of the time, so as to wonder, if the “original” text was in fact a performance itself, an anonymous piece of art, akin to the one reproduced by singers of that time.¹⁰ Like previously mentioned, these epic stories were commonly known by the people, so a poet of the epic could perform any particular part of them, and their grandeur sense of poetry, their vivid imagination, brought these stories to life. In the *Iliad*, we can see that their flair of poetry brings forth evocative images of the war and the raw, tangible mortality of mankind. Their metaphors are especially beautiful, transporting the reader to the battlefield itself.

“Death is neither abhorred nor celebrated in this world, however. Instead, just as the *Iliad* distils the Trojan saga into a few days of intense fighting, it crystallizes by means of this one theme – death in battle – the essence of what it means to be human.”¹¹ The *Iliad* captures the essence of what it means to be a human and the statement inherent to the work insists on the fact that glory can only be received through death in battle. In a way, glory marks the

⁸ ZIELIŃSKI, *The Iliad and the Oral Epic Tradition*, p. 52.

⁹ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 36.

¹⁰ WEST, *The Invention of Homer*, pp. 365-366.

¹¹ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 18.

boundary between a mortal and a god in the *Iliad*, but if we are to assign glory through the virtue of fighting in a war and perishing in the battlefield, where does it leave the women characters whose fights lie outside of these battles, their arms not drawn? This thesis aims to provide a platform to the understanding of not only the fighting men, but seemingly silent women as well. These women, who get very little space in the narrative scale of war, manage to leave a long-lasting impact on the readers. In the *Iliad*, the women serve an utmost important role while lurking themselves in the shadows. They lament their dear ones and this sorrow strikes a chord in the heart of the readers, humanizing the heroes beyond the words spoken, lines written. This crucial moment of making a hero *accessible* in the eyes of the reader/listener makes them relate to these demi-gods and super humans as one of their own. This affection has a long-lasting effect on many, and it is a foolproof way of vicariously living through the memory of these characters. In a way, the women facilitate the immortality of the men's glory.

I will attempt to briefly outline the full story of the *Iliad* as it is presented in *Theogony* by Hesiod (8th century BC) and *Cyclic epics* (7th-6th centuries BC).¹²

Zeus owed Gaia a favour, since she had helped him to claim the divine throne. The favour was returned by Zeus with the promise of reducing the heavy burden of human pestilence on her land by causing an enormous war. This set the premise for the Trojan war. The story takes a step forward with the marriage of the sea-nymph Thetis and the mortal king Peleus, where the "apple of discord" was tossed, giving rise to the infamous beauty contest between the three goddesses – Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite. The final stone fell into place when Paris chose Aphrodite and was rewarded with the ability to seduce the world's fairest woman, Helen. Unfortunately, Helen was married to the Greek king Menelaos at that time. However, with the powers of seduction gifted by Aphrodite, Paris managed to convince Helen to elope with him to Troy. This flight forced Menelaos to gather an army and called on the promise of all the kings present at Helen's wedding to retrieve her, if ever the need arose. This led to the epic Trojan war which continued for ten years, resulting in the death of many heroes, like Hektor. The final act of the war was the wooden horse brought inside the city of Troy as a ploy, a phoney offering to the gods, while the Greeks pretended to sail away in defeat. This wooden horse was filled with soldiers, who went on to wreak havoc in the city, and ultimately defeated the Trojans. While Trojans faced horrible fate, Helen was retrieved

¹² LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 9.

by Menelaos. During this rampage, Athena's altar at Troy was destroyed, resulting in a tumultuous journey back home for the Greek warriors.

Chapter 2 – Helen and Draupadī

The two main female protagonists of the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata* are undoubtedly Helen and Draupadī. These two female characters narratively stand out in these epics as driving forces for many events in their respective stories. The most striking similarity these two women possess is existing in the causal nexus of warfare, but additional review reveals layers not immediately accessible to the reader. Draupadī and Helen come off both as mere pawns in the grand scheme of divine plans, but despite their persons being used as a tool by the present men, they emerge as powerful and head-strong queens, devoted wives, and on top of that, *people* of their *own*. I have divided this chapter into 3 sub-chapters to explore their characteristics in depth.

Following the seemingly natural way of life, we embark on a journey from birth to marriage – in describing these we approach an idyllic form, a representation of what could be, the side of the coin of life bathing in light. As we approach death, we expect exactly that – an unequivocal end to all things. Alas, here I choose to defy the false dichotomy set in by the poet, and focus on what defines all, from birth to marriage and beyond: the hardship that moulds one into a continuously changing self. For death is but a stop for the last version of ourselves, one that we know only for a brief moment.

A) Birth

In the *Iliad*, Helen's background is not mentioned explicitly as the epic narration describes a time period of about ten days in a ten-year war. These ten days portray violent images of war and describe a pivotal moment in this long-lasting conflict. Although Helen's past is not mentioned, she is referred to as the "daughter of Zeus", which tells us about her paternal heritage, but her mother is never explicitly alluded to. In Book three, Helen stands at the Skaian gate with Trojan King Priam, and other elders, and she identifies several Achaians on the request of Priam. While identifying several members from her family and her homeland, she says,

yet nowhere can I see those two, the marshals of the people,
Kastor breaker of horses, and the strong boxer, Polydeukes,
My own brothers, born with me of a single mother. (3.236-38)

In these sentences, she refers to her Dioscuri brothers whom she cannot find in the battlefield. Through this we obtain another inkling of her mother. Helen's mother is most commonly said to have been the Spartan queen Leda, who was impregnated by Zeus coming in the form of a swan.¹³ By the virtue of Dioscuri being Helen's brothers, one can infer that Queen Leda is Helen's mother, indeed the one who was seduced by the god King himself. This unusual birth of Helen would make her semi-divine. There is another account of Helen's origin presented in the epic poem of *Cypria*, in which her birth is attributed to the outcome of Zeus's rape of Nemesis.¹⁴ This account makes Helen divine as her mother is a goddess, unlike the mortal queen Leda. However, Helen's unusual birth is extremely difficult to categorize in both accounts. Since Leda was seduced by Zeus in the form of a swan, it means that Helen was born from an egg. On the other hand, if Helen is the daughter of goddess Nemesis, this would make her godly and immortal. It can be argued that due to Helen's unusual birth, Zeus being her father, her characterisation is rather ambiguous, since she finds herself in a liminal space between the human plane and the divine. Perhaps it is this fact that makes her unattainable. On a side note, it is a curious detail how both accounts of her birth depict her mother as being abused by a god. The whole narrative scope of the episodes is filled with violence and abuse, yet when we read about Helen, she is separated from the war, with no violence inflicted upon her against her consent.

Despite her divine parentage, the *Iliad* does not bestow her with any divine power, her retrieval is only shown as a cause of the war, but curiously, she is always referred to as the "blameless". The only time Helen is blamed directly is by the famed fighter Achilles. In book nine, Achilles raises the question of fighting this war on Helen's part,

And why was it the son of Atreus assembled and led here
These people? Was it not for the sake of lovely-haired Helen?
Are the sons of Atreus alone among mortal men the ones
Who love their wives? (9.338-41)

Achilles is the only character in the *Iliad* to vocally insinuate that Helen is the cause for this war. He raises this question to Odysseus who has come to convince him to re-join the war. Achilles' question can be seen as a deflection of his own responsibilities.

¹³ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 27.

¹⁴ VUKOVIĆ, GLAVAN, "The Indo-European Daughter Of The Sun: Greek Helen, Vedic Saranyu And Slavic Morana", p. 391.

Helen's divine birth and beauty, comparable to one of Aphrodite's, have direct ties to the Trojan War. When Gaia complained to Zeus about the overburdening of Earth's plains, Zeus promised a catastrophic war which would lead to the death of thousands, and this is the Trojan War. To set in motion a war on such a huge scale, there must be a cause so stupendous as to force this enormous number of men against one another. Helen is used as a pawn in this divine machination, much like Draupadī, and thus, in the godly game, she is bestowed with unearthly beauty that would lead to the destruction of civilisations.

Unlike the *Iliad*, the *Mahābhārata* provides exhaustive background to the main characters in the epic narrative. The first thing we need to understand about Draupadī's birth is that it was not desired, nor expected. To unravel the details of her birth, first we must take a few steps back, and begin at the time of her father's youth. King Drupada of Pāñcāla studied at a *gurukul* with Drona, both being good friends to each other. Drupada, who would go on to become a king in the future, promised Drona half his kingdom. Unfortunately, he was not able to keep this promise, and Drona was ultimately robbed of what he was owed by his companion. This was followed by a series of misfortunes, as Drona was so poor that he could barely afford basic needs for his son. Ultimately, he comes to the court of his childhood friend, king Drupada, but he is not received warmly. This started the great enmity between two dear friends.

Drona was appointed as the teacher for the Kauravas and the Pāñḍavas for his excellent archery skills. When his pupils became of age, he asked them to attack Pāñcāla and take half of the kingdom, which was successfully executed. This loss infuriated King Drupada, thus fuelling his seeking of revenge on Drona. Since he already lost the war against Drona, and victory against such an opponent was nigh impossible, he sought another way to procure his triumph. He requested several *brahmins* to perform a rite ensuring a birth of a powerful son, whose strength would lead to the killing of Drona. Thus Drupada was blessed with the boy Dhṛṣṭadyumna, possessing divine youth, clothed in the colour of fire. As said in the *Mahābhārata*:

This fear-averting
prince, who shall raise the fame of the Pāñcālas and dispel the king's
grievance, has been born for the destruction of Drona.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Mahābhārata*, 1.11.40-41. Trans. from BUITENEN, *The Mahābhārata: 1 - The Book of the Beginning*.

Soon after the birth of the son, a young maiden arose from the centre of the altar. This woman being Draupadī. She rose from the sacrificial fire as a gift to king Drupada, even though he did not explicitly desire her creation. The same disembodied voice which spoke after the birth of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, spoke again after Draupadī's birth, and it proclaimed:

Superb among
fair-waisted maiden shall in time accomplish the purpose of the Gods,
and because of her, great danger shall arise for the barons.¹⁶

This proclamation contained more than just a promise, it contained a threat of imminent danger, and an unsubtle hint towards this woman taking a fundamental part in the machinations of the gods. She was named Kṛṣṇā due to her dark complexion, and she has generally been known as Kṛṣṇā Draupadī, the latter being her patronymic name. Born from the altar of a sacrificial rite which has its foundations in enmity and desire for death, Draupadī promised much more than the demise of one person. The disembodied voice at her birth entrusted her with tasks of a much larger scale than her brother. She would lead the threads of destiny to much grander destruction, cleansing of the World from evil, and overpopulation.

Unlike Helen, Draupadī's birth has direct ties to the wrecking following her wake. With this picture of an abominable threat hanging in the air, Draupadī's physical appearance contrasts in its divinity and beauty. She is described as:

well-favored and beautiful Daughter of the Pāñcālas, heart-fetching,
with a waist shaped like an altar. She was dark, with eyes like lotus
petals, her hair glossy black and curling – a lovely Goddess who had
chosen a human form. The fragrance of blue lotuses wafted from her
to the distance of a league, the shape she bore was magnificent, and
no one was her peer on earth.¹⁷

It is believed that Draupadī is the embodiment of Śrī, the goddess of prosperity.¹⁸ Another point where her birth differs from Helen's is Helen's origin in the union of a mother and a father. In Draupadī's case, she is not born out of a womb, rather, she is born out of the sacrificial fire. But it is true that both the heroines have somewhat unusual births. Draupadī's physical appearance at the time of her birth describes her beauty as one that cannot be

¹⁶ *Mahābhārata*, 1.11.45-46. Trans. from BUITENEN, *The Mahābhārata: 1 - The Book of the Beginning*.

¹⁷ *Mahābhārata*, 1.11.42-44.

¹⁸ HILTEBEITEL, ERNDL, *Is The Goddess a Feminist?*, p. 118

contested on this Earth. Another unusual factor involved in her birth is her emerging as a full-grown maiden. In a way, she is robbed of her childhood, stripped of any innocence in the moment of her advent. Her beauty would soon become an important tool in the political games of her marriage that we will discuss in the next section.

Both the female protagonists, being divine from birth, show a certain similarity to the famed (male) heroes and their divine births. It is to be noted that in the narrative females are either goddesses, or normal human beings, very few can be attributed such divine birth presented before. It is even more striking to note that these female characters are either incarnations of Goddesses or divine themselves, but they're dealt with by the narrative as if they were mere ordinary women.

B) Marriage

As previously stated, the *Iliad* does not provide much background on the characters, but there is no doubt about Helen's incomparable beauty, as described in the previous section. Her marriage solidified her glamorous beauty even further, as suitors from all over Greece came for her hand with riches to appease her. Her beauty was renowned amongst the Achaians, and noble suitors tried to win her hand through displays of their wealth. Since there were many noble suitors competing, Tyndareus (adoptive father to Helen) made them all take an oath to accept the choice of the suitable groom, and also to defend Helen in case of any future problem. Her suitors readily pledged, and thus the whole event went smoothly. Menelaos from Mycenae was chosen as Helen's husband as he was the one possessing the greatest riches. The choice of a husband was not Helen's, but her father's, and her brothers'. In that moment, she, was just a showpiece on a pedestal whose future was being drawn on the board of fate by her male guardians.

As a consequence of Menelaos's marriage to Helen, he became the ruler of Sparta. When Helen left Sparta for Troy, Menelaos's rule came under threat, since the true legitimacy of the throne lied within Helen. Waging war against Troy and retrieving Helen from another who claims to have wed her, held special significance for Menelaos, because Helen's current husband might claim the throne of Sparta, as he did at the time of his marriage to Helen. She initially inherited the kingdom through her mortal mother, the Spartan queen Leda, and after her mother's death, she became the queen of Sparta. When Menelaos waged war against Troy

to demand the return of Helen and his possessions, did he mean his physical wealth, or the claim to his title emanating from his marriage to Helen?

Helen's second marriage was to Paris. When Paris chose Aphrodite during the beauty contest of the goddesses, he was gifted the power to seduce the most beautiful woman on Earth. The most beautiful woman was Helen, but, unfortunately, she was married to Menelaos at that time. Bestowed with divine seduction powers from Aphrodite, Paris managed to seduce Helen while being a guest in her husband's court. They both eloped to Troy with stolen wealth from Sparta, leaving behind Menelaos and Helen's twelve-year-old daughter, Hermione. After eloping from Sparta, Helen presumably married Paris in Troy, as it is mentioned multiple times in the *Iliad*. The word "abduction" has often been used in reference to the flight of Helen with Paris. I argue that it is not entirely suitable to call it an abduction. It is true that it is impossible to actually know whether Paris abducted Helen or if she willingly escaped with him. Her later behaviour does not entirely indicate her being in Troy unwillingly, but we will discuss this more in depth in the next section.

Draupadī's svayamvara was a huge show of pomp and wealth, the whole marital area was decorated beautifully, and grand seats were arranged for all the noble suitors coming for her hand. Her groom was chosen through this ritual. She did not have much choice in this matter. The marriage festival went on with the entertainment, and on the sixteenth day, Draupadī appeared for the actual ceremony of choosing her husband. Helen's method of choosing her groom is starkly different to Draupadī's; because Helen lived within a matrilinear system her husband would rule her kingdom and thus the choice was made in favour of the wealthiest of all the suitors. But for Draupadī, it meant an alliance between two kingdoms through marriage. Although *svayamvara* means self-choice, Draupadī had very little choice in the matter of picking her husband. The whole event was planned by her father and her brother, very much like in the case of Helen. It should be noted that Earth's most beautiful women were being offered to the highest bidder, while they sat on a pedestal, all dolled-up, without the right to speak on the matter of their life partner. They were just being valued for their beauty and their royal status. These women were solely valued by the merit of utility they brought to their male partners. Draupadī's father always wished for her to marry Arjuna, but a fair chance at a *svayamvara* is impossible, if the groom is already chosen. Instead, he decided to make the suitors hit an extremely high target using a heavy bow, keeping in mind that Arjuna was an excellent archer.

Hear ye, all kings who are gathered here!
Mark bow and target, and mark these arrows.
You must hit the mark with these five arrows
By shooting through this hole in the wheel.¹⁹

This competition that had been designed to be won by an excellent archer was attended by numerous noble warriors from many kingdoms. Among them, in the crowd, Arjuna was present with his four brothers disguised as *brahmins*. Dhṛṣṭadyumna announced the names of the contestants and asked his sister to select the victor at the end of the competition.

These and many other princes of many countrysides, all these barons renowned on earth have come to sue for you, my dear. These brave men shall shoot at the great target to win you. And you, beautiful princess, will choose the one who hits it.²⁰

These sentences not only inform Draupadī about whom she is supposed to choose but also put her in a position where she becomes only a prize for the victor. The question of women being a possession will come into play in the dice match episode, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

The poet author describes these eminent warriors as struck by a raw desire for love at the sight of Draupadī, but all of them failed at the task of winning her hand in marriage. The bow was so strong that they were unable to cord the string. The five Pāṇḍava brothers were “all struck by the arrows of Love”,²¹ and they could not stop gazing at Draupadī. Alas, they did not compete, apart for one brother. When all the kings were finally defeated, Arjuna got up to compete, but being in disguise as a *brahmin*, he was not warmly welcomed. Arjuna could easily put the string on the bow and hit the high target with the dexterity of a skilled archer. Losing the contest for Draupadī to a *brahmin* was not well received by the kings and the other nobles present, as they felt humiliated for being bested by someone who was not on their level.

Having won in the lists, he took the woman
Whilst the twiceborn brahmins paid him homage.
And the miracle-monger strode from the pit,

¹⁹ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.33-34.

²⁰ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.21-22.

²¹ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.10.

And after him followed she, his wife.²²

A commotion took place, and the kings challenged the validity of this victory. A fight broke out between the kings and the two Pandu sons (Arjuna and Bhīma). Unlike Helen’s marriage ceremony, the newly endowed groom was not accepted peacefully by the other suitors. Instead, they took up arms at the very first chance. Finally, Kṛṣṇa had to interfere in the fight after recognising the two brothers as the Pāṇḍavas. He proclaimed that “The maiden was won according to Law”,²³ and this made the kings give up their fight and retreat in a divine defeat. The Pāṇḍavas returned to their shelter along with Draupadī, and called out to their mother who was inside:

Spoke to Kuntī of Draupadī, “Look what we found!”
She was inside the house without seeing her sons
And she merely said, “Now you share that together!”²⁴

This one sentence turned Draupadī’s life upside down, because a word spoken is set in stone, and cannot be taken back, unless committing an unlawful act, *adharmā*. Kuntī, realising her mistake, asked for Yudhiṣṭhira’s advice on this conundrum. Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, being the upholder of *the* Law, was the most fitting person to solve this issue. He asked Arjuna to marry Draupadī with proper marriage rites, but Arjuna refused this, stating, that the elder brother has a right to get married before the younger one. He was not willing to go against the Law (*dharma*). While contemplating what to do next, Yudhiṣṭhira noticed that the five brothers, the “boundlessly lustrous men gazed at Draupadī, their love became evident, churning their senses”.²⁵ Yudhiṣṭhira, accepting this shared love, came to the decision that “The lovely Draupadī shall be the wife of all of us!”²⁶ Thus, it was decided. Draupadī would become the common wife of the five brothers.

While the men play games with the future of this one woman, she does not utter a single word. She, being a *kshatriya*, does not protest being married to a *brahmin*, neither does she comment on being the common wife of five brothers, a state which would be looked down upon in the society. By not challenging the men’s decisions she has exhibited the qualities of *pativrata*, wifely duties towards her husband, accepting all thrown in her way. This unusual marriage was unsurprisingly not accepted by king Drupada, but, alas, sage

²² *Mahābhārata*, 1.11.20.

²³ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.33.

²⁴ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.182.1.

²⁵ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.14.

²⁶ *Mahābhārata*, 1.12.15.

Vyāsa came to the rescue and revealed to Drupada the true identities of the Pāṇḍavas. He described Draupadī as an anxious maiden who prayed for a virtuous husband to god Śiva, and she was granted five husbands who would possess these virtues. Sage Vyāsa managed to convince king Drupada, and Draupadī was thus married off to the five brothers with the rules of this union formally set in order to maintain a smooth functioning of their domestic life. Draupadī suddenly faced a challenge: she was prepared to serve only one husband, but when five husbands came into her life, maintaining a household required extensive resilience and mental fortitude. Nonetheless, she managed her household and married life in dignity, satisfying the demands of everyone, with dutiful dedication and love.

C) Resilience through difficult times

Hardships are who we are, for the struggles we overcome add to the twists and turns of the road of life. Photons, not people, travel in a straight line. The ability to navigate our life through the challenges thrown our way defines us. Our heroines from these two epics are no strangers to hardships in life. They have been dealt more challenges than most can even imagine. Through these tumultuous periods of life, these women strove to preserve themselves, because they were all alone, lost in the midst of many. This section will deal with how these women faced hardships with all the tools they had at their disposal.

The *Iliad* is a narrative spanning a fraction of the Trojan war which has been going on for ten years. In fact, the exact chronology of the events presented is heavily debated among scholars of the work.²⁷ In this time, Helen appears six times. In the grand scheme of the war, it may seem like Helen does not appear often, but it is quite impressive for a woman character to appear six times during the narrative of a war which is primarily male driven. During these comparatively brief glimpses, we can see a woman who is “sarcastic, defiant, regretful, complaisant, ashamed, wistful, and resigned.”²⁸ In comparison to Draupadī’s appearance in the *Mahābhārata*, Helen is not as visible or vocal, but we have to keep in mind that the *Mahābhārata* encompasses Draupadī’s whole lifetime on earth, while the *Iliad* only accounts for a few dozen days during a violent war. Helen’s first appearance is in Book 3 when goddess Iris appears in front of her, disguised as her sister-in-law, and invites Helen to watch the duel between her current and former husbands. Helen was weaving at the time when Iris

²⁷ TAPLIN, “Homeric soundings: the shaping of the *Iliad* and HOMER”, RIEU *The Iliad* In: ERICKSON “How many days does Homer’s *Iliad* cover?”

²⁸ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 27.

came. This can be seen as a typical woman-coded work, but Helen was in fact weaving scenes from the Trojan war:

a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles
of Trojans, breaker of horses, and bronze-armored Achaians,
struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god. (3.126-28)

It is very clear that Helen understands the impact of the war, the losses on both sides, and the poet himself also hints to the fact that Helen might be feeling a sense of guilt for her role in this great conflict. Iris' call makes her melancholic and reminiscent of her homeland, her former husband, and her parents.

Her second appearance is at the Skaian gates where king Priam is seated with the elders of the city to watch the duel between Menelaos and Paris. As she approaches the tower, the elders erupt in murmur amongst themselves, discussing how Helen is not to blame, but instead it is the fault of her beauty which can be likened to that of an immortal goddess. Priam calls out to Helen and tells her: "I am not blaming you: to me the gods are blameworthy" (3.164). He emphasises her being blameless, thus making her feel welcome at this assembly. King Priam will keep emphasizing this fact throughout his whole interaction with her. This speaks to the acceptance by her new family. On the other hand, Helen immediately blames herself in a response to Priam's comment:

Always to me, beloved father, you are feared and respected;
and I wish bitter death had been what I wanted, when I came hither
following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen,
my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age.
It did not happen that way: and now I am worn with weeping. (3.172-76)

Her response hints to a sense of guilt, self-blame, and respect for her father-in-law. She refers to Priam as her "beloved father" which is an indication of her self-integration into the family and the familial structures. She does not deny her active role in eloping with Paris, but she expresses her guilt and remorse over these actions. Although it is a matter of debate whether Helen was abducted, and the Achaians believe she has been taken against her will, here she clearly presents her own agency in leaving her family and her daughter behind. She seems to take some responsibility for her actions and wishes death upon herself, a possible indication to her feelings of guilt. Her harsh statements regarding herself and her actions reveal her disillusionment and her utter loneliness, yet her enigmatic nature is also

characteristic of her, and thus is shown by the vagueness of her statement.²⁹ However, we must ponder on the fact of how such a huge responsibility must weigh down on her mental health. She then answers Priam's question about the Achaian warriors, showing off the Queen of Sparta hidden away in her. She speaks about these men as a proud queen complemented by a touch of familiarity. She reminisces about her past and her *patria*. The way she speaks shows an innate knowledge about the Achaians. This exchange between her and Priam showcases Helen as a proud Spartan woman, indicating her skills of diplomacy.

The duel between Menelaos and Paris could not be concluded, because Aphrodite intervened to save the latter. She then disguised herself as an old woman to lure Helen to Paris' bedroom, but Helen recognized the goddess in an instant and rebuked her:

Strange divinity! Why are you still so stubborn to beguile me? (3.399)

This question indicates to us that Helen is well aware of Aphrodite's seduction powers which she gifted to Paris. This interaction between Helen and Aphrodite is not something that can happen between any ordinary woman and a celestial being. Helen speaks with an authority in her voice and even goes so far as to insinuate that Aphrodite would like to lay with Paris. Her speech is fuelled by anger and sarcasm, with Helen pained by her recent visit at the Skaian gate. She is mourning the loss of her status as the queen of Sparta, and she feels guilty about her own moral failure in facing the desire for Paris seeded by Aphrodite. The loss she is experiencing gives her the strength to scold a goddess. It should be noted how Helen immediately recognises Aphrodite even in disguise. It could be due to the fact that Helen herself is semi-divine. She also refuses to go to Paris' bedchamber in the fear that Trojan women would laugh at her, yet she had lived in Troy for ten years with Paris. Helen shows a sudden need for approval by the people she is surrounded with – it might be because she is feeling the pressure of the war and the losses incurred on both the sides on her account. She does join Paris in his bedchamber after Aphrodite threatens her, but she does not refrain from insulting Paris for losing the match against Menelaos, going so far as to wish for his death, an uncharacteristic action of a wife. Helen had been seduced by divine powers in her elopement and she is being consumed by guilt at this moment, but despite that she does not speak of returning home. She blames herself for the death, the loss of life, but never speaks of returning home, effectively physically impeding peace, even if the matter is outside of her

²⁹ KRIETER-SIPRO, *Book III Homer's Iliad. The Basel Commentary*, p. 75.

agency. Instead, she acts in favour of her current family in order to be viewed in a good light. Her behaviour remains ambiguous.

In book six, when Hektor comes to summon Paris to re-join the battlefield, he finds Helen sitting with her handmaidens, directing their work. She had been fully integrated into her household life in Troy. When Hektor scolds Paris for hiding from the war, Paris reassures him that Helen had convinced him to join the war effort again. This contradicts with the previous statement from Helen, when she says that Paris should not go to the battlefield again, lest he be killed. Helen had a change of heart after spending time with Paris in his bedchamber. She speaks to Hektor, her brother-in-law, affectionately, telling him:

But come now, come in and rest on this chair, my brother,
since it is on your heart beyond all that the hard work has fallen
for the sake of dishonored me and the blind act of Alexandros,
us two, on whom Zeus set a vile destiny, so that hereafter
we shall be made into things of songs for the men of the future. (6.354-58)

Her dialogues are tangled with feelings of guilt, endearment, remorse, blame, and melancholy. She refers to Hektor as a brother and asks him to take a seat. She then goes on to sympathise with the effort that Hektor is putting in on her account. For the first time, she blames the gods for this misfortune, this adversity that she and Paris had undergone. She wishes that they live in immortality, in songs by the men of the future, in the hearts of people, in an ultimate desire to achieve eternal glory. Men fight in wars to achieve glory, so that the future generations remember their names. Helen's wish follows the same path, in remembrance of the hardship she endured with Paris.

Book twenty-four, the last book of the *Iliad*, ends with mourning for Hektor's death. It is customary for close family members to be present at the formal lamentations for the dead, therefore, Helen's presence at Hektor's mourning shows her place in this family. She grieves him, for Hektor was her only supporter in Troy, and helped her accustom herself to this strange place when she came here "twenty" years ago, a reference to her prolonged sorrow. Her sorrow is for the death of a dear friend.

It is very difficult to categorise Helen as a victim. She shows agency and takes responsibility of her actions. Her dialogues are very ambiguous and do not speak clearly to what her heart truly desires. This could be a mechanism of self-preservation, a way to cope with this foreign land, far from her own. She confronts her guilt and remorse which seem to be eating her up on the inside. Being a female, she uses one of the few tools at her disposal:

The tool of speech. She ensures her own protection, both mental and physical, in her current situation.

In the *Mahābhārata*, it is not possible for us to properly analyse Draupadī's every interaction in this thesis because of their abundance. We will only focus on one major event where her role shifts the narrative drive. We will discuss the dice match episode.

After Draupadī's polyandrous marriage to the Pāṇḍavas, they all went to live at Indraprastha, a part of the Kuru Kingdom. They built a magnificent assembly hall with the help of Maya. Their splendour and glamour were the envy of many. Their kingdom was prosperous, and their subjects were content. Yudhiṣṭhira decided to arrange for his Royal Consecration, and kings from all over the World were invited for this occasion. Duryodhana, along with his brothers, also attended this function. Unfortunately, Duryodhana fell victim to a trick, an illusion of the palace, and for this he was mocked ruthlessly. This was not taken lightly by Duryodhana. On top of that, the grandeur and success of the Pāṇḍavas flared a hot burning jealousy inside of Duryodhana, and he asked his uncle Śakuni for help. They both hatched a plan for inviting the Pāṇḍavas for a game of dice, knowing that Śakuni can easily defeat Yudhiṣṭhira, as he is an expert gambler. Yudhiṣṭhira accepted the invitation and Śakuni played the dice while Duryodhana placed his bets. This fateful dice match was played in front of the elders, and it did not start well, because Yudhiṣṭhira lost everything in his initial bets. He started with hundred thousand gold pieces, eventually reaching a point where he lost both his army and his treasury. At this point, Vidura warns Duryodhana against playing any further, but Duryodhana accuses him of treason for such a suggestion. This would have been a great point for Yudhiṣṭhira to stop playing, but bound by *dharma*, he continued. Soon he lost his country and then all four of his brothers. When he had nothing more to bet, he bet himself, and he lost again. He was urged on by Śakuni to play for Draupadī, and he simply complied:

She is not too short or too tall, not too black or too red, and her eyes are red with love – I play you for her! Eyes like the petals of autumn lotuses, a fragrance as of autumn lotuses, a beauty that waits on autumn lotuses – the peer of the Goddess of Fortune!³⁰

Yudhiṣṭhira continued to describe Draupadī in a sensual manner while betting her. He forgot that she was the mother to their children and also the wife of his brothers. The only

³⁰ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.33-34. Trans. from BUITENEN, *The Mahābhārata: 2 - The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

adjectives that escaped Yudhiṣṭhira’s mouth were praises of her beauty, her physical self. Like Helen, Draupadī is endlessly objectified. Upon winning Draupadī, Duryodhana summoned her to the court as a slave. When the usher went to call Draupadī, she asked him three questions in a burst: “*How do you speak so, an usher? What Rajāputra would wager his wife? The king was befooled and crazed by the dicing. Was there nothing else for him to stake?*” In these questions, she displays anger, incredulity, and sarcasm.³¹ Draupadī’s first instinct is to make her status as a queen clear to the usher. Secondly, her question enquires about her position as a wife. She then questions the validity of the order. These questions reflect Draupadī’s self-identification quite beautifully. After receiving an explanation from the usher, she sends him back with a question that trumps the intellect of all the great men in the court who claim to be upholders of *dharma*.

Then go to the game and, son of a bard, ask in the assembly,
 “Bhārata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” When you have
 found out, come and take me, son of a bard!³²

Hiltebeitel argues that she uses these questions for two particular goals. First, she wants the usher to ask this question in the “assembly”, paving the way for it to be presented in the court of law: It is now a matter of justice in a court of law. Secondly, she presents a riddle. Even though she already knows the answer to this question, she is reiterating it for the men in the court to think it through again and question their own *dharma*. Although one is forced to translate, “What did you lose first, *yourself* or me? she also literally says, “What did you lose first, self or me?”³³ This question is not only loaded with legal precedent but also questions the nature of self. It is a question worthy of a philosophical debate. Draupadī had received education indirectly by the way of overhearing the lessons given to her brother from learned sages. This informal schooling provided her with knowledge about *dharma*, comparable to the one of her learned husbands, an unusual feat for women of that time. The implication of her question is multifaceted in the court as the usher adds his own touch to it, “As the owner of whom did you lose us? So, queries Draupadī. “Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?”³⁴ Hearing this, Yudhiṣṭhira did not move, as if he had lost consciousness. One wonders, if Yudhiṣṭhira was speechless now and his self was lost, how did he have the

³¹ HILTEBEITEL, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 242.

³² *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.7.

³³ HILTEBEITEL, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 242.

³⁴ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.8.

agency to bet his wife? This doubt is solidified further by the usher's modification of the question and his usage of the word "owner". Yudhiṣṭhira, having lost everything, himself included, was the owner of nothing. When he lost himself, he lost everything that he had held rights upon. If there was any right to Draupadī, it was now lost. But Yudhiṣṭhira, being King Dharma, and the ultimate upholder of laws, bets Draupadī, which, again, is a contradiction in itself, because Draupadī is shared by her other four brothers which does not give this sole right to Yudhiṣṭhira alone. One might argue that he had lost his four brothers, so they did not have any say over anything. Then it is also true for his own case. Draupadī's question makes everyone waver and ponder upon the core values of *dharma* itself. With one question she managed to give rise to doubts in everyone's righteousness present in the court and show her own agency as a free woman. This infuriates Duryodhana even further, because he never gave any thought to her own agency. Duryodhana orders Draupadī to come to the court and ask the question herself. Upon hearing this, Yudhiṣṭhira gives an order to his wife so that "In her one garment, knotted below, weeping and in her courses, she went to the hall, the Pañcāla princess, and stood before her father-in-law."³⁵

There are three points of analysis to this dialogue. Firstly, this is the time the court finds out that Draupadī is menstruating and is clad in only one cloth. Calling a woman to present herself in front of the elders of the family when she is on her period, and is bleeding, is inhumane for even a slave girl. There are several festivals all over India taking place during an auspicious period when the Earth should not be ploughed as goddess Earth is menstruating. This is considered sacred.³⁶ During such a delicate time of the month, a woman is being ordered to present herself immediately. Secondly, Yudhiṣṭhira refers to Draupadī as "Pañcāla princess". He is well aware that the status of her being a princess of Pañcāla could not be bet by Yudhiṣṭhira's own volition. It is a right that had been bestowed to her by her father, and only he can take it away, him being the king of that land. She had been repeatedly referred to as the "princess". The usher also calls her "Yājñaseni", meaning "a woman born out of fire". This title is also hers by birth and not for anyone else to lose in a bet. The only status that she could have possibly lost in a game of dice by her husband is her status of being the queen of Indraprastha and wife to the five brothers. We cannot assume Yudhiṣṭhira is aware of this fact as he interrupts his moment of trance to give his order, making one wonder whether his loss of consciousness is just a symptom of his guilt and shame over his own actions. Thirdly, he gives an order to his wife. That would imply his husbandly rights over his

³⁵ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.15.

³⁶ Personal knowledge of Hindu traditions.

wife, but he had just lost them to Duryodhana. If Yudhiṣṭhira is the son of Dharma, and he himself is King Dharma, then why is he ambiguous about his own speech? This could be attributed to his brief lapse of consciousness, but that is debatable.

Duryodhana repeats after Yudhiṣṭhira and commands the usher to bring Draupadī but the usher is too afraid of the princess’s wrath and declines. Duryodhana then commands his brother Duḥśāsana to fetch Draupadī to the court. Draupadī tries to flee to the Kaurava’s women’s quarter, but Duḥśāsana grabs her by her thick long black hair and drags her to court.

Duḥśāsana, stroking her, led her and brought her,
That Kṛṣṇa of deep black hair, to the hall,
As though unprotected amidst her protectors,
And tossed her as wind tosses a plantain tree.³⁷

Even though it is a violent scene of abuse, the poet still describes Draupadī by one of her external features. The sentence about her being unprotected amidst her protectors could not be any truer. A husband’s primary *dharma* towards his wife *is* to protect her. Despite having five husbands, she was not protected. Even though it could be argued that her husbands were slaves, and could not do anything on their own will, there were several elder members of the family present in the court, and none of them even flinched to protect the dignity of the royal bride.

Draupadī continues to protest, stating her menstruating situation, but Duḥśāsana lends a deaf ear to her pleas and taunts her to call the gods to protect her. Draupadī now gets to ask her question in the gambling hall, furious for her mistreatment, dragged and tossed about by Duḥśāsana, hair dishevelled, menstrual blood spotting her single garment, taunted as a *dasi*.³⁸ She addresses her question to the “men who have studied the books”³⁹, a veiled insult masked as a compliment. Her words burn through the men present, and then she goes on to address her husband:

The king, son of Dharma, abides by the Law,
And the Law is subtle, for the wise to find out:
But even at his behest I would not
Give the least offense and abandon my virtue.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.24.

³⁸ HILTEBEITEL, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 246.

³⁹ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.29.

⁴⁰ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.31.

Her words challenge the very understanding of *dharma* by these learned men, and they fail to answer her properly. Her husbands are inflamed by her sidelong gaze, hurting more than losing their kingdom or all their riches. One can only imagine, if Draupadī's single glance holds such power, then what staggering effect might her questions and her presence create in this court. Their inability to provide an answer to Draupadī's question points to the fact that there is more to *dharma* than meets the eye. There is more to ponder upon than what is taught in the books. Most importantly, it points to the fact that *dharma* needs to be an evolving subject, and not just a set of rules instructed by men. Draupadī also teaches us to question, even in the worst circumstances, and to demand justice when no one else is on your side. Her argument is the first step in positing that women should be worthy of a humane treatment, and not just as objects. She shows exemplary behaviour of bravery and diplomacy, and uses the only tool available to her to save herself, because the men were unable to do anything in such a critical situation. Bhīṣma is the first one to attempt to answer her question, but he is unable to provide her with a solution to the impossible riddle. Draupadī does not waver, she keeps repeating her question and demanding an answer. She is the only one to acknowledge that Śakuni must have used trickery during the match. Her comments are met only with silence from everyone, except for Duḥśāsana, who continues to demean her. This silence by the elders conveys the impression of admission of guilt, or possibly an acknowledgement of the truth spoken in the court. Bhīma is the one to speak up next, and he admonishes Yudhiṣṭhira against such a despicable behaviour towards their wife. He says that even prostitutes are treated with more dignity than the treatment Draupadī received. Arjuna reminds his brother that he is overstepping his "highest dharma" by going against their elder brother. One can only wonder how the highest dharma can involve listening to your elder brother, but excluding the protection of dignity of your wife, who you're sworn to protect. Draupadī has shown her character to be much more than simply the wife of the Pāṇḍavas, but the Pāṇḍavas on the other hand have lost themselves both in a bet, and in a quest to fulfil just a singular aspect of their duties. Vikarṇa (younger brother of the Kauravas) speaks up in favour of Draupadī, but he is shut down by Karṇa who claims that Draupadī is a whore, because she is shared by five men, and there is absolutely nothing wrong in dragging a whore to the court, clothed or naked. He continues demanding the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī to be stripped naked. Without a word of protest against such a vilifying comment, the Pāṇḍavas quietly take off their upper garments, and sit down obediently.

Duḥśāsana grabs Draupadī's robe and pulls on it, but, miraculously, more clothes appear to cover her. He continues trying to disrobe her until he is exhausted and ashamed.

Divine intervention saved Draupadī from being naked on her period in front of a full court, but mortal men failed to give this simple courtesy and uphold the basic rights of this woman. This outrageous action only prompts more debate in the court, but Draupadī continues to showcase her rhetoric prowess and her scholarly argument undeterred while weeping profusely. She uses her verbal skills in her own defence, but she never crosses the boundaries of *dharma*, or forgets about her *pativrata*.

Duḥśāsana is commanded to drag Draupadī to her quarters, but she holds her ground and continues to press for an answer. Her verses make the reader sympathise with her while also making them realize the gravity of the situation. The argument among men goes on until:

And there in the house of the King Dhṛtarāṣṭra
At the agnihotra a jackal barked,
The donkeys, they brayed in response, O king,
And so on all sides the grisly birds.⁴¹

The horrifying sounds scare everyone present in court. This is the second divine intervention in the episode, which raises a question in my heart: If these men present in the court are strict followers of *dharma* and are bound by it, presumably letting play out such a heinous act in front of them because of it, then why were there multiple needs of divine intervention? Can it be speculated that gods themselves are committing *adharmā* then?

Terrified by the horrific sounds, Dhṛtarāṣṭra grants two boons to Draupadī. She asks for the freedom of her five husbands and for the return of their weapons. Dhṛtarāṣṭra offers her a third boon, but she declines it, stating her own *dharma*. It is astounding that in a court where the subtleties of *dharma* had been debated over and over by many learned men, a woman managed to uphold it even in the face of utmost insults and abuse. Karṇa, who had been the most insulting to Draupadī, could not help but praise her skills when she managed to free her husbands:

Of all the women of mankind, famous for their beauty, of whom we have heard, no one have we heard accomplished such a deed! While the Pārthas and the Dhartarastras are raging beyond measures, Kṛṣṇā Draupadī has become the salvation of the Pāṇḍavas! When they were sinking, boatless and drowning, in the plumbness ocean, the Pāñcālī became the Pāṇḍavas' boat, to set them ashore!⁴²

⁴¹ *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.22.

⁴² *Mahābhārata*, 2.27.64.1-3.

Coming from a man who has stooped so low as to call her a whore, this feels like a standing ovation. Furthermore, king Dhṛtarāṣṭra went so far as to return their kingdom and wish them to rule in peace. A woman single-handedly managed to do what a court full of men could not. After this dice match, Karṇa, Duryodhana, and Śakuni hatched the plan for another dice match, which later gets approved by Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Yudhiṣṭhira again accepts the match and loses the bet, which forces them to live in the forest for twelve years and one year in hiding. During this period, Draupadī faces abuse multiple times. She is failed over and over again by the men whose first duty is to protect her.

Helen and Draupadī differ much in their speech even though they both belong to male driven androcentric societies. This disparity can be attributed to their cultural difference, but nonetheless, these women show their agency and their intellect through diplomatic and scholarly discourse for self-preservation. They transition from silent wives to very powerful women who do not hesitate to speak their minds. Born from fire, Draupadī's anger held the power to scorch everyone, and her aristocratic upbringing and her education paved the way for a scholarly speech, and her womanly virtues made everyone sympathise with her. Helen's divinity, her proud status as a queen, her excellent ambiguous, yet diplomatic, dialogues, her love for her people, and her care and compassion, make her a woman worthy of praise and exaltation. These women also show extraordinary strength and nerve in difficult situations, from confronting a goddess, to challenging a court full of men, they do not shy away. They also show a very tight grip on their emotions, they think before letting their emotions overcome their common senses and wit. Unlike many men who refuse to fight in a war, because they could not handle their emotions taking the better of them, or men who could not control their feelings of envy and let it be the stepping stone for their own destruction.

As Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage" and these two women have been put centre stage. The limelight is on them. It means that they need to act in an exemplary way, but it also means that their roles are violent, and they must undergo severe hardship. They shine in their roles as the protagonists, but we must not forget about the characters in the back, obscured by the shadows of the centre player. Even though they are not in the front, it doesn't mean that their roles are any less important than others. The *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata* teach us what it means to be in the front and in the back, the narratives work like a well-oiled machine, every part necessary for its results. I will discuss more about these characters in the back, away from the main focus, in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 – The mighty men and the sources of their powers

The *Mahābhārata* and the *Iliad* both revolve around the lives and feats of mighty men with extraordinary powers and a strong will to follow strict moral codes. These men often possess divine parental heritage, but more than that, these men are shaped by their mothers. This chapter will put an emphasis on a woman's motherly role and how their love and devotion sculpt these men's lives.

A) Kuntī

Kuntī is the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, but more specifically, she is the birth mother of the three oldest sons, Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna. “Kuntī, also known as Pṛthā. “the Wide,” because of her “girlish wide eyes,” was the eldest child of Kṛṣṇa's paternal grandfather Śūra, a Yādava chief, and the father of Kṛṣṇa's father, Vasudeva.”⁴³ She was promised by Śūra to Kuntībhoja, her paternal aunt's son, who was childless. Kuntī was her patronymic name, as Kuntībhoja was her adoptive father. As a child, she was gifted to a relative, like the exchange of inanimate wealth. “I was a child playing with a ball in my hand when your grandfather gave me to Kuntībhoja as a friend to a great-souled friend. I was humiliated by my father and my maternal uncles, Foe-scorcher.”⁴⁴ Kuntī bitterly admits this to Kṛṣṇa. She is unhappy about her treatment as an object when she was a child. Her indignation is justified, as once again, we face an instance where a woman is used as a device subject to the owner's whims rather than a human being. During her stay at Kuntībhoja's kingdom, she served sage Durvāsas and pleased him with her efforts. He taught her a mantra and said to her, “whichever God you call up with this mantra, by this or that one's grace there be a son for you.”⁴⁵ Out of sheer curiosity, she used the mantra to invoke the Sun God. Her curiosity was thus satisfied, but now she was left with a son out of wedlock. She decided, against her heart's content, to let the baby flow with the river “to hide her misconduct and out of fear for her relatives.”⁴⁶ Adhiratha later adopts this child, and it comes to be called Karṇa. She keeps this secret hidden away from everyone including herself till Karṇa's demise.

Kuntī is married to Pāṇḍu, and, later on, Pāṇḍu marries Mādrī as well, which is not well received by Kuntī. Pāṇḍu had been cursed by a Ṛṣi during a hunting expedition, which

⁴³ HILTEBEITEL, *Freud's Mahābhārata*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ *Mahābhārata*, 1.7.1-3.

⁴⁵ *Mahābhārata*, 1.7.4-8.

⁴⁶ *Mahābhārata*, 1.7.13.

makes him unable to sire any children. This curse forces Pāṇḍu to leave his court life behind and go to the Himalayas with his two wives, because they wish to be beside their husband whom they love and cherish. Due to this peculiar predicament, Kuntī reveals that she knows a secret mantra through which she can beget sons. She is shown to be a benevolent woman, and she does not hesitate to share this mantra with Mādrī as well, who sires twins. Kuntī uses her chant thrice to get three sons from three gods:

King Yudhiṣṭhira, O king, was a portion of Dharma; Bhīmasena of the Wind; Arjuna of Indra; and Nakula and Sahadeva, matchless in beauty on earth, enchanting to all the world, were portions of the Aśvins.⁴⁷

These five sons would go on to be called the Pāṇḍavas. Soon after their birth, Pāṇḍu decides to break his self-imposed impotence, knowing full well the repercussions of his action – the curse he was once dealt meant that to attempt any conjugal activity is to face death. Mādrī, knowing she will perish as well, joins him in this deathly endeavour, because she feels that she would not be able to give an equal amount of love to all five sons, if she were the single mother. After their demise, Kuntī became the sole parent, and she had to navigate through the loss of her husband as well as giving equal love and support to all her children. She had to single-handedly manage her whole family, and set an example for them, so their upbringing doesn't end in vain. Kuntī's life had been wrought with hardships, from the loss of her first-born child, carrying this heavy burden of a secret in her heart, riding a single motherhood-ship, to the pressure of treating everyone the same, without any prejudice, but she always favoured her youngest son, Arjuna. At the end of the day, she was just a human, and it is not fair to expect so much from her. It can only be supposed that mothering five children lessened her pain of losing her first-born child, but it did not make it any easier for her to see Karṇa regularly in the court. According to a folk tradition, she would often start lactating when she saw Karṇa in the court as an adult.⁴⁸ This points to a deep unresolved trauma that had been pushed to the back, into her subconscious. Unfortunately, this is not the only wound she had been dealt since her childhood.

Being a single mother gave her full authority over her son's lives as she had been in full charge of them till their respective marriages. This means that she had no opportunity to explore her unresolved bereavements which remained suppressed inside of her while she was always the figure that her sons could depend upon. Her emotional needs were met only by her

⁴⁷ *Mahābhārata*, 1.7.85.

⁴⁸ HILTEBEITEL, *Freud's Mahābhārata*, p. 38.

role as a mother, and she submerged herself in it completely. Even though we only see her in the role of a mother, she was also a proud *ksatriya* with a hot-blooded temperament. She had never shied away from expressing her discontent regarding Yudhiṣṭhira's leadership of the Pāṇḍavas. She also possessed a deep understanding of *dharma*, and she reprimanded the king Dharma himself about his shortcomings in her pre-war message to the Pāṇḍavas:

Keśava, tell the dharma-minded King Yudhiṣṭhira, Your dharma has greatly declined; do not go wrong, my son. Since you have mere rote learning of the Veda without understanding or insight, your mind is possessed by mere recitation and looks to but a single dharma.⁴⁹

Time and time again, it is the women of the narrative who are reminding the son of *dharma* to review his stance on it and to look beyond the books and upon the real tangible World. She does not mince her words, she does not please him, but rather she rebukes him as the senior-most member of his closest family, and also as a sole parent. She is also not forgiving of the happenings of the dice match, and adds to her message:

Who could forgive that before your very eyes the Princess of Pañcāla, who had accumulated the merits of every dharma, was harshly insulted?⁵⁰

Her words not only remind Yudhiṣṭhira to understand the true essence of *dharma*, but they also point him to the failure that the lack of protection of his wife was. As a mother, she retains full rights to admonish her children's actions, and she does so without coddling them. These sentences also show her solidarity with Kṛṣṇā Draupadī as a woman.

Kuntī had been the quietest of all the epic's women in the forefront, but she could not contain herself any longer at the funeral of Karṇa.⁵¹ The motherly love for her first-born son, suppressed inside her, burst forth like a fountain of grief from a bereaved parent, and she revealed her secret to the five brothers. Yudhiṣṭhira was shocked and hurt by this revelation. He blames Kuntī for all the misfortunes that they suffered in the war, and curses women everywhere to be unable to keep secrets.⁵² In my opinion, Kuntī is not deserving of these harsh words from her son – all her life she had strived hard to fulfil her journey in motherhood and had given her sons her all and all of her. Moreover, the consequences of her

⁴⁹ *Mahābhārata*, 5.54.2-4.

⁵⁰ *Mahābhārata*, 5.54.15-17.

⁵¹ FITZGERALD, *The Mahābhārata* (Book 11&12), p. 21.

⁵² FITZGERALD, *The Mahābhārata* (Book 11&12), p. 22.

having a child out of wedlock would have been disastrous for her and her family. I argue this, mostly, because there had not been a single day in Kuntī's life when she was not grieved with the pain of losing her child. She carried this pain and this revelation like a heavy stone through her life's cruise, and only succumbed to it when she could not bear to carry it any further.

Her resilience and her ability to thrive in any situation is commendable, she is an alienated fighter in a man's world. She has executed her roles with utmost dedication, from an adopted daughter to her brief role as a wife, as a mother to the Pāṇḍavas, and then as a senior member of the family. Even though the five brothers are called the Pāṇḍavas, stating their patronymic name, Pāṇḍu had very little to do with their birth, or in fact their childhood. Kuntī invoked the gods and was the sole parent to them since their birth. It was due to her virtue that the five brothers have a divine parentage and can proudly associate themselves with divinity.

B) Thetis

Zeus desired a sea nymph called Thetis, but he could not be with her, because he feared that an offspring of a powerful goddess might threaten his rule. So, he married her off to the mortal king Peleus to reward him for warding off the advances of a mortal queen.⁵³ It is at this wedding that the "apple of discord" was tossed which led to the infamous beauty contest. Thetis did not willingly get married to Peleus, and as such her agency, or will, was severely limited, threatened, and executed against, in this matrimony. She had one offspring with him, called Achilles. He was semi-divine by the virtue of his mother and he grew up to be an excellent fighter. It has been suggested that the moment in which she is raped by Peleus effectively presents her loss of empowerment and status.⁵⁴ His divine destiny was to achieve glory as a fighter and be renowned for his skills. As the greatest fighter on earth, he was recruited for the Trojan War. The *Iliad* starts *in medias res* in the war's tenth year, and it describes the next period of the war. Achilles is fated to live a short but glorious life. These nine days mark the destructive anger of Achilles and the death of the Trojan warrior, Hektor.

In book one, King Agamemnon is forced to return his spoil of war, Chryseis, to stop the wrath of Apollo against the Achaian soldiers. This did not sit well with him, and blinded by arrogance and self-centeredness, he decided to take Achilles' war plunder, Briseis. Achilles is much hurt by this:

⁵³ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ PAPROCKI, VOS, WRIGHT, *The Staying Power of Thetis*.

weeping went and sat in sorrow apart from his companions
beside the beach of the gray sea looking out on the infinite water. (1.349-50)

He calls his divine mother from the water and speaks to her motherly love, imploring her to help him. Achilles believes that he must be rewarded with “god-given honor”, if he is fated to die young. He asks his mother for a favour from Zeus and reminds her that she once helped Zeus in a dispute with his fellow Olympian gods, and thus she is in a reciprocal position to ask for a favour to be returned. Achilles wishes for the Achaians to suffer heavily in their war efforts until he re-joins them. He decides to leave the battlefield in a show of defiance against Agamemnon’s act of taking his beloved Briseis. Thetis promises to talk with Zeus and make her son’s wishes come true. (1.360- 427). Achilles continues to sulk by his ships over the loss of his “prize”. There are certain issues present in these scenes, the first one being women kept as prizes. It is understandable that women were often taken as war spoils, but this particular war, fought in the name of a woman, brings forth the stark contrast between a royal woman, for whom thousands of men are killed, and a common woman, who is claimed as a prize and treated thus. Secondly, the famed hero, Achilles, resorts to weeping and despair in his ship, calling his mother to fulfil his wishes, which can be seen as a desperate method to deal with the harsh realities he cannot face. In the epic narrative, it feels unusual for a grown man to call his mother for help.

Thetis goes to Zeus and she grasps his chin with her right hand and says,

Father Zeus, if ever before in word or action
I did you favor among the immortals, now grant what I ask for.
Now give honor to my son short-lived beyond all other
mortals. Since even now the lord of men Agamemnon
dishonors him, who has taken away his prize and keeps it. (1.503-07)

Thetis’ request to Zeus on behalf of her son may be likened to that of a mother who is saddened by her child losing its toy. She uses her feminine wiles and manages to convince Zeus, even though he does not enjoy going against Hera. Thetis’ love for Achilles blinds her to the death and destruction that will follow this decision, as Zeus will grant her this wish, and, in order to fulfil it, he will drive the Trojan forces with divine power to wreak havoc on the Achaian forces. In book thirteen, when the war is going on with full force, Zeus wills the victory for the Trojans and Hektor, only to present Achilles with glory. It is very clear that Achilles is only driven by selfish desire for he is not moved by the slaughter of his soldiers

on the battlefield. He is well aware that Zeus will stop supporting the Trojans as soon as Achilles re-joins the war, as per the request of Thetis, yet he refrains from doing so. Achilles plays the flesh and blood of human beings for his own personal gain, and he is only moved to war when his companion, Patroklos, dies in the battlefield.

In book eighteen, Achilles gets to know about his dear companion Patroklos' death. He is shattered by this news and lays down on the sand. Upon hearing Achilles' cry, Thetis emerges from the sea with the daughters of Nereus. Sorrowing for Achilles, she asks him about his sadness.

My mother, all these things the Olympian brought to accomplishment.
But what pleasure is this to me, since my dear companion has perished,
Patroklos, whom I loved beyond all other companions (18.79-82)

He acknowledges his hubris in asking for the wish and the consequences that he had brought with it. Patroklos' death forces Achilles to fight Hektor and kill him in war, leading to the expedition of his fate, death being nigh. Patroklos' death sets the mood of the Achaian camp as one of mourning, but when Thetis visits her son in sorrow, she does not cry for Patroklos, as she never mentions his name. Her only worry is Achilles and his death in the near future. Being a mother, she is extremely worried about her son, which is only natural, but sometimes it makes her short-sighted, like in the case of her pleading with Zeus. It can be argued that she is overindulgent for Achilles because she knows his days are numbered and thus she wishes for those days to be full of glory.

Thetis also goes to Hephaistos to obtain a new armor for Achilles, since his armor had been taken by Hektor during his fight with Patroklos. Hephaistos is an expert blacksmith who fashions magnificent weapons and armor for the Olympian gods, and, by procuring an armor from him, Thetis elevates Achilles to the status of a god. In book nineteen, when Thetis brings the freshly made armor to Achilles, no one is able to gaze directly at it except for Achilles. It is for the first time that we get to know a little about Thetis' sorrow through her speech to Hephaistos,

Hephaistos, is there among all the goddesses on Olympos
one who in her heart has endured so many grim sorrows
as the griefs Zeus, son of Kronos, has given me beyond others?
Of all the other sisters of the sea he gave me to a mortal,
to Peleus, Aiakos' son, and I had to endure mortal marriage
though much against my will. And now he, broken by mournful
old age, lies away in his halls. Yet I have other troubles.

For since her has given me a son to bear and to raise up
conspicuous among heroes, and he shot up like a young tree.
I nurtured him, like a tree grown in the pride of the orchard. (18.429-38)

Thetis opens up and this is the first time we see her sorrows embroiling inside her, bubbling to the surface. She grieves her marriage to the mortal Peleus and expresses her dissatisfaction with Zeus for making her do this against her will. Her grievances are not just bound to the forceful marriage but also to Peleus' current state. I will reiterate my point again and say that in this epic, driven by the motive of retrieving a woman, many other women are treated in a similar fashion. Even though Thetis is a goddess, she still had to marry someone, explicitly against her own will. Although Thetis is not happy about her marriage, she loves her only son, and now, she is faced with the reality of losing him as well, cut in the prime of his youth. Her sorrows can be compared to the ones of Kuntī. Both mothers faced challenges in their lives, but still, they strove to be good parents to their children, keeping their miseries hidden. The virtues of motherhood shine bright through them.

Along with fetching a brand-new armor for Achilleus, she also keeps Patroklos' body fresh by feeding him "distilled ambrosia and red nectar, so that his flesh might not spoil." (19.39) This helped Achilleus find courage and motivation to fight again, lessening the worry weighing down on his mind.

Thetis' presence in the epic narrative also works towards reader's sympathies for Achilleus. In the *Iliad*, Hektor might be inclined to receive more sympathy than Achilleus simply because we find women around him who care for him, fearing his death. Achilleus is far from home and his prize Briseis had been taken away, hence Thetis fills in the lack of the feminine by her pre-mature mourning for his death, preparing the reader for the perishing of such a glorious fighter.

We talked about Thetis's love for Achilleus and how she goes to great lengths for him, but now we shall see how Achilleus can listen to his divine mother without a word of protest. In book twenty-four, after killing Hektor, Achilleus refused to return his body and mistreated his corpse by dragging it along his chariot, leaving it to rot. He was not inclined to listen to anyone regarding the return of the dead body. Thetis then comes to Achilleus on the behest of the Olympian gods who despise such a display of abhorrent behaviour against a celebrated fighter.

His honored mother came close to him and sat down beside him.
and stroked him with her hand and called him by name and spoke to him:

“My child, how long will you go on eating your heart out in sorrow and lamentation, and remember neither your food nor going to bed?” (24.125-30)

Thetis’ address to Achilles is filled with motherly love and her movements are like a soothing balm to the harsh wounds of this battle. She starts with her concerns about his eating and sleeping, very mortal foci. Even though she is a goddess, her concern about her son is not dissimilar to the one of every other mother. She advises him to return Hektor’s body and Achilles agrees to the prospect of it. The relationship that Thetis and Achilles share is unlike many mother-son relationships due to their special familial conditions, but it is also like many mother-son relationships when it comes to the motherly duties that Thetis showcases towards her son. And, as many other sons, Achilles seeks refuge in the arms of his mother divine.

In the *Mahābhārata*, the only relationship that can be compared to that of Thetis and Achilles is that of Gaṅgā and Bhīṣma. Even though many female characters in the *Mahābhārata* are touched by divinity, but they are not immortal, Gaṅgā is the only such immortal goddess that plays a role in the narrative.⁵⁵ Gaṅgā, upon getting married to Kuru king Samtanu, births seven sons. She drowns her first seven sons in the river, but Samtanu interferes, when she is about to drown her eighth son, Bhīṣma. She takes upon the responsibility of nurturing, protecting and instructing her son until the day comes that he must return to his father. Very much like Thetis, Gaṅgā’s appearance is fleeting in the narrative, and she does not reside with her mortal husband. It is interesting how both the goddesses in these two epics are related to water, Thetis being a sea nymph, and Gaṅgā a river goddess. Goddess Gaṅgā’s next big appearance is after Bhīṣma’s death where she grieves profusely for her mortal son slain on the battlefield. Both these immortal goddesses give birth to mortal sons who achieve eternal glory on the battlefield but also meet their demise there.

⁵⁵ HILTEBEITEL, *Freud’s Mahābhārata*, p. 97.

Chapter 4 – The subtle maneuvering of the narrative by the female drive

The aim of this chapter is to bring forth all the female characters who are not in the limelight but play important roles in the shaping of the narrative. In effect, we will explore the butterfly effect or the small ripples these characters create, which form into huge waves. In the previous chapter, we exclusively discussed the roles of mothers, but in this chapter, we will discuss the roles of some goddesses, some smaller characters, and one mother. The goddesses manage to change the course of the narrative through their celestial meddling. Along with the goddesses, I will also be talking about the rather silent female characters, some of whom don't even have dialogues, but they still exist within the narrative scape, and unbeknownst, even to themselves, they are affecting the actions of the heroes. We have already examined the life-like theatre where some actors star in the central role and some move quietly in the background: This chapter will shine the spotlight on those characters.

A) Divine sacrifice and War prizes

During the journey to Troy, the Greek army faced with many challenges, but one of the biggest challenges they faced was the wrath of the goddess Artemis. The goddess sent contrary winds and the fleet was not able to depart. In Sophocles' *Elektra*, Agamemnon is said to have killed a sacred stag, which incurred the goddess' anger. Kalchas, the official seer of the expedition, reveals that Agamemnon must sacrifice his own daughter, **Iphigeneia**, to ensure the safe departure of his troops.⁵⁶ In some versions of the story, his daughter is lured to Aulis on the pretence of marriage to Achilleus, and she is killed there. In another version, Artemis miraculously rescues the girl from being sacrificed and a stag is left behind in her place. Homer refrains from ever explicitly mentioning this episode of sacrifice, but this scene became famous in the fifth century dramas of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis*.⁵⁷ Iphigeneia is one of the characters in the *Iliad* whose debt can never be fulfilled by those who enjoyed the fruit of her sacrifice. She is only implicitly mentioned once in the book one of the *Iliad* when Agamemnon complains to Kalchas,

Seer of evil: never yet have you told me a good thing.
Always the evil things are dear to your heart to prophesy,
but nothing excellent have you said nor ever accomplished. (1.106-08)

⁵⁶ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad*, p. 11.

⁵⁷ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad*, p. 11.

Agamemnon's outburst is born out of his anger over Kalchas' advice of returning his war prize, Chryseis. He blames Kalchas of having evil things as his prophecy. His mention of Kalchas' previous failure points to the sacrifice of his daughter which was advised by the seer. Such a gruesome sacrifice only brings one question to my mind: How is female life valued in the Indo-European tradition?

Even before becoming acquainted with the Greek epics, I spotted a peculiar painting in a magazine which instantly caught my attention. "Clytemnestra after the Murder" by John Collier (1882) portrays **Clytemnestra**, Agamemnon's wife, standing by a door, while in the background, Agamemnon and his war prize, Cassandra, lay on the floor. Her wielding of a bloodied weapon is a clear indication that she murdered them. Her eyes are defiant and angry, with no signs of remorse, nor guilt, her posture is confident, triumphant even. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Agamemnon was killed by Aigisthos, Clytemnestra's lover, whom she acquired while Agamemnon was at Troy. Clytemnestra killed the Trojan princess, Cassandra. Clytemnestra is driven by wrath for the sacrifice of her daughter and jealousy of her husband's new companion. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra murders her husband and his war prize, driven by anger for her daughter's sacrifice. This version of the story paints her as a woman acting in blind passion, and, moreover, it shows female rage in its raw form. Her pain over the loss of her daughter burns in a steady blazing fury, as she waited for ten years for her husband to return to her.

In the *Iliad*, the stories of **Chryseis** and **Briseis** are interconnected. Book one of the *Iliad* revolves around the possession of these two women. They don't have any dialogues in book one, but their presence creates an upheaval and introduces the readers to the internal struggles within the Greek force. It sets the tone for the *Iliad*, and the rest of the narrative reels from its effects. Chryseis is the daughter of the priest Chryses. She was acquired during a campaign led by the Greek forces. She was favoured by Agamemnon who claimed her as his war bounty. Chryses had pleaded Agamemnon for the return of his daughter, but alas, he was refused. This leads to a ruinous plague unleashed upon the Achaians by the god Apollo. Kalchas suggests that returning Chryseis to her father will bring an end to this dark shadow over their forces. Agamemnon's compunction over this prospect torments him, but he ultimately agrees to give up his beloved war prize. This in effect hurts his manly ego, and driven by his arrogance, he demands another prize to replace his Chryseis.

Find me then some prize that shall be my own, lest I only
among the Argives go without, since that were unfitting;
you are all witnesses to this thing, that my prize goes elsewhere. (1.118-20)

Agamemnon claims another prize in the same breath as he gives up Chryseis. He cannot stand the fact that other warriors get to keep their prizes, but his prize lays beyond his reach. He equates a female prize won as a thing of glory. His speech reflects a deep insecurity in losing his prize that he views as a symbol, a symbol of his rank as a fighter, as well as jealousy towards the famed warrior at Troy, Achilles, whom he should, in theory, tower over as the king of the Greeks. This leads to an eruption of conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, a terrible fight of authority and might. In the midst of the quarrels, Chryseis never speaks a word, and the last we know about her is when she is led by her hands towards the ship that is to return to her father. Odysseus takes charge of this expedition (Iliad 1.308-15). Just like that, the woman for whom a plague was brought down by a god, a woman who found herself in the core of a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, is taken out of our sights.

The next captive girl, a counterpart to Chryseis, is **Briseis**. She was the war prize of Achilles. During the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, the former man questions the latter's authority and goes as far as to say that wars are fought over the theft of cattle, horses or the theft of crops, but it is unusual, and less glorious, to fight such a large-scale war for the retrieval of a woman.

O great shamelessness, we followed, to do you favor,
you with the dog's eyes, to win your honor and Menelaos'
from the Trojans. You forget all this or else you care nothing.
And now my prize you threaten in person to strip from me,
for whom I labored much, the gift of the sons of the Achaians. (1.158-62)

Achilles reminds Agamemnon that he is doing him a favor by joining this war and it is wrong to strip him of his own prize for which he worked hard. The overreaching effects of this war resulted in a lot of women being won by men from foreign lands. Their futures were uprooted from their homelands, and they were simply claimed or exchanged by these warriors as an object of trade. The disregard for females as human beings, in the name of a single woman, is shockingly high. Achilles reluctantly gives up Briseis, and resorts to sulking by his ship, withdrawing from the war. This results in the catastrophic wish asked of Achilles' mother, which leads to the death of many Achaian soldiers and, ultimately, of his

beloved Patroklos. Like Chryseis, Briseis is also devoid of any dialogues in book one, and the last we see of her is when Patroklos is giving her over to Agamemnon,

He led forth from the hut Briseis of the fair cheeks and gave her
to be taken away; and they walked back beside the ships of the Achaians,
and the woman all unwillingly went with them still. (1.346-48)

Briseis' unwillingness to go to Agamemnon is not voiced by her, because, in this case, she is simply an object of exchange, yet Homer still expresses her feelings through his poetry. However, in book nine, Agamemnon promises to return Briseis to Achilles in order to win him back, but Achilles passionately declines his offers of gold, wealth, and even Briseis herself.

“Briseis, whom we first hear about as a counterpart of Chryseis, turns out to make one of the most impassioned laments at the death of Patroklos (19.282), giving voice to a social category that another poet might have treated as marginal or forgettable.”⁵⁸ In book nineteen, after Patroklos' death, Briseis delivers a heartfelt lament after she is returned to Achilles. In her lament, she speaks about Patroklos as a dear companion, who has always shown kindness to her since he has known her. She also remembers his promise of making her Achilles' lawfully wedded wife. Her short lament briefly shone light on her devastating past, but also her hopeful future. It was short but impactful as it gave power to the women sorrowing around her to grieve openly for fallen Patroklos. Not only does it serve its narrative purpose, but it gives birth to a sense of loss in the hearts of the readers as well. Briseis' lament is powerful, but Homer's description of her before her speech is even more interesting,

And now, in the likeness of golden Aphrodite, Briseis
when she saw Patroklos lying torn with sharp bronze, folding
him in her arms cried shrilly above him and with her hands tore
at her breasts and her soft throat and her beautiful forehead.
The woman like the immortals mourning for him spoke to him: (19.282-86)

Briseis' beauty has been likened to that of an immortal goddess, and specifically to Aphrodite. The only other female character whose beauty has been likened to that of Aphrodite in the *Iliad* Helen. Briseis' physical actions and her being likened to an “immortal”, or a goddess, engender a powerful vision in the Greek camp. A noteworthy detail worth mentioning is that this captive woman, whose husband was killed by Achilles, is

⁵⁸ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad*, p. 27.

presented as beautiful as Aphrodite even in her current state as a prisoner being exchanged between two warriors.

Even though Achilles was badly upset when losing Briseis, and withdrew from war for this reason, his attitude changes. In the beginning of book nineteen after Patroklos' death. He wishes Briseis' death while speaking to Agamemnon with regards to their reconciliation, "I wish Artemis had killed her beside the ship with an arrow on that day when I destroyed Lyrnessos and took her." (19.59-60) He blames her, because he believes that so many Achaian soldiers would not have died, if she was dead before he could take her. It is understandable that he is angry and hurt at his companion's death, but his instant blaming of a woman who has lost everything, now but a possession to be owned, deflects his own responsibility for the events of the war and the destruction that ensued from a decision taken by him, on his own volition.

In the narrative, women may be seen used by men to their own whims, from important pieces to be used as pawns for their own selfish gain or simply as an agency to be blamed for the shortcomings in the story. They might seem like insignificant characters at first glance, but upon further analysis, they may be considered the progenitors of enormous changes in the narrative.

B) Goddesses

In the *Iliad*, divine powers keep interfering in the story. An increased number of gods and goddesses aide the two sides of the war. Hera, Athene and Thetis gave their undisputed support to the Achaians, while Aphrodite, Apollo and Zeus (momentarily) supported the Trojans. In these divine interventions, we see gods and goddesses trying to help the side they support with their unreserved powers. In a way, the war of Troy can be attributed to the apple of discord, and Athene, Hera and Aphrodite are the three goddesses standing at the heart of it. The beauty contest brought forth their physical appearance, the warfare was fought beyond.

Hera, the wife of Zeus, supports the Greeks. Although she is not always actively present on the battlefield, she uses her power to rally the Olympian gods on the Greek side, Zeus included. She appears multiple times in the narrative and her presence and influence can be compared to Zeus' own. In book one, Achilles asks for help from his immortal mother, Thetis, and she, in turn, goes to Zeus, who agrees to fulfil Achilles' wishes. When Zeus, the father of gods and men, returns to his home after his promise to Thetis, all the gods present there rise up from their chairs to show him respect. In this atmosphere of respect and fear,

Hera speaks out revilingly towards her husband, “Traacherous one, what god has been plotting counsels with you?” (1.540). Her question and her authority, and the strength with which she refers to him as “treacherous”, gives us a glimpse of her might, even in the face of almighty Zeus. Hera’s admonition of Zeus reflects on Helen’s admonition of Paris in book three. Upon being probed and blamed by his wife, Zeus resorts to threatening her. He seems annoyed that his secret deal with Thetis comes to light due to Hera’s suspicious nature and he intimidates her,

But go then, sit down in silence, and do as I tell you.
for fear all the gods, as many as are on Olympos, can do nothing
if I come close and lay my unconquerable hands upon you. (1.565-67)

Hera is frightened by this threat and sits down in obedience. She is comforted and told by her son, Hephaistos, to have patience. Hephaistos implores her to be patient and to make her argument with gentler words. Hera is subdued for the moment, and she listens to her son, but this is far from the end of her display of strength and manipulation that we will come to see in the *Iliad*. Zeus’ threat of using force against his wife, on the condition of her quiet submission, is a mirroring of the behaviour many women face at the hands of men, although it may seem surprising that a god should threaten his own wife, who is a goddess herself, with brute force. Yet it does logically follow, if we think of them as simply a man and a woman. The threat of abuse loomed over Hera as it also loomed over Draupadī.

In book four, the gods assemble in a council to watch the fighting and to drink nectar. Zeus needles his wife and his daughter, simply for sitting and watching the war, while Aphrodite is in action saving Paris from certain death. This infuriates the two goddesses, but only Hera speaks up and recalls her efforts of gathering an army to fight against the Trojans. She uses the words “sweated in toil,” although it escapes the scope of the divine for a god to sweat in toil like a human being. The poet strives to humanize these immortals by using such descriptions and figures of speech. Hera asserts her dominance and her equal standing to Zeus in the council and offers a solution that gives way to both the husband and the wife to follow their own volition in the Trojan war. She promises Zeus that he can sack any other city that is dear to her and she won’t stand in his way, but she disagrees with Zeus’ idea that a truce should fall upon the war, because Menelaos has won the fight. Her bitter hatred towards Troy drives her to completely destroy the city. In order to convince Zeus, she reminds him of her standing,

Yet my labor also should not be let go unaccomplished;
I am likewise a god, and my race is even what yours is,
and I am first of the daughters of devious-devising Kronos,
both ways, since I am eldest born and am called your consort,
yours, and you in turn are lord over all the immortals. (4.57-61)

She threatens him in veiled words. We have seen in previous chapters how women use subtle manipulation and their words as a weapon to get their way, and even Hera, a literal goddess is no stranger to it. Before a truce agreement could have been reached and Helen could have returned with Troy remaining unscathed, the anger of one goddess changes the whole scenario and manoeuvres the situation to wreak ultimate destruction.

Throughout the narrative, despite Zeus' wish, Hera and Athene work towards their support of the Achaians and help them to survive the destructive strength of Hektor, driven on by Zeus. In book fourteen, confronted by the catastrophic assault by the Trojan forces, the Achaians face great loss. Agamemnon even proposes giving up and sailing home. Hera is angered by the prospect of such losses and decides to distract Zeus in order to help the Achaians gain some footing against the Trojans. She hatches a plan to seduce Zeus and make him sleep, facilitating her operations behind his back. Her cunning use of her feminine wiles makes up for her lack in celestial strength against the mighty Zeus.

And to her mind this thing appeared to be the best counsel,
to array herself in loveliness, and go down to Ida,
and perhaps he might be taken with desire to lie in love with her
next her skin, and she might be able to drift an innocent
warm sleep across his eyelids, and seal his crafty perceptions. (14.161-65)

She readies herself like a soldier ready for war, and armed with Aphrodite's enchanted breastband, accompanied by the embodiment of Sleep, she goes to Zeus. He is enamoured by his wife's divine beauty and seduced by the power of Aphrodite's enchantment he lays with Hera and soon falls asleep. This gives Hera the chance to call upon Poseidon and give him full reign to empower the Greek forces. Despite her being a goddess, she uses all her powers to fight, even if it means fighting against the mightiest of all gods.

Along with Hera, goddess **Athene**, daughter of Zeus, has also shown staunch support for the Greeks. Athene is associated with wisdom and warfare. The hatred that these two goddesses reserve for Troy stems from losing the infamous beauty contest. In kind, these goddesses were also used as pawns by Zeus, much like Helen, in his grand scheme of a huge war of destruction promised to Gaia. Hera's and Athene's anger fuels the war and facilitates

their ultimate goal. Athene works as the internal psychological force acting on the individuals. She has helped boost morale, give a voice of reason and act as an internal compass to victory for those touched by her, while bringing destruction onto others. In book one, when Achilles is angry at Agamemnon and it takes the better of him, he is tempted to draw his sword (1.190-222). Athene intervenes and suggests that Achilles should use restraint. "Divine intervention, then, serves as an externalization and projection of the internal psychological processes which the poet is incapable of expressing as such."⁵⁹ The notion of Athene's intervention, or any other divine intervention, cannot solely be classified as internal psychological processes in Homer's poetry, because his poetry fleshes out these instances in such a way that it cannot be only psychological, and not physical in nature. For example, when Athene intervenes Achilles,

The goddess standing behind Peleus' son caught him by the fair hair,
appearing to him only, for no man of the others saw her.
Achilleus in amazement turned about, and straightway
knew Pallas Athene and the terrible eyes shining. (1.197-200)

Athene is not visible to anyone but Achilles and he recognizes her immediately by her "terrible eyes shining." The poet's description of Achilles turning around to find the goddess standing behind him with her shining eyes, gives the reader a vivid mental image for this moment to be a psychological process. Athene has often been in disguise or limited her appearance to work her way through individuals' psyches and nudge them in the way she desires them to be.

In book twenty-two, Athene uses the same manoeuvre to convince Hektor to stand up to the combat against Achilles. Hektor is chased around the city by Achilles, but he is not caught as Apollo was giving him a helping hand. Zeus wishes to save Hektor from this torment, but Athene protests her father, and he concedes. Athene promises to Achilles that she will bring Hektor in for a face-to-face combat with him. She appears to Hektor in the guise of his brother Deiphobos and says,

Dear brother, indeed swift-footed Achilles is using you roughly
and chasing you on swift feet around the city of Priam.
Come on, then; let us stand fast against him and beat him back from us. (22.229-31)

⁵⁹ CLAY, *The Wrath of Athena*, p. 136.

Hektor is surprised that his brother has dared to leave the fortifications for his sake while the others are inside. He adds that the respect in his heart for Deiphobos has increased for such an honorable task. Unaware that he is being tricked by Athene into facing Achilles, he agrees to his brother whom he loves and respects. This combat ultimately leads to his death while his father watches from the tower. Athene's manipulation at such a strategic time helps Achilles to achieve the glory of killing famed Hektor, breaker of the horses. She plays a small but a key role in the events that lead to Hektor's death, therefore making sure the narrative goes as we know it today.

In the *Mahābhārata*, it is much more common to find female incarnations of goddesses compared to the presence of goddesses themselves, for example, Draupadī as the incarnation of Śrī. It is also interesting to note that by the virtue of women's feminine nature, they are considered to be the manifestations of the Goddess, sharing her powers.⁶⁰ The only goddess who is present in her corporeal form is Gaṅgā. There is a much more active interference of goddesses in the *Iliad* than in the *Mahābhārata*, but it does not mean that female deities are not mentioned. "Of all the world's religions, Hinduism has the most elaborate *living* Goddess traditions."⁶¹ This tradition of goddess worship can be seen multiple times throughout the narrative, and goddesses make appearances in invocations or prayers. As we have previously talked about goddess Gaṅgā and her role in the story, in this section, we will talk about a particular woman who is not an immortal goddess, but rather a queen and a mother with extraordinary abilities as well as dedication, by the virtue of which she is bestowed with divine powers.

Gāndhārī is the wife of King Dhṛstarāṣṭra and the mother of the Kauravas. Upon her marriage to the blind king, she decides to blindfold her eyes as an act of complete devotion to her husband. Her fidelity entails great suffering endured voluntarily for a greater good (tapas), which also leads to an accumulation of power. Her power had been pent up inside of her, bottled up like her feelings of loss and grief till the end of the war. When the Pāṇḍavas approach her and Dhṛstarāṣṭra for reconciliation, while they are on their way to the battlefield, the five brothers fear that she might curse them and they are right in thinking so. She was stopped by Vyāsa, who was aware of her intentions. Despite her being stopped by Vyāsa, she couldn't control her powers, because when Yudhiṣṭhira bent down to touch her feet, her eyes naturally fell downwards and burnt Yudhiṣṭhira's fingertips. "When Arjuna saw

⁶⁰ HILTEBEITEL, ERNDL, *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*, p. 11.

⁶¹ HILTEBEITEL, ERNDL, *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*, p. 11.

that, he stepped behind Vāsudeva. But Gāndhārī's anger was gone, and like a mother she consoled the Pāṇḍavas, who were fidgeting and shifting this way and that." (11.15.7cd-8) Gāndhārī's female rage and the power she has acquired by the virtue of her own great sacrifice hold a remarkable strength before the victorious heroes of the Kurukshetra war, so they resort to cowering and dare not stand in front of her.

She was then gifted the divine power of remarkable vision of the battlefield by Vyāsa. "The episode recorded here seems concerned to demonstrate to us that she had a clairvoyant power, and it seems to explain that the power is based in Gāndhārī's own meritorious behaviour."⁶² Her divine vision of the battlefield can be likened to that of a god's vision, far removed from the scene, yet in complete view of it, a spectator from afar. She describes the scene and the final positions of the great warriors on both sides at length. She also recounts the grief of the women who had lost someone in the war. Her rage fuelled by her grief, instantly falls on the Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa whom fate seems to have favoured. On top of that observation, she also heard Vyāsa telling Dhṛstarāṣṭra that this is a divine plan orchestrated by Kṛṣṇa, who is the incarnation of Viṣṇu, to alleviate the burden of Earth. (11.8.20) This revelation does nothing to lessen the queen's pain or anger, in fact, she turns to Kṛṣṇa and accuses him of not saving her family from elimination when he had the foresight of such a catastrophic outcome of their actions. Moreover, this revelation only leads to her feeling of being cruelly used as a puppet in a divine plan, and her rage, which held the power to bring ruination to an entire clan, fell on Kṛṣṇa,

And since you neglected the destruction of the Kurus, O Slayer of Madhu, because you wanted it, O man of mighty arms, now take the result of that. Since I have come to have some ascetic power because of my obedience to my husband, I will curse you with that, O bearer of discus and club, you who are so enigmatic. Since you ignored your kinsmen, the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas, as they were killing each other, Govinda, you shall slay you own kinsmen. (11.25.38-42)

Gāndhārī's curse is spectacular and laden with strength, because she went beyond the power divisions of men and gods and cursed the downfall of the divine incarnation of Viṣṇu. She then goes on to curse his own death and curses his wives to face the same fate as the Bharata women. The final part of her curse carried a personal touch, one that reflected a woman's perspective. The sense of utter loss, pain and helplessness that she felt at this point, and her indignation towards the men who actually had the power in their hands, makes this curse so

⁶² FITZGERALD, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 18.

fatal and cruel. It is embedded in destruction and despair. The curse comes to fruition as Kṛṣṇa himself promises to the queen.

To conclude this chapter, we encountered a number of remarkable women who used everything they possessed to make the best of their situation or to get what they desired, be it mortals or goddesses. From words, manipulation tactics, sexuality, to accumulated power through extraordinary deeds, the female figures command a strong grip over their prowess. This also indicates the complexity of feminine nature and the hidden feminist features in the narrative of these epics.

Chapter 5 – Modern Interpretations and the Impact of the Epic

This last part of my thesis explores the ways female epic characters are being interpreted in online media as well as in fictional reinterpretations. The *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*, both belonging to the Indo-European language family, employ performance art in the composition of the epic poetry. These epics have infiltrated our societies for thousands of years and have remained an indestructible pillar to the figurative temples of our civilisations. Their popularity cannot be attributed solely to the printing on paper, paper being introduced very late to their origins in time. These epic poems have survived the transition from orality to papyrus scroll to handwritten codex to printed books, and they are still very much present in contemporary production. In its true form, the *Iliad* has been composed in dactylic hexameter⁶³, the *Mahābhārata* in *shlokas*⁶⁴. If we ponder upon the need for such poetic devices, we may attribute them to the fact that it was, to a large extent a performative art. Nonetheless, I believe that there is something more to this aspect. The rhyme, the cadence, the careful structuring of the words, strove not only to transport a person to the scene, but also to create a long-lasting impression in the memory of the audience. The first point that we need to consider while analysing the orality of a piece of a work is, that when the medium is oral, it reaches a greater audience, because the information is not confined to the literary perspective of a few educated individuals. It can reach an audience irrespective of the listener's literacy level, even their class. In a biopolitical point of view, these texts may act akin to a virus, infiltrating every stratum of the society, and such a medium uses the resources available to it to reproduce itself.

These epic poetries, Greek and Indian, impart an indelible vision about the nature of human existence, but its interpretation, ultimately its vision, depends on its readers whom it strikes in the heart. These powerful texts, which are still studied and analysed in contemporary media, do not represent an interest solely for a few academics, but they persevere in the collective consciousness, tale-libraries, of our respective societies. These are stories shared by mothers and grandmothers. These memory-fixed stories never adhere to the original version, but rather they represent a version of their interpretations, a mirror stained by its bearer, a memory with which one makes a relationship. These narratives are educating and affecting, but they also constitute the world views of those in contact with them. The

⁶³ LATTIMORE, *The Iliad of Homer*, p. 44.

⁶⁴ BUITENEN, *The Mahābhārata: 1 - The Book of the Beginning*, p. xxvii.

material of these epics is to be heard and remembered, actualised and preserved as *Smṛiti* (memory) in a beautiful reproductive cycle. I must admit, for the sake of honestly presenting my position, that the interpretations presented by me in this thesis, in part, stem from my own perspective, colored by personal life-experiences. There is no escape from it. While on the subject of the effects of these epics in the contemporary world, we will further analyze some modern interpretations in online media and in fiction which bring these works to the modern audience in a new way and challenge the traditional ways of presentation.

There is an undeniable strong female presence in the *Iliad*, but its actions are not given much space in the narrative. We view these women through their interactions with the male characters. Such ambiguity gives opportunity to later artists to fill in the gaps with their own creative génie. In this section, we will discuss two modern adaptations of the *Iliad*.

Troy is a Hollywood film directed by Wolfgang Peterson, released in 2004. It is an epic historical war movie inspired by the *Iliad*. The movie stars Brad Pitt, Orlando Bloom, and Diane Kruger, among many others. The movie grossed \$ 497 million worldwide and was nominated for Best Costume Design at the 77th Academy Awards. The movie has been criticized by many for its deviation from the main storyline, but the director has arguably tried to maintain it. The driving plots of the movie are Agamemnon's love for expansion and Achilles' strength as a warrior. The movie presents an extremely reductive view of the characters: The men are showcased as strong and conventionally masculine, while the women are only subject to their reductive base-femininity and act as love interests for the main heroes. This reinterpretation is directed at a wide audience, and thus, several facets have been changed to appease a large number of people.

Thetis is the only goddess present in the narrative, and the mentioning of other gods is omitted. This reflects a sentiment of rejecting the Greek pantheon. Thetis' presence is only confined to a small scene. The other female characters played in the movie are Briseis, Helen, and Andromache. Helen's character in the movie has been pigeonholed into a lover, she is only present on screen as the simplified lover of Paris. This one-dimensionality of her character insults her multi-faceted personality that we come to understand in the *Iliad*. Helen's representation as a lover only speaks to the general target audience and their expectations of a woman. It restricts a woman's purpose to embody the femme fatale character and drive the male heroes. Like in the *Iliad*, Helen blames herself in the movie, but unlike in the *Iliad*, she wishes to return to her Menelaos. One can explain the purpose of this minor change in the tune of her character as simply bringing a woman closer to love. She

only wishes to protect her lover and his family. It does not do her any credit as the proud queen who feels guilty for the death of many men and she wishes death upon herself for deeming herself responsible. Her behaviour as the defiant wife is also absent from the movie, as she is always shown to be compliant and humble. Briseis plays a major role in the movie as the love interest of Achilles. When one thinks of Briseis, the name of Chryseis comes to mind as well, but surprisingly the movie makes no mention of her. The movie makers must have considered her character to be inconsequential to the plot of the story. This is a good example of the artistic freedom in the reinterpretation of an existing work. Briseis' role as the love interest to Achilles is a surprising take on her presence as a war prize. This added shade in the relationship between her and Achilles further solidifies a base of love, rather than glory. Homer's *Iliad* speaks about a hero's glory and justifies Achilles' anger, since his glory was threatened when Agamemnon took his war reward. Yet the movie adaptation gives a new spin to it by presenting love as a reason for Achilles' anger. The underlying motive, as shown in the movie, is affection rather than acclaim. This change from glory to love may be an indication of the change in our modern society. For a piece of art to speak to the audience, the audience must feel strongly about the subject, and love, in all its diversity, is a universal and timeless idea conceivable by a majority of people. On the other hand, the concept of individual glory has been diminished by the advent of machine-assisted war efforts, though one still one cannot deny its presence.

Patroklos' portrayal as a cousin of Achilles is a big change from the original narrative. In the *Iliad*, he has been repeatedly referred to as a "dear companion" of Achilles with no familial ties between them. Their companionship is an important plot point because only Patroklos' death could move Achilles to action and subsequently to his own death. The *Iliad* does not allude to this as an explicitly sexual companionship, but its nature remains exceptionally intimate. In 2004, the topic of same-sex relationships was not well accepted by all and did not take part in forming the targeted audiences. Its presence was extremely limited, mainly confined to gags, jokes, and puns. On the other hand, Achilles is portrayed as a strong man with a big sexual appetite for heterosexual relationships. There is no clear indication in the *Iliad* as to where Achilles' sexual orientation lies, apart from the fact that he has a son with a woman. This point of discussion is important for our next section.

The Song of Achilles is a novel by Madeline Miller published in 2011. Despite its publication in 2011, the book received a significant boost of popularity in 2021, thrusting it in front of a new modern audience. This novel received many awards, including the Orange Prize for Fiction, and it has been well received by the critics. The popularity of this book has

amounted to sales of about 2 million copies by the year 2022. Watching *Troy* and reading *The Song of Achilles* one after the other filled me with many conflicting comprehensions of the subject matter. The movie had an element of masculine glorification, while the book takes a much more profound path without losing touch with the main subjects, like glory and honour.

The Song of Achilles presents an unseen side of the famed warrior beyond his fighting skills. It humanizes him and shows a side of him that was not explored by Homer. This gives him a new depth of character. The story is told from Patroklos' viewpoint and explores his relationship with Achilles. Focusing the narration through the eyes of a minor character gives the writer the artistic freedom to retell the ancient narrative from a very fresh perspective. The narrative is captivating and delicately deals with the sexual relationship between Patroklos and Achilles. "A dear companion" may be reinterpreted as "a romantic partner", and Miller has provided the audience with many sources which explicate this special relationship as romantic. She says, "The idea that Patroklos and Achilles were lovers is quite old. Many Greco-Roman authors read their relationship as a romantic one – it was a common and accepted interpretation in the ancient world." Depiction of such a profound same-sex relationship does not chip away from Achilles' manhood, instead, it adds to it, a point which the film makers missed out on. The writing is extremely raw and moving and constructs a narrative which does not deviate much from Homer's *Iliad* and other Greek or Roman works. The novel teaches us some very important values, the first and foremost of which is to treat everyone as a human being, be it a warrior or a woman. Patroklos says how Achilles would tell him the war stories and such storytelling would lessen his burden, "make him Achilles again"⁶⁵, not conforming to the façade that is his warring vocation, but giving space to his hidden humanity. The importance that is imparted to every individual is remarkable, which brings us to the female characters. We encounter the episode of Iphigenia's sacrifice described in detail. As we know from previous chapters, she was brought from her home on the pretense of marriage to Achilles. What we never investigated is Achilles' assent to this. The novel captures his guilt and remorse over the death of a blameless girl. The next female character we must focus on is Briseis. She does not have any major standing in Homer's *Iliad*, except for her value as a war prize and her lament at Patroklos' death. Briseis' character is explored in detail in the novel. She develops a budding companionship with Patroklos. Giving the main stage to two minor characters strikes a chord in the reader's heart as it fills in a hole left in by the bard's omission. Patroklos' character faces the same problems and

⁶⁵ MILLER, *The Song of Achilles*, p. 212.

boundaries as a female character would, and he fulfils his lack in fighting with expertise in different matters. His bravery is remarkable – he uses all the tools available to ensure safety for those around him. He works with the camp surgeon, ensures Briseis safety with Agamemnon, and when the time comes, he goes on the battlefield to ensure the safety of his fellow men. Following the argument I presented in this paper, Patroklos also shows a character which shines through the narrative of warrior men.

This novel also shines a bright light on mourning. In the *Iliad*, we face mourning when the women lament for the fallen man, but Achilles’ mourning for Patroklos carves a special place and shows us the devastating wave of sadness that can wash over a person in deep sorrow. The narrative is not bound just to the glorification of men. As Patroklos says upon Achilles’ decision to withdraw from the war, “No fame is worth what you did today.”⁶⁶ The freedom is for the reader to decide which act is glorious and which act is not.

Surprisingly, the novel mentions Helen fleetingly, and the main reference to her appears when Achilles and Patroklos are discussing her elopement. She does not have any dialogues and does not hold the main stage in the narrative. The *Song of Achilles* makes its reader rethink the epic in a way closer to the proverbial heart, and its recent popularity indicates that the acceptance of same-sex couples in the general milieu of society is on the rise.

Like the *Iliad*, the *Mahābhārata* also has a large number of retellings and reinterpretations. Many of these works are done from the viewpoint of the female characters. One such novel is মহাভারতের অষ্টাদশী (*Mahābhārater oshtadashi*) by Narsinghaprasad Bhaduri, published in 2014. In his novel, Bhaduri tries to humanize the female figures of the *Mahābhārata* and analyse the godly interventions. He offers a bold interpretation of the birth of Karṇa. He says that Kuntī’s inquisitive nature may have been the reason for the unwanted child, or he may be the product of rape. Bhaduri gives an alternative scenario for Karṇa’s birth. He hypothesizes that Kuntī fainted during this episode, not from the radiance of god Surya, but probably from the excruciating pain she felt from the ordeal of rape. The child born out of a traumatic event is a living reminder, a testament to its happening, and a sign that she is impure. This impurity meant she had to get rid of him, but her mother’s heart couldn’t kill the child, instead she floated him in a basket. No matter what the actual truth is, she has

⁶⁶ MILLER, *The Song of Achilles*, p. 280.

always been in eternal pain and dilemma, because she had no way of sharing the truth or claiming her son without reliving her torment in shame.

The Palace of Illusions is a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, published in 2008. This novel is a retelling of the *Mahābhārata* through Draupadī’s point of view. It follows her journey as a woman in a patriarchal world. The book has been criticized, as it does not always follow the original text but it definitely makes an attempt to show a hidden side of a woman, who is always on the pedestal, but only little is known about her by the readers. One of Draupadī’s most prominent features was that she was never afraid to speak her mind, and faced with difficulties, she challenged the patriarchal values of the society which prescribes a woman to be timid and submissive. In the novel, we see that she was an unwanted child, a different force since birth, never given the love and appreciation that she deserved in her father’s house, yet never having her spirit broken. As seen in the original text, she received education from her brother’s teachers. In the novel retelling, she can be seen sneaking into her brother's lessons, and we can see the resentment that she feels from everyone around her. She bluntly asks, “And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?”⁶⁷, her question a reflection of her strong conviction and intellect.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, 1838 – 1894, a great Bengali author, noted that the softer feminine qualities are more prominent in Sita, whereas Draupadī was the fierce queen with pride and brilliance, who has never failed in her role as a wife or a woman, even after being subjected to pain, humiliation and multiple tests. *The Palace of Illusions* brings us face to face with Draupadī’s desires and shows how these life changing events affected her. She finds herself utterly lonely, being married to five husbands, because no one truly makes the effort to understand her true self. Amidst the perils of life, she found a friend in Kṛṣṇa. They shared a Platonic friendship and called each other *Sakha* and *Sakhi*. It was a very special friendship, since she always found him by her side in the face of difficulty, even when her husbands failed her. “Aren’t we all pawns in the Hands of Time, the greatest player of them all?”⁶⁸ This gives birth to a question, did Draupadī deserve to undergo all the pain and humiliation just to enable her warrior husbands to fight against the presumed evil?

The episode of her disrobing has been discussed in the previous chapters, but while reading this novel, and encountering the same episode from Draupadī’s point of view, we face a new side to the coin of the story. Dishonoring a woman in a court means the death of the woman’s self, but Draupadī’s resilience, and her choice to speak up against the violence,

⁶⁷ DIVAKARUNI, *The Palace of Illusions*, p. 26.

⁶⁸ DIVAKARUNI, *The Palace of Illusions*, p. 58.

shows the strength of her character making all the difference. She contests male authority and domination, yet she doesn't lose touch with her feminine self. In the narrative, her husbands show feats of physical strength, and she shows feats of mental resilience. She was the height of female power in a story written by men, without ever picking up a weapon. The resilience that she showed devalued her oppressor's actions, and her standing as a woman emerged victorious at the end. She is loud in her opinions, and thus from being the object of the male narrative, she becomes the subject of her own narrative.

Mahabharat is a 2013 TV show with 28 seasons. This TV drama tries to exhaustively cover the whole epic of the *Mahābhārata*. During its airing the show became a household staple for many people in India. The show's main language is Hindi, but it has been dubbed in many Indian languages to cater to the diverse Indian audience. Buitenen argues,

“The *Mahābhārata*'s strength lay, both, in its principal narrative and in the episodes. This influence extended not only to Sanskrit literature, but also to the literatures in the modern Indo-Aryan languages as well as the Dravidian languages.”⁶⁹

Owing to the huge popularity of the show, we can safely deduce how the epic interests and finally affects the Indian audience. The show tried to be true to the text, but there has been dramatization of certain scenes, conforming to the Indian TV serial style. When it comes to dramatization, exaggeration comes into play, and therefore, certain episodes enact a form of a heightened reality while keeping the core of the plot intact. Furthermore, the women characters are shown as an embodiment of *Shakti* and as extremely powerful beings, who can be likened to that of goddesses. They are shown to be capable of influencing the royal men's decisions and imposing authority through finesse in verbal dexterity, channelling their inner power. This is true up to a certain extent as we saw in this paper's previous chapters: They were not as outspoken or authoritative as depicted in the show. Hinduism has a long tradition of worshipping female deities and glorifying their powers, but there is a huge gap when it comes to the treatment meted out to ordinary women.

“Sundar Rajan sees feminine divinity shaped not by ‘the elevation of strong women or by women's actual material and historical conditions,’ but by ‘the embodiment of desired qualities in the female figure.’”⁷⁰

Thus, showing extremely powerful women in the TV series may have no inkling of actual feminine empowerment in society outside of the screen, but could it instead be a form of fetishizing these female characters? As a woman, I am at a loss for an answer to this

⁶⁹ BUITENEN, *The Mahābhārata: 1 - The Book of the Beginning*, p. xxvi.

⁷⁰ HILTEBEITEL & ERNDL, *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*, p. 18.

question, because, for me, these figures served as a form of empowerment, but my personal viewpoint does not necessarily line up with that of other viewers. Among the main goals of a TV show's is an appeal to a larger pool of an audience, such as we saw in the case of *Troy* (movie). *Mahabharat*'s portrayal of its female characters may be a selling point for the show, because the Hindu audience is familiar with worshipping powerful goddesses and idolizing them, thus seeing these powerful female characters on-screen might be a way of putting them on a religious pedestal of veneration by endowing them with more agency and power than they originally possessed.

“But how can the same goddesses serve patriarchy in one case and promote women's humanity in another case? Obviously, everything depends on what the devotees make of the Goddess, on how the devotees interpret her myths and images.”⁷¹ Therefore, it always trickles down to the personal interpretation which is influenced by every individual's perspective and their world view. In the TV show, each female character embodied certain qualities, but their power and resilience to battle through difficult predicaments, and to face pain with a courageous outlook on life, united them. They gritted their teeth and put in one step after the other. We see this even in the original text, but their journey was not so explicitly presented in the original as it is shown in the TV series.

The story of the *Mahābhārata* has been attributed to various authors, as we have already discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. In a way, it has organically grown into a living library. In my opinion, it would be wrong to say that there is one final version of the epic. Given the fact that the original text itself is a compilation of stories, added in by different authors, I argue that some new stories have cropped up which have in part become a part of the *Mahābhārata* in a way of solidifying themselves as *head canon* unrecognizable from the traditional one. In the TV show, during the final days of the Kurukshetra war, Gāndhārī decides to visit her son, Duryodhana. This visit by Gāndhārī is a desperate attempt to make her son invincible against Bhima, as she has already lost many of her sons and family members in the war. She uses her power, emanating from her eyes, to make her son's body into *vajra*. The power her eyes contain is a result of her self-imposed blindness, her sacrifice and her great deed. Her decision to deplete this hard-earned power to save her son only shows a mother's love. She instructs Duryodhana to come in front of her naked, not wearing a single piece of clothing, but Kṛṣṇa interferes and manipulates Duryodhana into covering his loins in an appeal to his decency, as it is wrong for a grown man to appear before

⁷¹ HILTEBEITEL & ERNDL, *Is the Goddess a Feminist?*, p. 106.

his mother naked. Duryodhana covers his loins, and thus Gāndhārī's powerful gaze falls on his entire body except for the covered part, making his thighs susceptible to injury. During the mace fight, Bhima delivers the fatal blow to Duryodhana's thigh and kills him. This episode is also present in many children's books stemming out of the *Mahābhārata*, for example, *The Mahabharata* by Shanti Publications, published in 2015. The act is prevalent in many books and shows and this is why it has gained an equal place among the other episodes of the epic. Yet this episode never happens in the original text. Going back to our discussion of the epic as a shared memory, rather than an educational reading, episodes like this are regarded as a part of the original text since very few people read the original. This episode has gained traction in the audience and people believe it as true. It has infiltrated the society like a virus and claimed a space in the mind, and when the epic will be told and shared from generation to generation, this episode will remain in the collective consciousness, ever emerging. We see here how an epic of such an immense volume will always act as a living library, collecting all the changes and additions to it along its constructive journey. The only inkling of this episode in the original text appears when Yudhiṣṭhira bends down to touch Gāndhārī's feet in filial respect and his fingernails get burnt by the power escaping through her eye slit. It is possible that this new episode emerged to fill in an expectation of motherly love and the loss she feels at the death of her sons.

Conclusion

The two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*, possess a multi-layered narrative emerging from their collective understandings, reproducing themselves in the living library of an interpretational flux of the respective societies they reside in. These epics have been shaping and redefining our civilisations for thousands of years in styles intrinsic to our ways of life. The narratives have influenced our lives and helped in creating our self-identities, belonging both to individuals and larger groups of people. The aim of this thesis was to shine a light on all the female characters and the lives they led, thus leading to the undeniable conclusion that women are not only an indispensable part of the society, but also, their actions and words play a significant role in the mechanisms of its functioning and informational transfer. Even though the narrative is male driven, the women ultimately present themselves as the guiding compasses for both the heroes and the story itself. Chaucer in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* would have you believe that "mulier est hominis confusio" (woman is the confusion of man), but the case is that *nemo est vir sine femina* (there is no man without a woman). In reference to the Simone De Beauvoir-inspired theoretical basis, I am confident in saying that the women characters escape their dependencies and thrive outside of the imposed narrative boundaries. It teaches us to think outside of the mainstream narratives objectifying reality into unquestionable ontologies. We see these women characters escaping their boundaries in an androcentric story, the same way we see women leaping over the traditional barriers of our respective societies – this tells us that both our world and the world of these epics cannot escape their ambiguities, their greys, their gradients, or their shades. All in all, our societies share the same body with the tales they reproduce: We share the same blood, aches, wounds, loves, sorrows, and joys.

In reading the epics we find ourselves reproducing the material we have ingested, changing to shapes familiar to us, and applying who we consider our "self" to be. A journey through these texts is a reflective path on which we constantly re-evaluate not only what the narratives mean to us, but what we, in effect, mean for them. I say this, because these epics do not follow any particular fatalist genre categorising its events as comedy, tragedy, or any other order of acts. They reflect life in its raw untamed form, and as such they offer us a window, a point of perspective to look at ourselves and those around us. We confront what life should be and what it is in an ultimate effort of making sense of our position in the World.

That is why these works cannot ever fall into oblivion – they will be relevant thousand years in the future as they were a thousand years before.

References

Primary sources

FITZGERALD, James. L., (ed. and tr.) 2004. *The Mahābhārata: 11. The Book of the Women, 12. The Book of Peace, Part One*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226252507.

LATTIMORE, Richmond, 2011. *The Iliad of Homer*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 9780226470498.

VAN BUITENEN, J. A. B. (ed. and tr.), 1983. *The Mahābhārata: 4. The Book of Virāṭa, 5. The Book of the Effort*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226846652

VAN BUITENEN, J. A. B. (ed. and tr.), 1983. *The Mahābhārata: I. The Book of the Beginning*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226846636.

VAN BUITENEN, J. A. B. (ed. and tr.), 1983. *The Mahābhārata: 2. The Book of the Assembly Hall, 3. The Book of the Forest*. The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226846644.

Secondary sources

ALLEN, N. J., 2002. "Mahābhārata and Iliad: A Common Origin?" Online. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*. Vol. 83, pp. 165-177.

BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, Chitra, 2008. *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*. India: Doubleday. ISBN 9780385525435.

BHADURI, Nrisingha Prasad, 2014. *Mahabharater Astadashi*. India: Ananda Publishers. ISBN 9789350402801.

CLAY, Jenny Strauss, 1983. *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in The Odyssey: Gods and Men in the Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN 0691065748.

DE BEAUVOIR, Simone, 1956. *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape.

ERICKSON, Mark, 2018. *How many days does Homer's Iliad cover?* Online. A UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON BLOG NETWORK SITE. Homer in the Laboratory: thoughts, poems and verses by Mark Erickson. Available at: <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/homer/2018/02/02/how-many-days-does-homers-iliad-cover/>.

HILTEBEITEL, Alf and ERNDL, Kathleen M. (eds.), 2000. *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* Sheffield Academic Press. ISBN 1841271578.

HILTEBEITEL, Alf, 2002. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: a reader's guide to the education of the Dharma King*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0195664205.

HILTEBEITEL, Alf, 2018. *Freud's Mahābhārata*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780190878337.

HOMER and RIEU, E. V., 1950. *The Iliad*. Penguin Classics. ISBN 9780140440140.

KELLOGG, Carolyn. *First-time author Madeline Miller wins last-ever Orange Prize*. Online. In: CALIFORNIA TIMES. Los Angeles Times. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/blogs/jacket-copy/story/2012-05-30/first-time-author-madeline-miller-wins-last-ever-orange-prize>

KRIETER-SPIRO, Martha, 2015. *Book III Homer's Iliad*. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter. ISBN 9781614517382.

MILLER, Madeline, 2017. *The Song of Achilles*. 2nd Edition. London: Bloomsbury. ISBN 9781408891384.

MINNEMA, Lourens, 2013. *Tragic Views of the Human Condition*. Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 9781441151049.

PAPROCKI, Maciej; VOS, Gary Patrick a WRIGHT, David John, 2023. *The Staying Power of Thetis*. Walter de Gruyter. ISBN 9783110678437.

PATHAK, Abhijit, 2023. "Women in Indian and Greek Epics: Some Reflections". Online. *Research Review Journal of Social Science*. Roč. 3, č. 1, pp. 24-30. ISSN 25832867. Available at: <https://rrjournals.co.in/index.php/rrjss/article/view/34/23>.

PROPERZIO, Paul. "The 'Ramayana' and the 'Odyssey': kindred epics of India and Greece." *The Classical Outlook*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2009, pp. 89–92. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43939857>.

TAPLIN, Oliver, 1992. *Homeric Soundings: The Shaping of the Iliad*. Clarendon Press. ISBN 9780198150145.

VUKOVIĆ, K. and GLAVAN, M. M., 2022. "The Indo-European Daughter Of The Sun: Greek Helen, Vedic Saranyu And Slavic Morana". *Nouvelle Mythologie Comparée*. No. 6, pp. 387-409.

WEST, M. L., 1999 [2009]. "The Invention of Homer". Online. *The Classical Quarterly*. Vol. 49, no. 2, p. 364. Available at: <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/cq/49.2.364>.

ZIELIŃSKI, Karol, 2023. *The Iliad and the Oral Epic Tradition*. Online. Hellenic Studies 99. Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://chs.harvard.edu/read/the-iliad-and-the-oral-epic-tradition/>.