

A Comparative Study On The Select Women Characters Of The Classics – *Iliad* And *Mahabharata* Through The Lens Of Post-Feminism

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Abstract: *The ideology of Post feminism was derived by the theorists to expand and fill the absences found in the second and third wave of feminism. Rather than voicing the disproportionate power principles between men and women Post feminism speaks for female empowerment and individual choice in male centric society. Indian mythology represents women as “Shakthi”, the embodiment of female prowess around which the entire world revolves and that is why from the ancient times, women are portrayed as the central characters not only in Indian epics but also in Greek epics. Homer describes the story of Helen and her rescue and the Indian epic Mahabharata narrates the causes and the courses of the Kurukshetra War to avenge the humiliation of Panjalai. This paper attempts to compare and contrast select women characters of Iliad and Mahabharata through the lens of Post feminism shedding light on how the choices exercised by them have a strong impact on their destiny and that of people around them at large and also how certain female characters at centre are muted and become powerless due to patriarchal power politics.*

Key Words: *feminism, identity, myth, post-feminism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As the goddesses, queens and the princesses, women of both the classics, *Iliad* and *Mahabharata*, are presented as nobles with the celestial exquisiteness and possessed great skill in all the endeavors. Unlike the women of 19th century who were subservient to the male centric society, the classics of the east and the west depict the realm of post feminism, where the women exercised free will and empowerment. They were given the freedom of choice, thoughts, words and action and at times they even overruled the toxic masculinity described by the later feminist writers. However, with time the audacious activities of the women characters are slowly forgotten by the heroic deeds of great heroes like Bheeshma, Arjuna, Karna, Achilles, Hector, Odysseus etc., and the lives and stories of women are neglected and considered insignificant afore the adventures of these dashing heroes. Though the sketches of independent women were painted by these classics, beneath these sketches we can also find the traces of subjugation and dominance of patriarchy which cannot be resisted by the female community from the time immemorial. Consciously or unconsciously, the womenfolk were consistently made obeisant to the male dominated culture. This paper aims to revisit mythology to explore into the hermeneutics of gender roles by way comparing and contrasting the female representation of power and powerfulness as cultural archetypes in Eastern and Western tradition through myths and epics.

2. Parallels in Female representation of Power - Marriage and Motherhood

Despite the powerful male characters who are sturdy, ruthless, and arrogant we can also witness strong and dominant women characters in the Greek classics. Hera, the queen of Gods, is often presented as the mightiest character of *Iliad*. She literally controls the course of the war as the great heroes of Achaean army like Agamemnon, Odysseus and Achilles including the gods and goddesses like Athena, Poseidon, Hermes, and so on follow her lead and counsel. She never once fails to exercise her rights and equality before Zeus and states “I am a god too. My descent the same as yours – crooked –minded Cronus fathered me as well, the first of all his daughters.”(Homer 68-70). She was also

successful in stopping Zeus from intervening in the Trojan War and at many circumstances Hera ousts Zeus, the ultimate symbol of the entire male centric province. When she finds that Zeus helped Trojans as requested by Thetis, mother of Achilles, in order to quench the shame of Achilles, like the conventional feminine figures she was not muffled but aggressively express her thoughts as

So who of the gods this time, my treacherous one, was hatching plans' with you? Always your pleasure, whenever my back is turned, to settle things in your grand clandestine way. You never deign, do you, freely and frankly, to share your plots with me – never not a word (Homer 648-653)

and when Zeus intervenes in her actions, she uses all the strategies possible like seduction, deceit, disguise and so on to win over him.

Women of *Mahabharata* were given full choice in choosing their husbands in the Swayamvara and to some extent they even controlled the words and actions of their male counterparts. When the great king Shantanu desires to marry Ganga, the river goddess, she hides her identity and decides to marry him with the condition that,

Neither you nor anyone else should ever ask me who I am, or whence I come. You must also not stand in the way of whatever I do, good or bad, nor must you ever be wroth with me on any account whatsoever. You must not say anything displeasing to me. If you act otherwise, I shall leave you then and there. Do you agree? (Rajagopalachari 5)

Similarly, Satyawati, the fisher queen, was portrayed as the strongest female character who flips her flaws as powers. To join in wedlock with Shantanu, she not only demands the throne to his sons but went to the extent of making the eldest son of the king, Devavrata, into Grandsire Bheeshma. Though her desires and rights were restrained before, by the Rishi Parashar and her own father, she was powerful and skilled enough in successfully establishing matriarchy in the kingdom of Hastinapur, subduing the then prevailed patriarchal remains.

We can also witness certain women characters Kunti, Athena and Thetis, who rule the storyline by silently remaining in the shadows. It was Kunti's decisive dominance over the sub conscious of Pandavas that draws victory to the side of Pandavas. Like the Greek Goddess Athena, she was silent, strategic and strong willed in achieving her goals. The entire lifetime of Pandavas were generalized among them by their mother Kunti. Since the beginning, she clearly knows that, one day or the other, her five sons have to compete with the mighty hundreds on the opposite. She was preparing for that and she clearly knows unity is the only tool that will bring them the success. This is the reason for her generalization and from the skills they acquired from their birth to the foods they share in the forest, the kingdom, its wealth and power, Kunti successfully generalizes everything in the lives of Pandavas, thereby creating an unbreakable bond among them which makes them even more powerful and unconquerable against their enemies. Though she was successful in all the other aspects she was afraid of the dispute between her sons for a woman and unknowingly, she also generalizes that one aspect in the life of Pandavas for which she was worried explicitly though satisfied implicitly.

It was the goal of the goddess of wisdom, Athena, to destroy the great city of Troy for the injustice laid to her in the 'Judgment of Paris'. Though superficially it looks like Athena is simply following the orders of Hera, without her skill and strategy the victory for Achaeans is inconceivable. Being the goddess of wisdom and warfare she excels in the Trojan war against the God of War, Ares, who simply possess the lust for blood. Apart from fighting with Ares, she remains off the battlefield working in the sideline, pacifying the duel between Agamemnon and Achilles, and persuades the latter and acts as a great counsel to Odysseus and Nestor. She is very conscious in keeping the war on fire and when the mortals pay reluctant to the war or retire from the war, Athena always makes sure to re ignite the war by any of the strategy possible and few of the examples can be seen in the manipulating and disguising scenes of Pandaros and Diomedes respectively. Though Athena collectively desires the victory of Greek army, like Kunti who was extremely partial in the case of her first born Karna, we cannot exclude the fact that Athena is also partial towards Odysseus than any other heroes in the battlefield.

Kunti was never once restrained from her goal of binding her sons by the patriarchal domain of Hastinapur. Athena was very strategic and was never stopped even at the command of Zeus, the king of Gods, to not interfere in the battlefield and she consequently wins the battle through her idea of Wooden Horse with the help of her dearest warrior, Odysseus. Thetis, the mother of Achilles, was indeed successful in persuading the King of Gods, who remained neutral, to intervene course the battle just to avenge the humiliation done to her son. Aphrodite, the chief goddess and the head

of the Trojans were equally powered and skilled enough to par with the former three mighty chiefs of the Achaean army. Thus, these feminist characters along with Hera, were not submissive and was not totally oppressed by the male dominated culture but was given the rights and free will to act upon their whims and fancies. The choices made by them not only shaped their lives but highly influenced the stories of the heroes of the classics. With these women of influence and action, the classics present us before the clever feminine system that becomes the driving source behind all the important events of the epics.

3. As Tools of Patriarchal Subjugation

Apart from these dominant women characters we can also behold few feminine figures of necessity and action like Panjali and Helen, who were muffled and deprived of their rights despite being highly influential and powerful. At the request of Gaia, Earth Goddess, when Zeus decides to reduce the number of mortals, rather than choosing any other means of destruction like deluge and deadly diseases, he opts for the most beautiful women in the world, Helen, as a tool of destruction. "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium" (Marlowe 106). Zeus passes on the Judgment of Golden apple to Paris; Helen was staked in the process, resulting in the outbreak of the great Trojan War, between east and the west causing massive destruction as desired by Zeus. Similarly when Krishna, incarnation of Lord Vishnu decides to end the Dwapara Yuga, he is in need of a cause for the obliteration. Thus unlike his previous methods like bringing on the great deluge, this time he uses the disrobement of Panjali to ignite the war between Pandavas and the Kauravas at Kurukshetra, causing the annihilation of entire Bharat as the planned by the gods before. Thus here Helen and Panjali were literally used as a tool of destruction by the realm of Gods, where their pride, dignity including their chastity was staked in the process.

4. As War prize and stake

The women of ancient Bharat enjoyed the freedom of choosing their husbands upon their own will. But by the time of Panjali this too was restrained from her as, with time Swayamvara was transformed into the arena to establish the skill of the heroes and women were gifted as the prize to the mightiest warrior among the competitors. However, Panjali was extremely happy in garlanding Arjuna in the disguise of Brahmana, at her Swayamvara. "Her face glowed with happiness which streamed out of her eyes as she looked on Arjuna" (Rajagopalachari 71) But when she was asked to be shared among the five the discussions first on the grounds of Vedas, Shashtras, Rishis, Krishna and Pandavas than counseling Draupadi herself. She was played as a puppet among the patriarchal figures only because of her exquisite beauty. Though Kunti had her own reasons in not taking back the words she uttered, Yudhishtira, the representation of Dharma, would have opposed and prevented the chaos. But Draupadi's beauty cannot be resisted by any of the Pandavas, and she eventually becomes the puppet of men for their selfish desires and was forced to marry five men which is not moral and never heard before. This event was even justified by Dharma as "O king, Kindly excuse us. In a time of great peril we vowed that we would share all things in common and we cannot break that pledge. Our mother has commanded us so." (Rajagopalachari 73) When the decision is made, she was cunningly persuaded by Krishna and others, where she was left with no choices but to accept her fate to become Panjali from Draupadi.

The practice of Swayamwara is not exercised in the ancient Greece, but exceptionally Helen was given this right as she has number of suitors waiting to hold her hands in marriage. And it was Helen who chose Menelaus as her husband, among the countless suitors and her decision was accepted by others. But like Panjali who chose Arjuna, she too was deprived of her choice and was taken by Paris against her will and thoughts, which she accepts as her fate. And this made the troop of entire suitors to war against the Trojans and similarly the Pandavas against the Kauravas guaranteeing the destruction as anticipated by the gods before. On this light it is evident that Helen and Panjali were used not only as the cause of destruction but the binding force of the team of success.

5. Female Autonomy and Free Will in Male Centric Space:

Though the heroes, Pandavas and Paris have equal influence in the life of Panjali and Helen respectively, only the heroines were blamed for their polyandry and the annihilation. In Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Penelope complains as "Helen should have been kept in a locker trunk in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs" (Atwood 79) and as "...Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes." (Atwood 131) But Paris was never blamed as he is considered to be the puppet of Aphrodite. Similarly rather than pointing to the wicked mind of Duryodhana, Panjali is considered to be the outbreak of war which caused a great destruction, as Duryodhana and his brothers are believed to be under the lifetime hypnosis of his uncle Sakuni.

But if we look closely it is not the male dominated culture that brought injustice to these female protagonists but the dominant female figures. It was the selfish and strategic Kunti, who proposed the idea of publicizing Draupadi

among her sons throwing seeds for her subjugation and it was Aphrodite who continuously oppressed and suppressed Helen and forced her life with Paris thereby assassinating her character and life. "I was unhappy about the wrong that Aprodite had done me in taking me over there, away from my country, my little girl, and my lawful wedded husband, who is indeed by no means deficient either in person or understanding." (Homer 466)

But analyzing again, we can uncover that these powerful females were only the figurative heads and the actual driving source that lies behind each and every action is the ultimate symbol of the male centric province. Women were still used as a commodity, prize of war, and consistently their desires, wills and sufferings are still silenced and are deprived from them for centuries. By giving few powers to exercise and few rights to enjoy, the female community is actually blinded and backstabbed by the male cultured society who was still dominant and continues to overrule their so called weaker sex, this time not in the foreground, but in the background. With the cage opened, womenfolk are rejoicing of their independence and the choices and the desires that they can exercise outside it; being unaware of the fact that they were actually fooled by the masculinity who periodically cuts off the wings of women before opening it.

6. Reclamation of Identity – An ordeal of loss and suffering:

From being taken up as a possession, women of these epics powerfully question all the confinements of the stereotyped male dominated society. Both Helen and Panjali strife hard to break the traditions of both patriarchal and matriarchal traditions that dominates them and plunders the independent identity from them. When Pandavas proclaim their decision of Panjali marrying the entire five, she clearly express her distasteful in the matter. Also when Aphrodite forces Helen's relationship with Paris she breaks out that

Go sit with Paris yourself; henceforth be goddess no longer; never let your feet carry you back to Olympus; worry about him and look after him till he make you his wife, or, for the matter of that, his slave –but me? I shall not go; I can garnish his bed no longer, I should be a byword among all the women of Troy (Homer 60)

But their identity was established and the muffled voices were amplified only after undergoing a great ordeal of loss and suffering. After the disrobing scene, Panjali was set on fire and with strife, rage and anger she questions the entire masculinity around her for which the patriarchy was muffled, resulting in the war causing a massive destruction. Though the identity, pride and justice was reclaimed to Panjali, in the course of war she lost everything, including all her sons except for her husbands. Though Helen was rescued back to Sparta by her lawful husband Menelaus, she lost her ten years of time including her parental rights and pleasures of her only daughter, Hermoine, and suffered from the Trojan trauma for the rest of her lives.

7. Conclusion

The above mentioned events in lives of select females from the myths of east and west, clearly depicts that the women of classics are free from the direct patriarchal subjugations but were unknowingly hypnotized and were used as puppets by the dominant male figures like Zeus and Krishna to fulfill their needs and desires. From analyzing on the surface, we may witness strong and powerful characters like Hera, Athena, Kunti, Satyavati and Aphrodite who were provided with extreme power to create the matriarchy and controlled the twists and turns of the story line and hold dominance over other subservient feminine figures like Helen and Panjali. However all their actions, including their thoughts were actually governed and directed by the heads of the patriarchal province. They were only the vessels to carry on their purpose, tools to exercise their desires, the dices rolled upon their interests and the puppets danced according to their whims and fancies. Through this re-reading and re-assessing of the texts of the two great epics of all time, *Mahabharata* and *Iliad*, this paper has illuminated how myths and epics enable the lateral approach to explore and analyze female behavioral patterns under the context of culture with reference to the power structures which rendered mute female voices and the ramifications so on from the times of lore to times to come.

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