

Women in Indian and Greek Epics: Some Reflections

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Abstract

In the two famous Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, there are five admirable women - Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari. These are five special women with remarkable power, wisdom, dedication, and sacrifice which are honoured across periods of the Indian civilisation. Similarly, in Greek mythology also, there are important powerful women characters having exceptional capacity and power. They are Helen, Hecuba, Medea and Thetis. They have not only portrayed their sexuality and motherhood but also demonstrated their power, virtues, kindness, grace and capacity to withstand crisis. In this paper, we take a look at the five women from the famous Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and attempt a comparison of some aspects of their lives with important women characters from the legendary Greek epics, Iliad and Odyssey. In the study of these interesting, dynamic and complex women characters we have found that the customs and norms of those societies dominated by patriarchy have immensely affected their lives. However, it will be grossly unfair to treat them as women only. Their lives were affected by brave, power hungry warriors on one hand but on the other hand all these women have emerged as political entities involved in the intricacies of war from behind and not merely as the observers of incidents of wars. These characters have enjoyed much more power than one may perceive from these epics. This vindicates that it is the power that mattered more than gender notwithstanding the fact that patriarchy remained as an influential force in the society.

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Introduction

In Indian epics which predominantly represent the Hindu scripture, women hold a special place. There are many important women characters in those scriptures and folklores. Amongst them there are five admirable characters from two Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata known as Panchyakanyas. They are Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari. While Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari are from the Ramayana, Kunti and Draupadi are from the Mahabharata. These are five special women with remarkable power, wisdom, dedication, and sacrifice which are honoured across periods of the Hindu civilisation in India. They are also worshipped as a symbol of Shakti and ubiquitous woman power in different parts of India. Even in the morning chants of Hindu women, they are mentioned regularly as a symbol of power against evil.

Sanskrit transliteration

“abalya draupadi kunti tara mandodari tatha |
 pancakanyah smarenityam mahaptakanasinih” |

English translation

“Abalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari

One should forever remember the panchakanya who are the destroyers of great sins”

Similarly, in Greek mythology also, there are important powerful women characters having exceptional capacity and power. They have not only portrayed their sexuality and motherhood but also demonstrated their power, virtues, kindness, grace and capacity to destroy.

In this paper, we take a look at each of these five women from the famous Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and attempt a comparison of some aspects of their lives with those of similar women in the legendary Greek epics, Iliad and Odyssey.

Section I

In this section, we attempt a broad and general comparison between the two famous Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata with the two famous Greek epics – the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The Ramayana is attributed to Rishi Valmiki. It is the first of the two Sanskrit epic poems, the other one being the Mahabharata. Ramayana depicts the life of Lord Rama - the most worshipped god across the Indian sub-continent. He is portrayed as the ideal character of a human being as a son, a husband, a father and a king. In the Ramayana, he was born as the first son of king Dasharatha and first queen Kaushalya of Kosala Kingdom. He was also the crowned prince of that kingdom but was banished from the kingdom for fourteen years to keep the promise of his father to his second queen Kaikeye. Rama was accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana during their banishment period in the forest for fourteen years. During their stay in the forest, Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, the powerful king of Lanka. This finally resulted in a war where Rama overpowered the mighty Ravana. Rama came back to Ayodhya after the completion of the period of banishment and became a good prince of the masses. The Mahabharata is attributed to the sage Vyasa. The story line of the Mahabharata is long, complicated and absorbing. Mahabharata is about the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas for the establishment of justice and values in the society against greed, lust and dishonesty.

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The legendary author Homer was the writer of Iliad and the Odyssey. It is one of the oldest texts available having descriptions of Greek Civilisation. It is also the oldest text of the European tradition. These epics were the outcome of the centuries-long tradition of orally transmitted poetry in ancient Greece. Both these books remained as educational tools for a long period of time. They reflect the moral frameworks of proper and improper behaviour of those times which were also followed for centuries. These epics also represent culture, tradition, myths and societal norms of those periods. The desire for women and power and consequent vices resulted in war in both the Mahabharata and the Iliad. These epics therefore described the just and unjust forces of the societies and finally the victory of virtue over evil. Both have strongly demonstrated the negative consequences of greed and selfishness jealousy.

Section II

In this part, we take a look at each of the five Panchkanyas of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata individually and attempt to see whether their lives bore any resemblance with women in the Greek epics.

Ahalya and Helen –

We will begin by comparing Ahalya, one of the Panchkanyas with the Queen of Troy Helen.

The first *Kanya*, Ahalya, in Valmiki's epic *Ramayana* is the wife of the sage Gautama. Her son Satananda was the family priest of king Janak. There are differences in opinions about the birth of Ahalya. In some sources it is mentioned that she was born out of a sacrificial fire of seven sages and handed over to Gautama. However, in the Puranas, she is mentioned as the princess of the Puru kingdom. As described in the Ramayana, Indra, Lord of the Gods, disguised himself as Gautama and approached Ahalya for sexual union. Ahalya had a feeling that the person may not be Gautama but went for the sexual union. Thus, Indra violates her. When Gautama came to know about it, he was angry on Ahalya as well as Indra. Thus, by curse of her husband she became a stone. When Gautama realised that Ahalya was not fully responsible for this incident, he told her that she will get rid of this penance for her sin till she is purified by Lord Rama. When Rama went to the Ashrama of Gautama on his way to Janak's Kingdom, he brushes his foot with the stone and releases her from her curse (Pande 2016). Ahalya the most beautiful women of that time had to go through the painful punishment for a sin where her conscious involvement was not beyond doubt. But her respect for her husband Gautama never declined despite this curse.

Helen is the daughter of Zeus and Leda. In Greek mythologies, Zeus was the powerful god of sky and thunder. Helen was believed to be the most beautiful woman in the world. She became the wife of Menelaus, the brother of the Spartan King Agamemnon. There was a festival in Sparta and the royal family of Troy was also present in Sparta. Paris, the young prince of Troy was also present there. He dared to seduce Helen and ran away with her to Troy. When Agamemnon came to know about this incident he was enraged. Menelaus along with his brother Agamemnon decided to fight with Troy and win back his wife Helen.

Ahalya's seduction by Indra who assumed the form of her husband Gautama has strong similarity with a Greek myth in which it is said that Paris supposedly assumed the form of Menelaus to seduce Helen, who is also half-divine, being the daughter of Zeus. Another version says that Paris, a Trojan prince, came to Sparta to claim Helen, in the guise of a supposed diplomatic mission. Whatever the story may be, Paris seduced Helen, had sex with her and ran away with her. Helen had her consent in this whole incident because without her consent it was impossible for Paris to kidnap her from the palace of Sparta and take her to Troy by Ship. Again, like Ahalya, Helen also enjoyed her sexual relationship with Paris, whatever price she might have to pay for it later. The mix of hesitance and excitement of Helen is also reflected in the poetry of the Roman poet Ovid when Helen writes to Paris:

*"I wish you had come in your swift ship back then,
When my virginity was sought by a thousand suitors.
If I had seen you, you would have been first of the thousand;
My husband will give me pardon for this judgment!
You come late to delights already possessed and seized
Your hope was tardy; another has what you seek"*
(Ziogas 2013)

Ahalya also recognised that someone has approached her with a disguise. So, it was a conscious decision of Ahalya to involve in sex with Indra. There was hesitation as well as excitement within Ahalya. It may be a momentary lapse to enjoy her curiosity. Gautama thought sin unpardonable and cursed his wife to perform penance until she gets rid of the vices of greed, desire, and lust.

In both the cases, unfulfilled sexual desire of women from their elderly husbands and their attempts for their sexual fulfilment is observed which was treated as felony by the society. Both the women were partly divine and still their urge for sexual emancipation disgraced them reflecting the prevailing norms of the society. Helen was queen of a royal family of Greece and Agamemnon used the kidnapping of her as an opportunity to take control of Troy

through a violent war, while Ahalya had to bear the wrath of her husband and was petrified or shunned by her husband or society for years. It required as powerful a man like Rama to regain her honour and status.

Tara and Hecuba

Now we compare Tara, another of the Panchkanyas with Hecuba, another Queen of Troy.

The second *Kanya*, Tara, was the Queen of Kishkindha and wife of Bali, the monkey king. She was an extraordinary woman having immense wisdom and knowledge in running the kingdom. Her husband also recognised her abilities. She realised that there must be a greater force behind his brother Sugriva's challenge. Otherwise, Sugriva would not dare Bali for a battle. Accordingly, she advised her husband Bali not to accept Sugriva's challenge. He realized that he had made the mistake of not listening to Tara when he was fatally injured and killed by Sugriva with Rama helping him from behind. After Bali's death she married his brother Sugriva for the interest of the kingdom (Bhattacharya 2004).

In Greek mythology, Priam was the king of Troy. Hecuba was a queen and the wife of King Priam. Once Troy was defeated in the war Hecuba was captured by enemy soldiers. She was made a slave and given to Odysseus, a Greek king of Ithaca. But when Odysseus came to take her daughter Polyxena also as a slave, she tried to prevent it using all her power.

After her husband Bali's death, Tara gives a flaming speech asking Rama to kill her also which draws similarity with a woman called Hecuba or Hecabe. Like Tara, Hecuba is seen mourning the loss of her husband Priam in the Trojan War. But, in spite of the fact that she had lost her husband, like Tara, she does not stop short at rebuking and confronting Odysseus when he comes to claim her daughter Polyxena from her. Tara's powerful speech confronting Rama bears striking similarity to Hecuba's confronting of Odysseus when the latter came to sacrifice her daughter Polyxena:

*“The strong ought not to use their strength
To do what is not right; when they are fortunate
They should not think Fortune will always favor them.
... kill me with [Polyxena]; so both Earth and the dead soul
Who claims this blood – offering, shall gain a double draught” (Niyogi 2010)*

However, unlike Tara, she plots revenge against Odysseus, king of Ithaca and one of the main Greek leaders of the Trojan War. This shows the courage of the women of royal families to defend their families, respect for the kingdom not usually observed within common women of the society. It shows that more than gender and sexuality, it is the power one enjoys that makes the difference in society. Both Tara and Hecuba were politically very powerful even in the presence of their husbands and influenced the decisions of the royal families.

Mandodari and Medea

The third *Kanya*, Mandodari was the wife of Ravana, the king of Lanka. She resembles Tara in her wisdom and intelligent assessment of her husband's character as well as of the changing political situation in her kingdom. Like Tara, Mandodari also sensed that without any divine power, no simple man living in a forest could organise a force and fight a war with mighty Rama and therefore she begged Ravana to make peace with Rama. She rebuked Ravana for kidnapping Sita as she knew it was not his lust but his lack of control over his anger that had created the turmoil. She also told him to release Sita honourably as her presence in Lanka would spell doom for their kingdom. It was not at all easy for her to put forward her own opinion in front of the mighty Ravana. The death of his son Meghnad perturbed Ravana but Mandodari still stood by her husband. It symbolises the strength of her character in the most difficult time of her life. Despite all odds, she stayed with her family and remained loyal to her husband and his kingdom. She married the brother of Ravana, Vibhishana after the death of Ravana in the war. It may reflect the customs of the different communities of that period that the reigning queen used to marry the new king.

The character of Mandodari is in sharp contrast with a woman called Medea, a Greek priestess (Lowatt, 2013). Medea is a priestess, called variously as enchantress and sorceress who was the daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis, niece of Circe, granddaughter of the sun god Helios, and later wife to the hero Jason. Jason received the proposal of marrying Glauce the daughter of King Creon who used to rule Corinth. Thereafter, Jason left Medea unlike Mandodari who accepts her husband's infidelity. She decided for a reprisal of this act of her husband. She sent a golden crown along with a beautiful dress to Glauce. These were covered by poison. This resulted in the death of Glauce and Creon. She became so revengeful that she killed her children too. However, Mandodari neither walked away from her marriage, nor gave way to uncontrolled anger and passion like Medea. On the contrary when Ravana lost control over the loss of his son Meghnad in the hands of Laxman, Mandodari maintained calm though she was broken down at the loss of her beloved son.

Medea commented that "We were born women – useless for honest purposes, but in all kinds of evil, skilled practitioners." This shows the powerlessness of women of the powerful royal families that she celebrated the evilness within her for revenge. The above expression is nothing but the frustration of a woman who has lost her husband to another woman. Mandodari handled the situation much better having arguments with Ravana. She also saved the life of Sita when Ravana decided to kill her by holding his hand and reminding Ravana that killing a woman is a heinous crime and Ravana should not increase his crime any further. But Medea took a different path to establish her status and to give a befitting reply to her insult.

Kunti and Thetis

The fourth Kanya Kunti was the Queen of Pandu, the King of Hastinapur and the mother of the Pandavas. In the early years of her life, she gave birth to a child even before her marriage. The Sun God was the father of that child. The abandoned child was named Karna and he became a great warrior. The contradiction became stronger when she found that Karna was standing with the Kauravas against her five sons called Pandavas. With the progress of the war at Kurukshetra, this contradiction intensified and reached its pinnacle when Karna became the General of the Kauravas against Pandavas leading to a situation where Kunti would have to sacrifice either Karna or her third son Arjuna. Whatever be the result, Kunti would lose one of her sons in this war.

Thetis was a Goddess of water in Greek mythology. She was the mother of the famous warrior Achilles and wife of King Peleus. Just as Kunti did influence the role of her son Karna in the battle of the Mahabharata, Thetis influenced the actions of her son Achilles in the Trojan War.

The interesting factor is the common thread of destiny weaving through their lives, distinguishing them from other heroes. Karna at the time of birth had a special protection of his life known as 'Raksha Kavach' within his body. This protection prevented him from all enemies before the war of the Mahabharata. When the war of the Mahabharata was about to begin, Lord Indra in the disguise of a Brahmin asked the 'Raksha Kavach' from Karna after his morning bath. Karna who was famous for his donations gave it to that Brahmin, knowing fully the intention behind this request. Achilles too is a demigod born of Thetis, a nymph, and King Peleus. Thetis dips her infant son in the Styx River by holding him by the ankle to grant him invincibility, but the heel remains untouched. Achilles became a fiercely skilled warrior. He used to create fear in the mind of opposition warriors. What is strange is that both Karna and Achilles are drawn to a war which had little to do with them — Karna, as he had sworn allegiance to his friend Duryodhana and Achilles, due to his word given to King Agamemnon who joined the Greek army to fight against Troy.

Thetis had been indirectly responsible for the death of her son Achilles, by leaving his heel vulnerable. But Achilles was a human being and he had to die to become a legend. Achilles was not interested to go to the war with the Trojans as he realized that this war was to fulfil the ambitions of Agamemnon. But Thetis urged him to go for the Trojan War as it would give him the opportunity to remain in eternity as a great warrior of all time. Kunti left Karna, her first-born son, vulnerable by making him promise not to kill any Pandava other than Arjuna, thus making him emotionally weak through his knowledge that he was fighting against his brothers - a fact that the Pandavas were

unaware of. Thetis wanted her son to enter into eternity as a great warrior fully knowing that Achilles would not come back alive from the Trojan War. Kunti wanted to save her five children from Karna as she was advised by Krishna to meet Karna and make Karna emotionally weak. Both were aware that a morally upbeat and emotionally charged Karna would be able to destroy Arjuna and the morale of the Pandava Army. Kunti was a political character of the royal family and had to deal with many complexities and it is very difficult to find a character like Kunti in any epic that has gone through so many phases and crises in her life and remained so calm and poignant. She retrieved the kingdom of her husband from so many odds fully using the opportunities available to her. After the deadly war she decides to retire to the forest. The maturity displayed through her character throughout the Mahabharata was unparalleled.

Draupadi and Helen

Draupadi, the fifth Kanya was one of the central characters of the Mahabharata and the common wife of the Pandavas. Though the middle Pandava Arjuna - disguised as a Brahmin - won her in her swayamvara, Draupadi was compelled to marry all the five brothers on the command of her mother-in-law Kunti. She was insulted, humiliated and disrobed by the Kauravas in the game of dice played by Yudhishthira where he lost her. Although Krishna saved her honour, she pledged revenge which occurs in the Battle of the Mahabharata.

We have described Helen already in this paper. While Helen is blamed for the destruction of the beautiful city of Troy, Draupadi is blamed for the Battle of the Mahabharata. However, warriors had their own interests to capture power but somehow both these women were used as a pretext of war. Insult of Draupadi by the Kauravas instigated the Pandavas and intensified their rivalry. Sexuality of Helen was at the centre stage of conflicts and war of Troy. Oscar Wilde exclaims about Helen:

*‘For surely it was thou, who, like a star
Didst lure the Old World’s chivalry and might
into the clamorous crimson waves of war!’ (Niyogi 2010)*

However, unlike Helen, Draupadi was a political character, tirelessly urging her husbands to avenge her humiliation. She stands apart from other epic women in her immense psychological strength, political acumen and courage which distinguish her from other royal women of that era. Like Helen, she too was surrounded by violence, bloodshed and war but not as a witness but as a designer of the war.

Unlike the Iliad and the Odyssey, women characters in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are more political and powerful in nature. They are more actively involved in the decisions of the royal families. It will be unfair to treat them as women only. They are all political entities involved in the war from behind and not the observers of incidents of wars. They are much more powerful characters than one may perceive from these epics. The portrayals of these unmatched women characters may not represent the women of those times but hints to the fact that it is power that mattered more than gender.

Conclusion

This paper has made a broad and general comparison of a group of five iconic women of the two famous Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata with the two famous Greek epics – the Iliad and the Odyssey. In this analysis, we have found many startling similarities and dissimilarities in the characters and actions of these powerful women of the two traditions. The study of these interesting, dynamic and complex women characters has found that the customs and norms of those societies dominated by patriarchy have immensely affected their lives. However, unlike the Iliad and the Odyssey, women characters in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are more political and powerful in nature. They are more actively involved in the decisions of the royal families and kingdoms. It will be unfair to treat them as women only. Their life is affected by brave, power hungry warriors or patriarchs on one hand but on the other hand all these women have emerged as political entities involved in the intricacies of war from behind and not merely the observers of incidents of wars. These characters have enjoyed much more

power than one may perceive from these epics. This vindicates that it is the power that mattered more than gender notwithstanding the fact that patriarchy remained as an influential force in the society.

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