

QUES. COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE ILIAD AND THE MAHABHARATA AS EXAMPLES OF CLASSICAL LITERATURE.

Two of the world's most widely read epics, The Iliad and The Mahabharata originated in two distinct parts of the globe which had no rapport at the time of their foundation. Over centuries they have been repetitively read and re-read, translated into other languages and criticized and talked upon in almost all parts of the world. No matter their original languages, Greek and Sanskrit are almost defunct in today's world; they have punched their everlasting influence in the frame work of the epics. In order to bring to us such great classic versions of the life of the ancient world, Homer and Vyasa must have been profoundly rooted in their respected traditions.

The Epic tradition, dating back to c. 3000 B.C., has been one of the most unique genres in the history of Literature. J.A. Cuddon writes "An epic is a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes. It is a polygonal, 'heroic' story incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history. Epics are often of national significance in the sense that they embody the history and the aspirations of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner."

For a modern reader of literature, the ancient world is not any one thing. It is not as easy to rely as a scientist's inventions. We see this unseen world through the eyes of contemporaries. Reuben A. Bower in his introduction to the Macmillan Company edition of The Iliad, translated by Alexander Pope writes 'Whatever Julius Caesar or Brutus may have been in fact, their significance for most of us has been permanently affected by Shakespeare's play.' In this similar stride we may also say that, all that has been left upon us is to perceive our antique world through these tremendous works of our ancestors.

THE FACTUAL COMPARISON

Written in around 6th-8th century B.C., The Iliad is not much distanced in its date from the great Indian epic, which belongs to the 6th century B.C. Whereas when we compare the volume, The Mahabharata is much ahead of the Iliad. The Iliad limits its grandeur with around 15,000 lines, and on the other hand, Mahabharata is supposed to have 200,000 lines, which mark up to eight times that of Iliad. Factually, their being located in two distanced lands leads to difference in the various themes and values present in the two epics. However, where there are differences, there are similarities too. And hence the twain shall meet somewhere.

WHO'S THE POET?

Even after long debates among the critics, both the epics are well regarded for following the old traditional way of oral narration as the writing tradition came much later. There are scholars who doubt this oral recitation too. In his Prolegomena ad Homerum (1795), the German scholar F.A. Wolf argued that our Iliad and Odyssey were the work of more than one man. His reason was that Homer did not know how to write, and that his poems were far too long for oral recitation. He therefore concluded that Homer composed short series of poems, which were later expanded by other poets. And from here the famous Homeric question arrives- 'what was Homeric and what was not?' After varied battles between the analysts and Unitarians, most scholars resolved to the formerly believed fact that the Iliad belongs to one and only Homer.

Similar is the conflict in The Mahabharata. Being excessively vast in its size, critics doubted the durability of an orally recited text over centuries. But then its excellent narration and the depiction of various scenes cannot be a work of anyone else except the bard, Vyasa.

THE NARRATION

Homer is a third person, omnipotent narrator who is not only retelling the story of the Fall of Troy, but also has access to every character's mind. The storyteller in that way has control. The style is linear in the sense that the story Homer's telling has already happened.

The narrative in the Mahabharata is complex in comparison. Vyasa himself is both poet and actor in the epic. Vyasa has written the story but Vaisampayana, a disciple of the rishi, is actually telling it. There is a linear form but some open-ended questions like this, make the epic a mystery.

THE TEXTUAL AND THE CONTEXTUAL

The Iliad, as told earlier, is the story of the fall of Troy. E.V. Rieu, in his introduction to his translated edition gives us a brief plot of the epic. He writes 'King Agamemnon the imperial overlord of Greece has, with his brother Menelaus of Sparta, induced the princes who owe him allegiance to join forces with him against King Priam of Troy, because Paris, one of Priam's sons, has run away with Menelaus's wife, the beautiful Helen of Argos.' And from here, the glory of war starts. The Achaean and the Trojan forces come to almost a decade long combat. In Homer's Iliad we are placed almost in the last year of the war, but through his excellent narration, Homer creates the impression that he is covering the whole war and even the periods before and after it. Meanwhile, the Mahabharata is a touching tale of how sibling rivalry can bring about the onset of a war. The plot surrounds around Kauravas and Pandavas, the two groups of brothers from the same lineage. It progresses with various instances that result from Duryodhna's jealousy of the pandavas. Leading to pandava's sojourn and many other adversities in their life, this jealousy ends up with a great war, with destruction of the multitude. It is during this battle only that Krishna recites the sacred Bhagwad Gita to Arjuna in order to teach him the lessons life.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHARACTERS

Though Iliad is full of great warriors like Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, et cetera, Mahabharata comprises some of the distinguished characters of the Indian epic world. On one hand where Achilles is renowned as a Greek warrior, Arjuna is the greatest archer of Hastinapur. C. Rajgopalachari, in his translated version of Mahabharata describes the characters as "Bhishma, the perfect knight; the venerable Drona; the vain but chivalrous Karna; Duryodhana, whose perverse pride is redeemed by great courage in adversity; the high souled Pandavas with godlike strength as well as power of suffering."

A glance at the women characters in both the plays gives us a new dimension. The female characters in the Mahabharata, Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari are much more influential than the human female characters in the Iliad. We rarely hear briseis, Helen and Chryseis raising voices against male domination. Out of all, Draupadi stands unique due to her bold role throughout the epic.

THE DIVINE INTERVENTION

It is inevitable to have no divine intervention in an epic. And the Iliad and the Mahabharata, being great epics have various instances of deities participating and helping the progression of the plot. In the Iliad we have direct interventions of Thetis, Aphrodite, Apollo, Hera, et cetera, in making various decisions during the course of the war. Krishna, the divine factor in the Mahabharata, appears sometimes in quasi-human form while sometimes in a complete divine picture. He is the pandava's savior who always comes up in the correct form at the correct time. We see other deities too who show up from the heaven.

We may also note that, in both the epics, there is this belief in the prophecies. In the Iliad, the prophecy was about Paris, and it foresaw him as the cause of Troy's destruction. Meanwhile, in the Mahabharata, it was foretold that Duryodhana would bring about the destruction of the entire universe.

CONCLUSION

After a long overview, we may say that the two epics have some similar traits as their dates are quite close to each other, whereas their differences may be the result of the long distance between their lands of action. Being great epics, even after so many centuries, the two of them are profoundly regarded by a worldwide audience and expect such acceptance with the future generations as well. And hence, The Iliad and The Mahabharata stand as literary works that inspire many a generations.

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