



GODS AND MEN IN THE *ILIAD* (AND THE *ODYSSEY*)

Whenever one speaks of the *Iliad* one cannot but think of the other epic by Homer, *Odyssey*. Religion has always remained a significant component of an epic. However, what is interesting in *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the relation of the human characters with the Gods. The first pointer towards this came from none other than Aristotle who in his *Poetics* talks of the basic difference of plots of the two works. Aristotle concludes *Iliad* to be more tragic than *Odyssey* and hence the better.

The intervention of Gods are apparently similar in both the epics. Such Divine interventions become a recurring pattern in both. What is different is the motive for Divine intervention the poet gives in the two epics. Human actions in *Iliad* are controlled by the passions of the Gods. A case in point is Hera and Athena's outrage when Aphrodite wins in the judgement of Paris. It is this disappointment that determines the conduct of both the Goddesses in the *Iliad*. It directs their hatred against Paris, and his city, Troy. Even Poseidon uses the battle to settle his score with the Trojan Royal dynasty.

Aphrodite on the other hand is always there by her protégé Paris. She does not forget that he had favoured her in the beauty contest between Hera, Athena, and her, on Mount Ida. Incidentally, this episode is mentioned towards the end of the Book. Aphrodite's choice is made clear in her epiphany (moment of sudden revelation) before Helen as a familiar old wool spinner, in Book III. In fact, all the gods take human shapes to give encouraging talks to their own protégés during the Divine interventions.

The Gods' passions induces them even to deceit. Athena, with the permission of Zeus induces the Trojan ally Pandarus to shoot the disastrous shot at Menelaus, breaking the truce between the warring parties. Equally disgracefully she lures Hector to his Death; she takes the form of his brother Deiphobus, exhorting him to fight Achilles. At the decisive moment she abandons him; Hector realizes Athena's deception and his imminent death. The tragedy of Hector results as much from his own infatuation as from false and deceitful divine action. The Gods may be playing with men but they do respect the passions of each other. Zeus suggests ending the Trojan War merely teasing his wife, but respects her outrage at the suggestion. Hera too invites Zeus to destroy towns dear to her heart (Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae), only if Zeus will allow her destroy Troy. Very similar is the way Apollo beats and stuns Patroclus so that Hector and Euphorbus can kill him.

In Book XXIV of *Iliad* the Gods assemble to discuss whether Achilles can be allowed to continue defiling Hector's body. The Gods in general pity Hector, and Apollo mentions the principles of Decorum; but, Hera, Athena, and Poseidon cling to their hatred for Troy. Ultimately Zeus decides to stop Achilles, but the clemency rests up on the fact that Hector



always made due sacrifices to the Gods. Gods in *Iliad* do not arise above the human standards of morality. In the words of Walther Kraus:

What is essential to the poet is that emotional actions of the gods allow for a rational explanation of fateful events in human life. As frivolous as the gods may appear to us, their actions account for the whole of human suffering and weakness.

Things are very different in the *Odyssey*. In the second epic men are solely responsible for their tragedies and sufferings beyond their destined share. Gods guarantee *Poetic Justice* after they warn men against evil. Divinity is not responsible for evils in this mundane world. In *Odyssey*, unlike the *Iliad*, Man and his fortunes occupy the central stage. In *Iliad* Divine is never unquestioned. Towards the end of the story, after Priam has lost his best son and when final destruction is not far away. Divine intervention is not questioned; neither does the focus shift to the fate of the fallen. The fateful erotic ties between Priam and Helen becomes possible only after the personal intervention of Aphrodite.

The *Iliad* is characterised by its unquestioning non-judgemental attitude towards Divine actions that not only decide the course of the narrative but also the fate of the characters. The resigned attitude of the dying Hector is another case in point. Hector shows absolute resignation before dying. Divinity, in *Iliad*, defines the tragic ways of life; it does not guarantee justice. Similar he to Hector is the stance of Achilles; when Hector warns him that as per predictions is to die soon after, Achilles states that he will readily submit to death whenever Zeus and the other Gods so want. This resignation to the will of the Gods is common to both the warring sides.

The attitude towards Divinity touches deep when while Achilles takes compassion on Priam who has come for the body of his son, Hector. Achilles tells him the allegory of the two caskets in Zeus' palace, one containing bad gifts and the other good ones. At his best a man can get a mixture of the two, and at his worst he gets only the bad ones. This distribution depends on fate and not on moral qualities. Achilles elaborates, the ones getting bad gifts are wretched and are not esteemed by either gods or men. This lot points to abandonment by the Gods whom one must submit to. Gods here are higher beings who dominate human fate and life because they have greater power. This belief in divine absolute passes on to the *Odyssey* but in a more complicated form signifying increased complicacies of human society. *Iliad* is the representation of faith at its rudiments.