The picture of gods and religiosity in the homer’s iliad

Literature, Poem

Critics and historians are of varied opinions when it comes to the authenticity of Homer’s text. Amidst everything else, it is often disputed whether The Iliad was even written by the man known as Homer, just as Shakespeare’s authorship is sometimes brought into question in academic circles. However, one thing is certain as EV Rieu points out in his introduction that a place called Ilium indeed existed in present-day Turkey. Although, whether it faced an actual siege by the Greeks is again debatable, but as Rieu rightly claims, “ The question whether there really was a Trojan War is irrelevant to Homer’s purposes”. For Homer was but a poet relying on the oral epic tradition, and his main purpose was to enlighten or entertain his audience, rather than chronicling actual events. Either way, The Iliad is recognized as a work of literature above everything else, and hence, the discussion should circumvent such vain questions, for we can never be sure of their answers.

Therefore, the primary issue that emerges is – why did Homer give such eminence to gods in his tale? Was it the actual power of faith acting upon his motives or rather did he see it as a clever literary device to comment upon the value systems of his time? While the influence of popular beliefs would be undeniable upon a man born in eighth century BC, such that he incorporates the classical gods and goddesses into his work, it cannot be refuted that Homer painted them with the colours of his own subjective reflections. While the idea of such divine immortals must have existed thanks to the workings of human nature and psychology, by which men tend to romanticize what they cannot rationalize, Herodotus argues that Hesiod and Homer were the ones who gave these immortals an identity based on social parameters. For it is clear when one looks at Homer’s gods, that apart

from their immortality and supreme powers, they bear quite a resemblance to everyday characters that one might encounter; and if readers in the twenty-first century could feel so, the timelessness and genius of Homer's work is more than evident.

Throughout the text, the gods seem to signify an alternate structure, which despite being distant from the mortal world, isn't all that distinct. Homer does not associate his gods with the usual characteristics of divinity that we understand. While being immortal, they aren't exactly omnipotent, as indicated by the fact that Diomedes manages to wound Aphrodite. Moreover, a palpable hierarchy is visible among them, based solely upon the magnitude of power each of them possesses; whereby, Zeus the mightiest god is ordained the ruling patriarch of Olympus. In fact, how did Zeus gain this position, but by dethroning his own father Cronus through a symbolic castration. The nature of this hierarchy is evident through Zeus' warning to the Olympians in Book VIII – " Come on, you gods, try me, if you like, and find out for yourselves." Besides, the gods are seen to tower above the mortals only because of their strength and indestructibility, even if a few mortals such as Hercules manage to pose a challenge to them. Combined with the ritualistic offerings and sacrifices that mortals conduct to appease them, it could be said that Homer, in his objectivity, viewed the gods simply as powerful overseers, not much different from the feudal lords of medieval times.

Neither does Homer attribute the quality of omniscience to his gods, as they are seen to live in a parallel society, riddled with their own sets of

insecurities and interactions, similar to that of mortals. Although, the gods are able to observe the workings of the mortal world from their vantage point at Olympus, the fate of these minions is not entirely known to them, for fate and destiny are seen to be all-encompassing abstractions even beyond the immortals. Zeus is seen to foretell events, merely by virtue of his superior strength, which enables him to influence circumstances and keep the other gods from interfering; but even he is seen to reconcile himself to the workings of destiny, for instance, when his son Sarpedon is killed. Similarly, when Aeneas takes on Achilles, Poseidon intervenes to save Aeneas, only to thus fulfil his eventual destiny, whereby he establishes the Roman lineage. Moreover, unlike an almighty god, Zeus is seen to get tricked when Hera seduces him to enable Poseidon to help the Greeks.

Besides, following the feudal analogy, the immortals are seen to treat human affairs like a game for their own amusement and vanity. They only intercede when it appeals to them, and at times, solely for their own lust as witnessed through the numerous instances of their consummation with mortals in Greek mythology. In addition, they’re also plagued by the mortal flaw of ennui, as corroborated by the instance in Book XIII, when Zeus, convinced that no immortal shall intervene in the Trojan battle, turns his eyes elsewhere, almost as if he happened to be flipping through channels on a television. The sole purpose of the Gods is often betrayed as to amass as many mortal followers as they can; and given to factionalism, it is seen that at times, even worship and offerings are useless in gaining their support, if they happen to be bent upon a particular occurrence, e. g. when

Agamemnon is deluded by Zeus through a dream in Book II, or when Achilles prays for the safety of Patroclus in vain.

Finally, when it comes to omnipresence, it is but obvious that Homer characterizes the gods as actual entities rather than pervading abstractions, and hence they are not unlike ordinary mortals who can only be at one place at a time to participate in events. Moreover, the gods do not simply appear at a location but undergo the mundane process of locomotion, albeit through supernatural means.

As a result, it can be concluded that Homer based his gods upon the structure of human behaviour. In the affairs of the gods, one finds shades of all mortal flaws such as pride, envy, malice, conceit, lust and ambition. Thus, what emerges is a complex political system with a class structure of its own, accompanied by numerous tiffs, recriminations, rivalries, ego battles and skirmishes, such as those of Ares and Athene or Hephaestus and Scamander. While none of the gods dare provoke Zeus due to his sheer supremacy, they all at times begrudge him the same; particularly Poseidon, his prudent brother: “ Zeus may be powerful but it is sheer arrogance for him to talk of forcing me, his equal in prestige, to bend my will to his.” Likewise, the conjugal discord between Zeus and Hera is seen to be reminiscent of an average married couple. As Rieu points out, “ The humanness of the gods is evident in the most mundane details”, further emphasizing the aspect of divine domesticity such that ‘ after a hard day’s work they enjoy an evening meal of ambrosia and nectar, and go to bed with their wives in their houses on Olympus’.

Continuing in the same vein, it might be pointed out that the gods are prone to effrontery, vengeance, sycophancy, prejudices and whims. Why should immortals interfere in the trivial concerns of men? And yet they do, even in the trifling games at Patroclus' funeral, which would probably be their biggest flaw, as envisioned by Homer. As Ares laments to Zeus: " We gods have to put up with the most frightful indignities from each other whenever we do mankind a favour – and it's all your fault." For at one level, the entire tale of The Iliad is but a constant tug of war between the Gods, as voiced in these profound objective lines, so characteristic of Homer: " So the gods pulled alternately on the rope of this violent and evenly balance battle, to make it taut over the two sides. The rope was indestructible and no one could break it; but it broke many men." In fact, if Athene hadn't prevented Achilles from killing Agamemnon in the very first Book, the Trojan battle would have probably ceased there and then. Herein, one must note Homer's clever working on the foreknowledge of the audience.

On their part, the mortals are generally oblivious to the whims of the gods. However, they do at times have an inkling of which way divine favour seems to be running, as in the case of Menelaus, when faced against Hector over Patroclus' body: " When a man decides, without the good will of the gods, to fight another who enjoys their favour, he has disaster coming to him". Here, it is ironical that Hector goes on a rampage thanks to Zeus' support, little knowing that he was merely being used as a pawn in Zeus' greater will to hand glory to Achilles, until he finally realizes it in the face of death: " It's over. So the gods did, after all, summon me to my death."

Nonetheless, it is heartening to note that at least for a while, the gods do realize the dreadful and futile nature of their interference, and thus cease to participate in the Trojan war even though Zeus had permitted them to do so; in Poseidon’s words: “ So let us move out of the way and sit down where we can watch from a convenient spot. War will be men’s business.”

As the ancient critic, Longinus claimed, “ In relating the gods’ wounds, quarrels, revenges, tears, imprisonments and manifold misfortunes, Homer, or so it seems to me, has done his best to make the men of the Trojan War gods, and the gods men.” He further elaborates that as a result, the gods serve as allegorical devices employed by Homer. Each of Homer’s gods is seen to have a humanistic character, unveiled through their actions and speech, which justifies Peter Jones’ statement in the introduction that Homer created them out of his own experience of life, and in that, one may find touches of his humour and realism.