Chapter IV: Representation of Women in the *Ramayana* and the *Iliad*

Section 4.0 Introduction

Feminism contends the different definitions contrasting man and woman, the norms being formulated by men basically. Helen Cixous, a French feminist, states that “the term female as a cultural expression suggests, weakness, deficiency, frailty, etc.” (qtd. in Kumar 84) She argues against the binary opposition between male and female. She states that “the binary opposition between the male and the female has been created in the patriarchal socio-cultural order in order to confer a place of superiority to man as “the only source of validity and authority”’. (ibid) This contention, i.e such male prejudice, gets confirmed when we read the opinion of critics.

Sharma quotes words from the *Mahabharata* that describe the general view presented of women: “A man with a hundred tongues would not be able to describe completely the vices and defects of women.” The critic states that according to the Hindu canon femininity is synonymous with ‘sexuality, frivolity and fickle-mindedness’. (186) He observes that the references to women as found in the *Ramayana* are one of contempt. In his opinion Greek mythology also presents women as an embodiment of evil, untruthful and untrustworthy.

While studying the ancient society of India, Alka Kurian writes about how in ancient India the patriarchal norms made women stereotypes. “The dominance of patriarchal attitudes and the
complexity of caste, class and religious identities in India have been responsible for subjecting women to stereotypical roles.” (qtd. in Gamble 77) Feminist critics speak about the gender discrimination that prevailed in ancient societies. Feminism also draws a clear-cut distinction between the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. While the term ‘sex’ is biological, ‘gender’ refers to the social and cultural construction. Patriarchal society restricted the roles for women by attributing certain negative traits to them. Male superiority defined roles for women in order to make them subordinate.

Kapil Kapoor talks about the main concern of Feminist studies which is to study the ‘bio-social roles’ of women. In other words it refers to the woman’s private self and public sphere of activity or professional role. He groups the study into four major areas and lists down the elements of Hindu society that are criticized by Feminists:

i) issues
Is fidelity (monogamy) only for women? What rights of divorce and marriage obtain for them? Do they have equal right to education? Do they have equal right to parental property? Can women/daughters perform rites, particularly death rites and rituals? Do/did women have access to knowledge texts? Are they subject to father, husband and son in the three stages of their lives? Why is Kanya-dana at all necessary?

ii) customs
Sati-dowry/female infanticide/bride-burning/taking on husband’s family name/ not being knowable by the mother’s name.

iii) paradigmatic instances
Sita’s agni-pariksha/ Renunciation of Sita by Rama/ Draupati’s disrobing
iv) images and representations in mythology and thought

Of goddesses representing powers and functions/ icon of ardha-narishwara/ philosophic opposition of Purusa-Prakrti and of rati-prana (Padia, ed., 35)

Sebasti L Raj explains the standards by which the social status has to be determined: “Social status by definition is the position occupied by a person, family or kinship group in a social system relative to others. The social status is determined by education, income, possessions and the social valuation of occupation and of other activities in society.” (114)

Keeping this hypothesis in mind the women characters are studied in comparison and the insights are presented by way of finding out if they fall into stereotypes. Women characters are studied in terms of their virtues and failings as well, since they symbolize either the ideal or the average. The individual nature of the women characters has been presented in the previous chapters based on the evidences from the chosen texts. Their bio-social roles based on the above paradigm are given focus in this section.

4.1 Role of Women in the Family

“The position accorded to women in any society has rightly been regarded as a true index of the state of its civilization.” says Vyas (100) He states that the position of women can be studied mainly from the three important aspects of their life and character, namely their maidenhood, wifehood and motherhood. A study of the society will throw light on their role in the family, the
freedom and rights given to them and more importantly the attitude of men towards them and their place in society.

In contrast to the Vedic period there seems to be deterioration in the way women of later periods were regarded at home and in society. Till the Vedic period, a girl child was received well in the family, but in the later-vedic period a boy was preferred and the parents were anxious about the daughter as she had to be given in marriage as she grew up. However, there were a few positive aspects regarding the position of women alongside the unfavourable stipulations.

The mother had greater influence over the children than the father. Rama states how he felt hurt because Kaikeyi did not communicate to him directly the plan of sending him in exile. On this occasion he says that the mother has greater influence over the son. According to the sacred texts, it is footnoted that “A mother is ten times superior to the father in respectability” (265: Vol. I) Rama also accords due respect to the parents and stresses that they are justified in their actions. He tells Bhrarata to obey his mother and not to speak ill of her. “Nor should you reproach your mother through ignorance. Freedom of action on the part of elders with reference to their esteemed wife and progeny is always permitted.” (507: Vol. I) Through Rama and other brothers, one learns that they all referred to their step-mothers as ‘our mother’ the practice of which throws light on the affinity the family members had in that age.
There was a popular belief that the sons take after their mothers. It was observed by Lakshmana that Bharata was an exception; because Bharata had not taken after Kaikeyi, in that he did not indulge in covert guile like his mother. Lakshmana wonders further, “How is it that mother Kaikeyi, whose husband was Dasaratha, and whose son is the virtuous Bharata, wears such a cruel aspect?” (592: Vol. I) It was Lakshmana’s reasoning that the goodness of the husband and the son should have been shared by the woman.

Despite the importance given to the mother in the family her life is dependent on others throughout. Kausalya expresses a similar feeling, unable to bear separation from Rama, that a woman is dependent on her father, husband and son at every stage of life. It is to be noted that her life is dependent on a male all through. Kausalya holds Dasaratha responsible for her agony and tells him, “The main support of a woman is her husband, the second is her son, the third is her kindred; there is no fourth support at all, O king.” (395: Vol. I)

Motherly sentiments are reflected through the characters of Hecabe and Thetis in the *Iliad* similar to that of Kausalya in the *Ramayana*. The pang of emotions at the time of separation from their sons is well brought out. Hecabe and Thetis knew of their sons’ early death and yet remained helpless as their sons’ involvement in war was imperative. Thetis delays the death of Achilles by requesting Zeus to give victory to Trojans for some time, whereas Hecabe remains a helpless suffering mother. Kausalya curses Kaikeyi for all her misfortune and also reproaches Dasaratha for having yielded to Kaikeyi’s demands. She could not think of separation for fourteen years and insists on accompanying Rama to the forest. It was Rama who reminded her
of her duty towards her husband that should be given the first preference. Kaikeyi does everything to cajole Dasaratha to crown Bharata as king and this is also born out of her intense love for her son and a feeling of insecurity. It is referred in the *Ramayana* that Kaikeyi’s father gets a promise from King Dasaratha that only Kaikeyi’s son should be given the privilege of ruling.

The queens had the boldness to question the decision of their husband and also reproach them when they deviated from the path of right action. Hecabe chides King Priam when he is keen on approaching Achilles for retrieving the body of Hector. Hecabe tries to dissuade Priam from going to Achilles’ camp for fear of losing her husband. When Rama has been asked to leave for the forest Kausalya deeply grieved tries to dissuade her son from going to the forest and pleads with Dasaratha not to send Rama in exile. She asserts that the mother has more right and power over the son than even the father. This is explicitly expressed by Kausalya. Hecabe’s accusation of Priam is similar to that of Kausalya when King Dasaratha had to send Rama to the forest and in her anxiety for her son, Kausalya charges the king that he has lost his wits which people used to praise him for. Sita advises Rama to abstain from using the weapon unnecessarily. When Rama decides to kill the demons, Sita tells him that when the demons mean no harm to them directly, he should keep away from them. Rama listens to her with patience and then goes on to justify his killing of the evil forces in order to protect the sages in the forest.

Even in the royal family there seemed to be a possibility of a rift among the co-wives. Kausalya fears to live under the control of her junior queen, as she feels that Kaikeyi may take it out on her
for the reason that she was treated as a junior before. Rama is equally worried that his mother and Sumithra may not be treated well by Kaikeyi. Though he has absolute faith in Bharata, he doubts that Bharata may try to appease his own mother and not care for the other two. Kausalya expresses her fear when she says, “senior most though I am, I shall in my present plight hear many unpalatable words from my junior co-wives, who will rend my heart.” (412: Vol. I) She goes to the extent of contemplating death as she fears ill-treatment based on her past experience wherein she says she was snubbed by Dasaratha and even treated like a servant. She never regretted so much the loss of kingdom as the loss of her husband and the exile of Rama. Her fear of having to live a submissive life gets augmented when she says, “Forsaken by Rama and deprived of our husband, how shall we live in proximity to our co-wife, Kaikeyi, of wicked intention?” (ibid) Kaikeyi also feels insecure and threatened and develops a feeling of envy towards her senior queen.

Woman in those days was used as an object of sensual pleasure. Sages were distracted out of their penance by beautiful women either on their own will or on the prompting of some other envious person. Sage Viswamitra was deprived of the privilege to become a Brahmarishi as Indra and other gods feared that if he completed his penance it would endow him with the greatest power. Hence Menaka was sent to lure him. But on another occasion, when he was to be diverted he became cautious and attained the status of a Brahmarishi through self-control.

Helen was used as a gift by Aphrodite to win the judgement in her favour. Aphrodite tells Helen to gratify Paris even in times of crisis. Helen grudges going with Paris and at some point even
fears whether she would have to share the bed of any other man. Aphrodite being the goddess of love exploits Helen on many occasions. She forces Helen to go with Paris and threatens to punish her severely if she refuses. This is unbecoming of the goddess of love who should actually save a marriage. The conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon had been over the women captives. Despite being an exemplary hero, Achilles could not resist the temptation to marry Polyxena and went down to the level of agreeing for a truce with the Trojans. In order to motivate the soldiers, Nestor, an old and wise leader of the Greeks promises to give them beautiful women as a prize for winning. In the Indian system of war there is no reference to the sexual exploitation of women. In the case of Ravana, though he took custody of many women captives, there was a curse that if he tried to enjoy the company of a woman without her consent his head would split.

Hera resorts to the strategy of luring Zeus with her charms in order to turn the course of war in her favour. At the same time she hated Zeus for his sexual exploits with mortal women. That Zeus indulged in both pre-marital and extra-marital sex finds reference in the *Iliad*. Under the spell of Hera, Zeus recalls how they shared the bed before marriage without their parents’ knowledge.

Doniger asserts that gender discrimination is more pronounced and common in the two countries of India and Greece despite some cultural differences. She observes: “They also share factors that transcend cultural barriers we may isolate certain contrasting patterns in the behavior of men
and women in comparable situations and a number of clear assumptions of gender in the depiction of women as objects”. (49)

King Priam and Peleus show respect for their wives, Hecabe and Thetis respectively. They respected their sentiments and feelings. Zeus on the other hand showed his power over Hera and threatened to punish her whenever she crossed him. He was ever dominant over her and established his might. In general, in both the cultures women were found submissive and were considered as chattels by men. Even as the war drew to a close, Achilles wanted a truce with the Trojans. If Polyxena were willing to marry Achilles, he proposed peace talks with the Trojans, as he was enamoured of her beauty. But it did not materialize, as Polyxena did not show willingness to marry him. When it came to the question of a woman’s beauty and sensual pleasure, the ideal of heroism and glory was put aside.

Generally speaking women were protected by men. Knowing the hardships of forest life both the brothers keep watch and see to that no harm is caused to the person of Sita. While trekking along the forest, the brothers take utmost care of the woman. There is another view that women like Sita were always under the shadow of man. In spite of such a protection given to women, one can find insecurity of women in different situations and different dimensions in the Ramayana age-in the household, in the presence of men, after the husband’s death, due to one’s own physical deformity and in the lives of widows of heroes and captives.
Kings were allowed to have three wives, one each from the other three classes. Dasaratha’s three wives belonged to the kshatriya clan. (44: Vol. I, footnote) There is a reference that Dasaratha had 350 wives altogether. G.S Altekar brings out a significant point that polygamy led to many conflicts in the family. It is clear that Kausalya and Kaikeyi felt insecure and became wary of each other because of this reason. Though Dasaratha had many wives, there was a possibility of a rift among the first three queens only. In the case of Ravana there seems to be no account of any rivalry among his many wives, because Mandodhari was his principal queen and all others shared equal status as his ‘consorts’. The critic states the purpose of the poet in the following words: “The poet has very graphically exposed to the public the very evil effects of polygamy in his Ramayana and the consequences of this custom on the several members of the royal family and the society also.” (343) This practice of polygamy among the royal clan, according to Altekar might be due to the necessity of royal families ‘to establish more friendly relations.’ But within the royal household it had created a disharmony. The analysis of the problems between Kausalya and Kaikeyi shows the ill effects of polygamy.

Though the widows were not ill treated in the epic age, they felt distraught and insecure. The widows of heroes experienced similar plight as is evident from the fear expressed by Tara, who was a strong woman otherwise. On Vali’s death she laments: “Leaving me alone without a protector for good, you have departed O bestower of honour! A girl should never be given in marriage to a hero by a wise man. Look at me, the wife of a hero, widowed in no time and ruined.” (814: Vol. I) Tara is equally worried about her son as she says, “… I with my son have been ruined and along with you the goddess of fortune is deserting me as well as my son.” (815: Vol. I) Andromache was in a similar plight after the death of Hector. While Tara and her son
were well taken care of by Sugriva, Andromache did not have any assurance of a secure life. Mandodhari expresses similar sentiment after Ravana’s death as she calls herself a ‘wretched woman’.

There is no stereo-typed villain in both the epics. But women play an important role in initiating action and for all the turns and twists. Women characters, Griffin feels, have been the ‘cause for difficulty’. Caught between the two, Hera and Thetis, Zeus finds it difficult to take an early decision. Considering the plight of Zeus, the critic says, “The elemental god of sky and weather, sitting alone on the highest mountain and shaking it with a nod, is blended with the mythological god who has personal obligations to repay and a wife to be wary of. (20) Eris the goddess of discord and the three goddesses, Hera, Athene and Aphrodite play an important role in the Iliad. In the Homeric epic the actual cause is the rivalry among the goddesses caused by Eris, the goddess of discord. That the preference of pleasure over wisdom and power led to downfall provides the ethical base to the episode.

It holds good for the Indian epic also. In the Ramayana, all the critical incidents are caused by women, though the gods are not put to hardship by women nor is there any mention of rivalry among goddesses. Manthara and Kaikeyi play a vital role in the Ramayana. The main turn of events is caused by women. The same choice of pleasure is made by Ravana who brought about his own destruction by coveting another’s wife. There is a reference in the epic that the death of Ravana was destined to come through Sita and Rama.
Kaikeyi is condemned by every other character except Rama, as she is considered the sole reason for the death of Dasaratha and the exile of Rama followed by the abduction of Sita. Rama does not tolerate any curse hurled upon Kaikeyi. Instead of blaming Kaikeyi he blames Destiny which is solely responsible for everything. There is yet another character held responsible for all the happenings. Manthara corrupted the mind of Kaikeyi who had considered Rama as her own son. But the negative influence of Manthara on Kaikeyi is too sudden and overnight everything changes. This only shows how weak-minded a human being can be. In both the instances a woman had been responsible for such a situation.

**Section 4.2 Rights, Education, Freedom, Religion and Rule**

In Ayodhya there were female dancers and the town was thronged by lovely women. This shows girls were given freedom to participate in public functions and festivities. During the coronation of Rama there is a reference to the ‘dancing girls’ who were ‘beautifully adorned’ to grace the occasion. King Janaka sends ‘100 richly-adorned maids endowed with supernal beauty’ as companions for his daughters. The presence of young girls was considered a good omen. It is referred to in the epic that attendants, women, eunuchs and virgins were present when elaborate arrangements were made for the funeral of King Dasaratha.

Kausalya bestowed jewels, cows and gold on those who brought her the news of Rama’s coronation. Women had the freedom to give gifts as they wished, from the wealth they had. Dowry system was prevalent in the Ramayana age. Sita had the right to give gifts to the
Brahmanas before the coronation. Later, she gives her jewels, given as dowry by her mother, as gift to Hanuman about which Rama knows.

Women had non-formal education in the rituals, scriptures, art and other duties. Women pray for the welfare of the husband and children. Sita is happy and observes fast and follows other austerities on the eve of Rama’s coronation as women had the right to participate in rituals, etc. Kausalya is given the utmost importance during the putrakameshti yagna. There are many such accounts of a woman praying for the welfare of her husband and not the reverse. Sharma asks whether there is any instance of a man doing all this, like Sita or Savithri. Feminists believe that in actuality even rituals give no importance to women but to pacify women they were allowed to take part in rituals. Raj feels that even though religion gave importance to women it is not indicative of the real status of women. (114)

Parthasarathy points out how some of the women like, Tara, Surpanaka and Mandodhari, and Sita, have exhibited great skill of mastery over language and eloquence on many occasions. They did not need any formal education as such about matters regarding the governance or scriptures or about the duties of a statesman. Women enjoyed certain rights- right to a life of comfort, right to protection and right to take part in war and rule of the state if the situation demanded.

In the *Iliad* no direct references can be found regarding the education of women, their freedom and other activities other than their household. The epic of Homer does not throw much light on
the education and rights of women. While referring to Andromache the poet says that she married Hector ‘with a rich dowry’ (110) Yet the woman is so dependent on her husband that she is totally distraught after her husband’s death. The husband remains the sole anchor for a woman. There is also a reference that Helen brought a lot of riches to Paris. This shows that dowry system was prevalent in that age. However, there is no reference is made as to whether they had the right to use their riches whatever the way they wanted.

In circumstances of necessity women were considered for administration as well. When Rama is to be sent to the forest, Rama insists that Sita should stay back in Ayodhya and ‘take to religious observances and fasts’ (292: Vol. I) But Sage Vasishtha recommends that Sita can manage the administration of the kingdom. He even quotes the scriptures wherein provision is made for a wife to rule the kingdom in the absence of her husband. The Sage says, “Princess Sita shall not proceed to the forest. She will occupy the throne which was offered to Rama.” (324: Vol. I) Tripat Sharma presents a positive image of Kaikeyi and Manthara who were catalysts in administration. In India women were reported to have accompanied men to the battle field. Kaikeyi helped Dasaratha out of trouble in the battlefield when he was wounded. In the Iliad the battle is watched by women from the terrace.

Section 4.3 Attitude of Men towards Women

Their individual characteristics apart, the attitude of men towards women reflects the kind of status accorded to women in the household and society. Rama held Sita in great regard, yet he feared public opinion. His role as a king prevented him from placing his personal joy and life
first on the priority list. Though he firmly trusted Sita for her chastity in the heart of hearts, he had to put her to test to prove her chastity. Rama’s duty as a king takes precedence over his duty as a husband. He could not ignore public opinion. He was not beyond social norms and criticism and the social taboo of their time robbed Sita of her domestic felicity. But in the case of Helen, Menelaus accepts her without any hassles. When Helen expresses her displeasure with Paris, she accuses him for he was devoid of self-respect and did not fear public opinion.

In the Indian society, there is scant record of a man physically assaulting a woman as it is not sanctioned by the Vedas. Rama hesitated so much to destroy Tataka. Surpanaka was mutilated for her constant nagging of Rama and to drive her away they resort to this assault. Surpanaka went beyond limits to pester Rama to marry her. The mutilation of Surpanaka, among other instances, has invited the attention and contention of many critics which will be discussed in the following chapter. Though there was a strict code against assaulting women, not all men followed it. One finds an instance of Satrughna dragging Manthara, having been irked by her role in effecting Rama’s exile.

Hanuman is extremely respectful and protective of women. He accomplishes his mission of tracing Sita and uses appropriate strategies to win her confidence. When he learns that Sita is hurt by his suggestion to carry her on his shoulders, he apologizes to her profusely. He tells her that only out of affection for her and because of her own anxiety to meet Rama at once, does he make that suggestion. Whenever an occasion arises, he never fails to hail Sita. Hanuman shows respect for other women too. On his way to Lanka, he comes across two ogresses, Suras
Simikha. As both of them pose a threat, he gets rid of them. The protecting deity of Lanka being a woman, he shows compassion towards her. “No violent anger, however, was exhibited by him of his own accord, inasmuch as he looked upon her as a woman.” (24: Vol.II)

Hanuman visits the gynaecaeum to search for Sita. To identify Sita amidst the women, he has to take a close look at them. He feels bad for having to look at other women, though he is certain that, ‘no foulness entered my mind’ (51: Vol.II) he says, “Gazing on a group of others’ wives lying fast asleep is not good at all. Indeed it will utterly neutralize my virtue.” (ibid) Hanuman considers Sita as a mother. He represents yet another important value to be followed by human beings in any society as stated by Sukhadeva when he says, “That society progresses in which man sees his mother in every woman and woman sees her father in every man.” (43)

In contrast to this, Hera hates Artemis as she was born to Zeus and Leto. When Artemis complains to her father about Hera, she refers to Hera as ‘your wife’ and does not consider her as her mother. In spite of being a goddess Hera is threatened by Zeus whenever she questions his decision. Though Hera seems to have influence over Zeus, she is treated as an inferior being by the god. That Hera being a goddess receives such a treatment from Zeus shows how women were looked down upon. Hera tries to assert herself but fails.

In Greek society of that time men felt that war was a man’s business and they did not want women to interfere. Aphrodite is warned by Diomedes not to interfere. When Andromache tried
to dissuade Hector from taking part in the war, he tells her that war is man’s business and does not want her to interfere. Towards the end of the book Zeus tells Aphrodite in a cynical manner that war is not her domain but she only had the passions of men to influence. Another instance to show that the men did not take the words of women seriously is when Cassandra foretells the fall of Troy no one heeded to her words. Men treated women as inferior beings and considered them weaker. She was earlier cursed by Apollo that whenever she prophesied something people would not believe her. The reason was that she did not reciprocate the love of Apollo. In the *Ramayana*, there is no woman character or goddess who influences the course of war. There is no direct involvement or intervention. In the Ramayana Age the royal women were well-versed in the code of administration. If necessary they accompanied men to the battlefield as in the case of Kaikeyi. Vali ignored the counsel of Tara not to encounter Sugriva and advised her to get back. He wanted her to return with the ladies, not willing to change his decision. As a wife her duty was to pray for the welfare of her husband, which was the last resort when her persuasion has failed.

When the Greek soldiers lost their morale and wanted to withdraw from war, the heroes tried to motivate them to fight and told them not to behave like ‘widowed wives’. The unfavourable comparison confirms that men looked down upon women as the weaker sex. When Ulysses speaks to Agamemnon about the demoralized soldiers, he considers them to be as weak as ‘widowed wives’. “The way they whimper to each other about getting back, they might be little children or widowed wives” (29) Whenever the soldiers lacked the vigour to fight, they were compared to a woman. This reflects how men spoke ill of women as being incapable. Menelaus says, “What does this mean, you big mouths, you women? I cannot call you men.” (123)
Despite some instances of men showing a positive attitude towards women, male domination is reflected in some occasions. RP Sharma states: “The greatest law of a patriarchal system is an ordinance which keeps its men free to do what they like but enjoins upon women to act according to the dictates of their men.” (64-5) Rama tries his best to make Sita aware of the dangers of forest life and tries to exercise his strong influence on her saying, “You should act as I am going to tell you, O frail Sita!” (295: Vol.I) He also dictates terms which Sita is expected to follow. While Hanuman reports to Rama of Sita’s eagerness to meet him, he commands Vibishana to escort Sita, after she has had a bath and got adorned with fine robes and jewels. She is surprised at this but Vibishana tells her, “You ought to do the bidding of your husband, Sri Rama, as he has enjoined you to do.” (638; Vol. II) Sita obeys and appears as expected by Rama.

Lakshmana refers to the fickle-mindedness of women in general terms that shows the attitude of men towards women. When Sita is in a fix to save Rama, she uses unjust remarks to the extent that even Lakshmana is unable to tolerate and makes an observation on the fickle-mindedness of women in general. He says, “I dare not make a reply to you, since you are a deity to me. It is no wonder at all for women to utter words which are not worthy of them….Since I who have spoken what is right have been castigated by you in harsh words, fie upon you, who are going to perish inasmuch as you distrust in this way through feminine nature….” (659: Vol.I)

Lakshmana’s virtue is highlighted on another occasion. Rama shows the jewels of Sita, which she had thrown in the hillside while being carried away by Ravana. Lakshmana pleads his
inability and says that he is unable to recognize the ear-rings and other ornaments of Sita, as he had hardly looked at her person. He would not even look at his brother’s wife. Considering her as his mother, he had always bowed at her feet, never taking a look at herself. Lakshmana says, “Neither do I recognize the armlets nor do I know the earrings, I only know the anklets due to my bowing at her feet every day.” (763: Vol. I) For a man who had such a regard for his brother’s wife, the disparaging words of Sita suspecting his intentions, were too much to bear. Though Lakshmana apparently curses Sita to perish, he wishes that, “Let all the sylvan deities protect you.” (ibid) From this one can understand that women were generally respected and protected by men.

While Dasaratha hurls abuses at Kaikeyi, initially he generalizes on the nature of women but takes back his words and speaks only of Kaikeyi. The king who never pronounced a word against any woman is driven to the extent of saying, “Woe unto womankind, who are malignant by nature and whose supreme concern is to advance their own selfish interests.” (241: Vol.I) The very next words are directed against Kaikeyi in particular. “I do not speak of all women, but of Bharata’s mother alone.” (ibid) Dasaratha disowns Kaikeyi: “O Kaikeyi of sinful resolve, do not touch my limbs, really I do not wish to see you; you are neither my wedded wife nor my relation. I am no longer the master of those who depend for their subsistence on you nor are they my servants any more. I disown you, who are solely devoted to your selfish ends and have forsaken virtue”. (337: Vol. I)
Sumantra also generalizes on the nature of women while in reality he abuses Kaikeyi for her act. Sumantra represents the resentment of the public as they all reproach her. He uses harsh words against her faintly hoping that they would bring about a change in her. He also tells the people gathered that she behaves just like her mother caring little for her husband. He substantiates his statement by narrating an instance in the life of Kaikeyi’s parents wherein to know a secret Kaikeyi’s mother was willing even to sacrifice her husband. He says, “Nay, the popular saying on this subject that males take after their father and females after their mother appears to me as true.” (319: Vol. I) Sumantra traces Kaikeyi’s stubborn will to her mother and generalizes on the behavior of women.

Though the Greeks fight Trojans to defend the honour of a woman, many characters get discouraged because they feel that they are fighting for a wrong cause. One can find Hector, Achilles and the common public expressing their discontent over the whole issue of war as it brings untold misery to many. While defending the honour of a woman, they offend other women captives which include both married and unmarried women. Thersites, another Greek warrior tells Achilles that even he has every right to enjoy any number of women. “…you have the pick of any number of women too….or a new girl to sleep with and keep all to yourself…” (27) Diomedes wounds Aphrodite when she rescues her son Aeneas. Zeus is another example of a god physically harming a goddess. It is unbecoming of heroes to fight over a woman and the epic begins with such a quarrel. It shows that the women had no say or choice. They were considered objects of sensual pleasure by men. Nestor, the oldest Counselor on the Greek side motivates the Greek soldiers to take active part in the war and assures them that the Greek army shall not leave Troy “till every man of you has slept with a Trojan wife and taken revenge for all
the sweat and tears Helen has caused you.” (30) This throws light on the status of women in the society and the prevalent value system. The very purpose of defending a woman for which the war was fought is defeated. That a goddess like Aphrodite promised to gift a woman, to satisfy her fancy, shows how women were disregarded in that society.

There were other men like Hector who respected womanhood and reproached Paris for his misdeed. He was loyal to his wife and shuddered to think of his wife’s plight after his death. Paris had disregard for women and he was ‘lustful’. Hector holds Paris responsible and calls him a ‘sex-crazed seducer’. He says that Trojans are soft and so he was spared. Despite the criticism, Paris defends himself saying that if the gods gifted him something precious he cannot refuse it: “But don’t hold against me the irresistible gifts I have from golden Aphrodite. The glorious gifts which the gods themselves choose to lavish on a man are not to be despised; no man ever acquires them by his own efforts”. (47)

Menelaus prays to Zeus before the duel with Paris that he should be helped to kill Paris “so that our children’s children will shudder at the thought of wronging a host who has offered them friendship.” (54) These words of Menelaus carry the moral that friendship should never be betrayed. The war is not entirely caused by humans, but by the gods themselves. Dione, while consoling Aphrodite when she comes wounded by Diomedes spells out that the rivalry among the gods has caused the event. “Many of us that live here on Olympus have suffered at the hands of men in our attempts to inflict serious injury on one another.” (84) She indirectly refers to the first episode of the golden apple.
Jill Savitt, based on the stereotypes identified by Mary Ellman, says that the women characters fall into four basic stereotypes, namely, Virgin, Wife/Mother, Seductress/Whore and Maiden. The characters are briefly summed up for this purpose based on the insights got after the comparative study of the chosen texts.

Valmiki’s *Ramayana*

*Sita* is perceived as a meek and timid person given to emotional outbursts and lack of judgement. But she emerges as a strong character later on. She is beautiful, devoted to Rama and acts as a loving and responsible mother. She is unselfish and self-sacrificing. All the same she appears assertive in the end, facing the challenges with fortitude.

*Kausalya’s* life was characterised by insecure feeling and she was not allowed to take any decision on her own as she was dissuaded from accompanying Rama to the forest. She is presented as a docile, unselfish, dutiful wife and dependent mother with lots of sentiments and family takes precedence over everything.

*Sumitra* though appears practical, yields to the patriarchal code and she is a dutiful wife and remains submissive.

*Kaikeyi*, charming in her looks, enticed Dasaratha. She is bold yet her feeling of insecurity changes her nature. She allows herself to be influenced by the evil temptations of Manthara, her maid. She becomes utterly selfish, not sacrificing and unsympathetic. Because of her revolting nature she does not fit into the framework of stereotype. That is why she is not accepted by many. Since Kaikeyi appeared assertive in the beginning, she was branded rebellious and not accepted by the patriarchal standards.
Manthara appears selfish but there is a motive for it; her deformity and society’s scorn turn her into a vile character. A maiden, like Kaikeyi, she is rebellious and does not fit into the framework and she grows into a despicable character. Manthara was an equally condemned character, because she did not fit into the mould.

Urmila is a neglected character as her virtues are not portrayed except her sacrificing nature. She is a marginalised character like Mandavi and Srutakirthi.

Tara is unselfish and pure. She is dependent and feels insecure. She is not allowed to think on her own and her advice to Vali is ignored. Her role is only confined to the family, as she is expected to be a devoted wife.

Ruma, another marginalized character, appears as a dutiful wife. Other virtues are not highlighted. She does not have a voice to protest when Vali takes her forcefully.

Mandodhari is a charming, pure and devoted wife. There is a feeling of insecurity in her as she is dependent. She is jealous of Sita’s beauty. Her advice is not heeded by Ravana.

Trijata is sympathetic towards Sita and her other virtues are not highlighted.

Sarama is a devoted wife and other virtues are not highlighted.

Surpanaka represents the male concept of the ‘other’ and is presented as a seductress and gets driven to extremes by her jealousy and anger.

Anasuya is pious and educates Sita as to the duties of a wife. From childhood such codes are instilled in girls.

Tataka is a beautiful woman made ugly because of a curse.
Ahalya is made insensitive for the act committed by her. She is an anti-thesis to the protagonist.

Homer’s Iliad

Helen is remembered by posterity as a paragon of beauty. Her life is characterized by suffering and guilt, as her beauty turns out to be a curse for her. She is full of self-pity and does not think on her own. Not being devoted to Menelaus, she takes life as it comes. As Marlowe refers to Helen, her beauty is destructive and Shakespeare calls her ‘an imperfect model’.

Andromache exhibits self-pity, as she harbours a feeling of insecurity. She is a devoted and dependent wife and caring mother. She considers personal life more important and her role is restricted to the family. She represents society’s ill treatment of woman after the husband’s death.

Hecabe is a devoted wife and caring mother. She is dependent and has no freedom to voice her feelings or opinions.

Thetis as a loving mother exercises a strong influence on her son. Being selfish she takes a favour from Zeus and changes the course of war. She represents the conflict between heroism and love.

Hera haughty by nature appears to be revolting but made submissive by her husband. She is selfish to achieve her end and possesses no conviction but personal rivalry in supporting Greeks. In Greek tradition a goddess shares no equal status with her counterpart. Her role is limited and through her sexual attraction wins favours from Zeus.

Athene the presiding deity of Greece influences the course of war. She is jealous of Thetis and speaks ill of Zeus, her father.
**Aphrodite**, despite her occasional appearance influences war. Her role is limited. She is also selfish in achieving her end.

**Cassandra** is a marginalised character and her prophesy is not heeded by anyone.

**Captives** are helpless in that they are treated badly by victors. They reflect the derogatory status of women in society.

The characters of the epics fall into any one of these four categories. Mukharjee in her study about the normative models among the Hindu women says that the identity for a woman was only with reference to others and that her roles were limited. She sums up:

> Proceeding down the ages we find that the ideal held up before a woman is to be a submissive, dutiful and loyal wife totally dependent upon her husband. An ideal woman is she who is an ideal wife. In other words, it was rather an ideal wifehood, and not an ideal womanhood, that all these authorities were describing at great length. (17)

Sally Sutherland speaks about how “The duties of these ideal role models are divided according to their gender; a man’s primary concern is his dharma, while a woman’s is her husband.” (32)

It is appropriate to quote the words of Rama who represents the voice of his age but takes the defence of Vedas for expressing the same: “Intent on doing that which is pleasing and good to her husband, a woman should, therefore do service to him alone: this is the lasting duty enjoined on a woman in the Vedas as well as in the Smrti texts. (285: Vol. I) Karl Reinhardt while analysing the characters and their presentation in Homer’s *Iliad* observes that epic heroes
enjoyed greater importance than their female counterparts. The role of woman was limited. He gives the instance of Hecabe whose identity is primarily as Priam’s wife and Hector’s mother. Her role is confined to be a devoted wife and dependent mother.

Images of women presented in canonical texts were according to patriarchal norms. Neera Desai while analyzing the normative structure of traditional Indian society describes how laws of Manu laid down that women should be devoted wives and loving mothers. She says that “Indian society like many classical societies” was patriarchal. The patriarchal values laid thrust on sexuality, reproduction, etc, restricting them from specific activities. The critic says, “But more subtle expression of patriarchy was through legends highlighting the self-sacrificing, self-effacing pure image of women and through the ritual practices which day in and out emphasised the dominant role of a woman as a faithful wife and devout mother.” (28) Feminists believe that gender roles and identity are socially and culturally imposed and constructed. They argue that women began to internalize the patriarchal norms and that “their ‘inferiority’ was culturally imposed rather than naturally derived”. (Gamble 5)

RP Sharma writes that women were subjected to denigration in the past:

Once upon a time, the Chinese used to deform the feet of their girls to shape them as beautiful. Likewise, other patriarchal societies in their wisdom chose to deform the minds of their girls, their emotions, their creative faculties and their bodies to shape them for happiness in and out of marriage. (183)
Section 4.4 Insights

Characters play a very significant role as the poets use them as a vehicle to drive home their point. Both the poets have drawn several parallels and contrasts of characters to show how the average and the ideal were found existing together in their respective societies. The very purpose of the poets was to suggest a movement towards the ideal by presenting reality as they only visualized an ideal society in future. That was why the poets had brought in different constructs to set ideals of human behaviour in society. The purpose of these poets was to convey to the future generations that reforms were necessary at personal, familial and social levels. In the light of the observations made in the previous chapters it can be inferred that the poets suggest changes at personal level, wherein negative qualities like jealousy, insecurity, lack of judgement, submissiveness, emotional outbursts and over-reaching ambition, need to be changed. In the family, rivalry, polygamy, servitude, dependence of women, need to be changed. In the society at large, attitude of men and lack of respect of women and lack of recognition of their potential, all need to undergo change, thereby enhancing women’s self-image and empowerment.

Characterization of the principal character is essential for a writer to deliver the message to the readers. A comparative study of the texts chosen reveals many facets of the characters of the heroines. The very purpose and conception of the heroines are different. It is essential to understand that the main difference between the two epics is regarding how each woman reacted or behaved in the given situation and the value or principle driven home by the writers. The situation appears the same for Sita and Helen, but their behaviour was different and the treatment meted out to them was also different. Though there are cultural differences between the two
epics there is a common thread running that shows the gender discrimination which was predominant in both societies.

Das points out a significant difference regarding the way the character of the heroines are conceived and developed. He observes that the gulf between Sita and Helen is more pronounced in that, “If Sita appears as an embodiment of moral beauty it is mainly because of her steadfastness and fidelity, her firm faith in the code of chastity. Thus Sita and Helen represent two different norms of conduct.” (104) Sita even while being physically away from Rama is filled with the thought of Rama. The character of Sita is presented as an epitome of the highest virtue. Helen gives in to the desire of Paris. In Ashokavana Sita appears like a flame ready to engulf anyone who dared lay hands on her. Das states emphatically, “Helen belongs to the victor, Sita to her husband.” (ibid) Even after the abduction, Helen does not fix her mind on any one of them. As Das states, “She finds Paris irresistible and Menelaus unforgettable.” (ibid 101) Even when given a choice, she does not choose. Blackwell makes an observation that Helen was solely responsible for her own pitiable state, when he writes, “Homer’s Helen is passive….Further, Helen’s situation seems largely of her own making.” (144)

Watching the sufferings of the people on both sides, Helen goes into a state of self-pity and a sense of guilt grips her. She curses herself for having caused the whole calamity. She apparently defies Aphrodite who, she thinks, has victimized her. But considering her fate to be the cause of everything, she appears submissive. In the case of Sita, though she is fated to suffer separation, she does not submit to Ravana and was willing to give up her life if Rama did not rescue her
soon. She threatened to take away her life if Rama did not rescue her in exactly a year. This shows the strength of character of Sita. She could neither be coaxed nor forced into accepting Ravana.

Sita, having been doubted by Rama was all tears as she was deeply hurt and felt she could have been repudiated earlier when Hanuman was sent as a messenger. All the trouble of war and ‘fruitless hardship’ could have been averted. She represents the lot of women when she says, “O jewel among the rulers of men, womanliness alone has been mainly taken into consideration.” (643: Vol.II) These words bring out the anguish of a woman that male-domination unduly censures a person just because she is a woman. Sita in spite of being pure in mind is forced to be on the defensive as Rama accuses her unjustly. As Rama refers to the forcible act of Ravana in carrying Sita away, she defends herself saying that she was helpless in that situation and she did not do anything wrong on her own accord. “I was helpless when I came into contact with the person of Ravana. I did not act of my own free will on that occasion. My fate is to blame on that score.” (ibid) Chastity was over-stressed in that age, in the opinion of Yardi. He says that this led to the ‘seclusion of women’. The inner apartment meant for their protection came to be a place of confinement guarded by eunuchs. (106)

Though the Greeks want Helen back, the Greek heroes and their Trojan counterparts curse Helen for all the suffering. The public and the heroes who vowed to defend her express their displeasure and contempt for her. Despite the several killings on both sides no one speaks ill of
Sita, because they knew they were fighting for a just cause. Gill draws another significant point of departure when he says,

However, cultural differences drastically change the interpretation of this act in the two narratives. In the Ramayana, the battle between Ram, Sita’s aggrieved husband, and Ravan, the aggressor, is projected as an instance of eternal tussle between good and evil. Unlike the secondary status granted to Menelaus vis-à-vis Achilles, Agamemnon and Odysseus, Ram is the focus of the Indian epic.

(4)

This is obvious from the fact that “Culturally speaking, Greeks were much more forgiving of Helen’s folly than the people of Ayodhya, who demanded supreme sacrifice of their rulers and were not willing to concede the slightest chink in their perfect facades.” (ibid 5)

The heroine as well as the public does not attach any moral aspect to the entire episode. Hector and a few other characters despise Helen, for she has brought woe upon them and not because their moral pride was at stake. Though Hector and the Trojans condemn Paris for his immoral act, they do not give up war nor do they insist on Paris sending Helen back to Greece. Helen also does not make a choice, though it was available. At times when she expresses her anger against Paris, it is only short-lived and she ‘succumbs to his desire.’ She either acts according to the whims of Aphrodite or meekly submits to fate. Das observes, “And yet Sita acquires a moral halo which is denied to Helen. This is partly because of the different conceptions of the two heroines.” (ibid 104) The very design and purpose of the poets are different. The critic further
highlights, “The similarity between the Iliad and the Ramayana is not in the characters of the heroines but in their situations.” (ibid 106)

According to Gill, “There is no doubt that Sita’s abduction by Ravan (a) in the Ramayana has wide-ranging socio-cultural implications that go far beyond Helen’s experience.” (5) From the ethical point of view also, the very conception of the characters of the heroines in the epics is different. Chellappan says the difference between the two epic heroines lies in the ‘ethical choice’. Neither Helen, nor Menelaus feels regretful for the turn of events.

As Gill says there was a strong political rivalry involved behind the whole story. He points out that there are historical evidences for the continued political conflict between Troy and Greece and that both the parties used the abduction of Helen to settle some political scores. It is clear from the fact that the Trojans did not withdraw from war nor did they advise Paris to leave Helen. The kinsmen and the enemies of Helen were more concerned about defending their own honour rather than worrying about the honour of a woman. Gill even says that Helen could not show her rebellion which “against the socio-cultural compulsions seems to fail miserably because of her royal rank.” (2)

RP Sharma draws attention to the fact that the very name of Sita invites multiple meanings. According to him, “As an allegory or a symbol in literature, ‘Sita’ does not pose a serious problem for critical analysis. The problem starts as soon as we begin to analyse her identity as an
epic character, that is, as a woman‖. (215) Drawing a comparison between the two epic heroines, Sharma observes, like Sen, that Sita had to sacrifice her life, whereas Helen went scot free. This is because of the strict code that unduly censured Sita.

Critically examined as a character in an epic, Sita seems to bear an antithetic resemblance to Helen. Sita is and is not like Helen. The Trojan war is fought for Helen. The war destroys the Trojans but Helen is unbruised. She is restored to her husband and kingdom with love and respect, even though she had eloped with the Trojan prince, Paris. The Lankan war is technically, but not genuinely, fought for Sita. The war destroys the Lankans, and it also destroys Sita in the long run, even though Sita had been abducted by a mighty foreigner from an unguarded hermitage and kept in captivity for more than a year. (ibid 220-21)

There was a strong accent on fidelity for women. It was considered that a woman’s character alone would provide her a shield. Many critics of the Ramayana observe that there were different codes for men and women when it came to be a question of loyalty. According to Tripta Desai, “Society also drew distinction between a fallible man and a woman astray. The former deserved pardon for his indiscretion, the latter condemnation for her sin.” (7) N.D Sen draws our attention to the difference between ‘exile’ and ‘abandonment’. When the hero is sent into exile, he is glorified but when a woman is abandoned, she is condemned. In Valmiki’s Ramayana one can find instances where men who coveted others’ wife were punished. There is not so much of discussion regarding the punishment meted out to Vali, Indra or Ravana as there may be a justification that they deserved the punishment as per the society’s norms of that age. Sita was
censured and her trial was the most talked about because her punishment was not justified as she remained pure in thought and deed. She was punished for no fault of hers, whereas Ahalya, Indra, Vali and Ravana were punished for going astray. Even though the code of loyalty was common for both genders, in Sita’s case, she received the utmost cruel treatment in the form of public censure and Rama’s abandonment. All this earned her greater honour in history than the men whose death was accepted by people. It is observed by many critics that in the battle to win her back Sita had to sacrifice her life. The accent laid on loyalty and the code prescribed were the same for men and women, but the treatment meted out to women was different from that of men.

Mainly royal women or women belonging to the upper strata of society came under the purview of such norms. They were not to be seen in public. When Rama and Sita left for the forest the public remarked in awe, “people on the roads are able today to behold Sita, who could not formerly be seen even by beings coursing in the air.” (310: Vol.I) This is a kind of a foreboding of the later episode where Rama allows Sita to be seen in public.

After victory in the war at Lanka, Rama instructed Vibishana to bring Sita. The latter was annoyed by the crowd of ogres and monkeys who had gathered to take a glance at Sita. He tried to disperse the crowd as royal women do not usually appear in public. But Rama did not mind their presence as they were his people. He said:

Neither apartments, nor costumes nor a protective wall nor again royal honours constitute a veil for a woman. Her character is her shield. The appearance of a woman in public is not condemned in times of adversity, in straits, in conflicts,
during the selection of a husband, at a sacrificial performance or at the nuptial ceremony. The yonder Sita is in distress and beset with difficulty. There is no objection to her appearing in public, particularly in my presence. (639: Vol. II)

The code was altered according to the circumstance. The woman who was not even to be seen in public was humiliated before the crowd. There are arguments presented in this regard as to why a woman alone should be taken to task and that she should have protested. One has to understand the code that was prevalent in that age and not in the light of standards in the modern age. Both Rama and Sita behaved the way they did by following the moral standards of that age, never questioning the spirit or principles behind those values. As a critic observes,

First, in our study of traditional texts, do we always take care to relate them to their specific socio-cultural contexts in which they were written? What looks odd to us today may well have been demanded by their day. Secondly, tradition is not merely a matter of practice, it is also to be found embodied in books, as argument and as distillation of wisdom from long and deep observation of life-experience. (Padia ix)

There is criticism that Sita was submissive and that she did not protest. Jagadeesan points out that Sita had not only the will power but also great responsibility. He observes,

What is involved is not a sacrifice of her rights by the woman but a resolute acceptance by the woman of a transcendent ideal that love and marriage are
in institutional devices to enable man and woman to work in harmony with the concept of the *divya dhampati* and the concept that all human relationships involve the principle of inviolable *swadharma* appertaining to each human being. (24)

Sita was not submissive but only supportive of her husband. Despite their roles assigned, Parthasarathy explains why there was a specific code for women. “The code of conduct for women is designed to give them a place of honour and protection.”(47)

Parthasarathy endorses this view when he says that certain characteristics and responsibilities were assigned to both the genders, not by way of making them competitive but by way of complementing. He says, “That man and woman are only supplementary and not competitive, is briefly indicated in the analysis of characters from *Ramayana*…” (48) The accent on chastity for women does not mean subordination. In the words of Jagadeesan and Nagarajan,

> The Hindu concept that a woman is an *abala* does not exclude the strength of the inner spirit in woman which is rooted in chastity as an end in itself. The ideal of chastity does not involve any spiritual subordination of woman to man but a recognition of the spiritual harmony that inspires the concept of marriage and of love. (23-4)

Considering the socio-cultural ambience of her time, Sita could not have revolted. Instead she abjured the unacceptable norms of the society and rejected it and entered Mother Earth. Till the
very end she protected the honour of her husband. She had no reason to die as she had to take care of her children. At the same time she had no reason to live later as Rama did not accept her. She leaves the earth only after fulfilling her duty as a mother, keeping aside her role as a wife on Rama’s rejection of her for the second time. Kapoor expresses that Sita’s agni-pariksha is not to be taken in the literal sense. For instance ‘acid test’ is used metaphorically and the spirit behind it is to be understood. (Padia 40) The very fact that Sita did not protest much in the first instance underscores the strict code of behavior for women.

When Sita was put to test by Rama she only questions why there is a doubt lurking in the mind of Rama regarding her purity. She even understands that public opinion cannot be ignored by a king. She does not talk as a feminist. Yet the fact that after few years again she had to undergo the same ordeal pains her beyond measure. There are some observations that such an ordeal for the second time is only an interpolation by later writers to heighten the effect and to drive home the point that the only shield for a woman is her chastity. G.S Altekar expresses his opinion that the fire ordeal is just a myth and that it could be an interpolation by a later writer. Rama’s love for Sita and his pining for her when she was in Lanka go to bear testimony to the fact that Rama could not have been so ruthless to abandon her for good and subject her to a fire ordeal for the second time. In the words of Altekar, “We have shown in this section that the fire ordeal ‘seems to be a myth’ and the cantos 117 to 123 of Yudha-kanda are a later interpolation of misguided enthusiasm, mean taste and rash impulsion on the part of a writer of low standard. (214)
It was also a norm that the king had to set an example to his subjects. That was why Rama had to abandon Sita after enquiries revealed that his people questioned his very act of having accepted Sita after she lived in a distant land. The public feared “Such conduct of our wives shall have to be suffered by us also, since whatever a king does, the subjects follow.” (821: Vol. II) It was also necessary for the king to follow certain norms when it came to judging his people.

Rachel Bespaloff says for Helen “Beauty is not a promise of happiness here; it is a burden and a curse.” (Steiner & Fagles, ed., 102) This is similar in the case of Sita as well. The critic states that the epic presents a negative image of Helen. Even if she looks like a goddess, ‘the heroine is a scourge.’ (ibid 153) Other characters attribute all their troubles to Helen. She feels so guilty that she invites death. But Priam convinces her saying that the gods are responsible for the developments. Calame expresses that “For this royal recluse freedom does not exist” (ibid 102) But when compared to Andromache, Helen is better off. The reason is “No matter who wins in the end, Helen, unlike Andromache and the Trojan princesses, does not have to fear a life of slavery and forced labour “under the eyes of a harsh master.” (ibid)

The code of treatment meted out to Sita was different. Though Sita and Helen ‘both gained immortality through art’ (Silk 60) the difference lies in the fact that Sita had to sacrifice her life to become immortal. N. D. Sen in her article ‘The Immortality Trap’ re-presents Sita's story in a new light and as the very title suggests she feels that Sita had been dragged into the immortality trap. To gain immortality in art, Sita had to sacrifice her life. “She's willing to pay the price of terrible suffering in life in order to acquire immortality in art” (Jain & Avadesh Kumar Singh.20)
According to Sen, Sita did not enter fire, ‘but entered a period of slow burning till death’ (ibid 19) Her character is used by the poet to drive home a norm that ‘She who endures, ensures’.

Sita’s character is one of the most discussed and innumerable interpretations are possible while analyzing her character. Some humanized her yet others deified her. She still remains an iconic character and means a lot to modern women who find her as a representative of womanhood. A study of her character reveals that she is unparalleled not only in literature but acts as a point of reference for moral standards and self-actualisation. It is significant to see the evolution of her character. Sita may not be an ideal character to begin with. Just as Sukumari ascertains that Rama is not God but a man, “for only a man could become a convincing ethical model”. (Raghavan 76) Sita emerges as a convincing ethical model.

In literature the allusions to Helen are something to do with her enchanting beauty or her ability to lure men for sensual pleasure. Dr. Faustus marvels at the beauty of Helen and exclaims: “Was this the face that launched a / thousand ships and burnt the/ Topless towers of Ilium?” He considers it the greatest happiness to be kissed by Helen and at the eleventh hour before his damnation, he conjures up Helen. His physical proximity with Helen marks his end. In this context Helen’s beauty is presented as evil and destructive. Shakespeare alludes to this in As You Like It wherein he refers to “Helen’s cheek but not her heart”.
The images of women presented in epic narratives are according to the patriarchal definitions and norms. The next chapter takes into consideration the epic traditions which also reflect a definite standpoint according to the writers’ own sociological, political and gender ideologies or prejudices. Priscilla P. Clark while expanding the scope of comparative literature observes: “Comparing texts in some sense implies comparison of societies that speak to and draw upon those texts”. (qtd. in Chandra 406) The critiques on the different telling and re-tellings are taken for discussion as the historical changes would throw light on the evolution of the societies.