

VULNERABILITY AND ETHICALITY IN HOMER'S THE ILIAD BOOK XVI

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Abstract

Homer's The Iliad vividly delineates the skeleton of war in Homeric society where men and Gods actively participate to be honoured and glorified. But Homer does not glorify this socio-political event where the warriors act as animals to kill the opponents. The Iliad Book XVI exposes the vulnerable nature of mortals and immortals who also have to bow down to the power of fate. Achilles who was previously unaware of his vulnerability silently laments for the loss of Patroclus becoming aware of his own vulnerability and the Almighty, Zeus cries for his son's death. This paper is meant to project the ethicality of war where honour, glory, heroism, pride, anger, vengeance, power float ultimately towards the verge of death. My paper will explore to negotiate the wounds of the mortals with the wounds of the Gods underlining the fluctuation of war and its fragile centrality that war is no longer a noble or glorious endeavour, but a celebration of loss of humanity.

Keywords: Achilles, Ethicality, Humanity, Heroism, Homer, Honour, *Iliad*, Patroclus, Vulnerability, War

Homer's *The Iliad* narrates the war and the heroism of man and God. The poem portrays the politics of Homeric society which is actually stateless and therefore "pre-political". *The Iliad Book XVI* presents the war as a socio-political event where political organization motivates the hero as a pursuit of honour but ultimately invokes the vulnerability or the "countless losses" as a result of the Trojan War. This epic clearly highlights the workings of fate over mortals and even over immortals who possess a divine power and determine the acts of the mortals. Homer constantly alludes to the events especially towards the end of the epic making it clear that the greatest among men can never escape the inevitability of death. Suggesting the fragility of life, Homer argues the greatest, "noblest and bravest may yield to death sooner than others". While much of the epic depicts the glory of military victory, it also honestly exposes the "costs of war which significantly undermines the idea that war is not wholly a glorious endeavour".

There are many battle scenes focusing on brutal fighting, firing and faded bodies. Homer does not glorify war but shows how it becomes *deus ex machina*, a pivotal part of a socio-cultural aspect of Homeric society. Human lives become merely puppets in the politics of war. A chain of killing is present throughout the course of this epic. If a warrior in the name of sense of duty and responsibility for heroism is forced mentally to go to the battlefield and to win seeing the face of victory, very soon he has to be doomed to die, maybe in the next moment. In *The Iliad Book XVI, The Death of Patroclus*, the hero Patroclus taking the armour of Achilles fights against the Trojans and kills everyone he meets. He spears Sarpedon and causes his death. But in the next episode, Apollo strokes Patroclus badly and finally Hector, who decamps twice from the battlefield, easily demolishes him. With the dying words of Patroclus, he not only predicts Hector's death "smashing through the skull" but also foreshadows Achilles's death. Thus the poem emphasizes the ephemeral nature of mortals and immortals suggesting that the glory of this sound and fury signifying nothing. This dirty business of Troy has eventually cost bloodsheds and dead bodies. Homer brings out the dehumanizing qualities and the animalistic nature of the Achaean and Trojan soldiers. He portrays the men as a group of animals rushing into the battle. Though a soldier wins and appears as a glorified hero, he reaches his victory by participating in this truculent and bloody way of slaughtering the enemies. The agitation between "the glory of war and its simultaneous costs fuels". In *The Iliad* heroes are pressurised to grapple arduous choices with difficulty as their culture demands from them. This epic ultimately presents a dualistic and catastrophic world where pride should be equated with agony and individual's action with a lack of absolute control.

The wrath of the "blazing Achilles" in *Book I* of this epic is a subject to critique in *Book XVI* of the same. The arrogant and superhuman warrior, Achilles becomes a timid, selfish and uncommitted man when he refuses to join the battle field at the time when their own Achaean ships were burning. Even when Patroclus challenges him, "Pitiless: the rider Peleus was never your father nor Thetis was your mother, but it was the gray sea that bore you and the towering rocks, so sheer the heart in you is turned from us" (Lattimore, 2011, Trans.), Patroclus questions that Achilles lacks human sense of responsibility and therefore commits an anti-communal act at the time of crisis. Though he acted as a devoted, angry warrior one who has displayed courage and bravery which make the hero an honorable member of a society, he is either aware of his vulnerability or he preserves his ego as an honorable hero who satisfies his honour after every Achaean injury that without his active participation Achaean can never win. So the inner dilemma of a warrior to participate in the drama of war becomes an irony in this particular book which has witnessed the violation of social bond within a community. But an ethical notion in Achilles is that he without questioning fate secretly prays to the Almighty Zeus for Patroclus's "safe and sound return from the battle" and even sends Myrmidon to protect Patroclus in the battlefield. So the dualistic nature of anti-communal act in Achilles who wants to gain glory staying calm at the

time of crisis and his ethical nature of praying for his friend Patroclus to Zeus with whom he knows "I think I am honored in Zeus's ordinance" (Homer, Book 9. 608, Trans.) is questioned in *The Iliad Book XVI*.

In Simon Weil's review of *The Iliad or The Poem of Force* the true hero, the true subject the centre of the epic is 'Force'. "Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away". In this epic human spirit is exhibited as modified by "its relations with force as swept away, blended by very force. It imagined it could be handled"(Weil 6), but ultimately caused the final destruction. The force for the pursuit of glory results from the wrath which is developed on the divine level projecting subsequently into the mortal giving universal harmony and unity into the plot structure. In *The Iliad Book XVI*, Patroclus who forgets the warning of Achilles for not entering into the gate of Citadel becomes the victim of the wrath of Zeus for killing his son, Sarpadon. Patroclus who is "a kind, gentle, tender" lacking lion like rapacity taking the armour of Achilles becomes a senseless machine in the battlefield motivated by 'Force' and "innocently asks for his own death" who is unable to sense of his vulnerability in this chapter projects the role of Achilles who is very much concerned about his own sense of glory and vulnerability. As Simon Weill points out that it is 'force' that enslaves man and dehumanizes Patroclus to fight for his own community. Though Homer uses animal imagery to highlight that heroes act like animals in the battlefield, they nevertheless experience human emotions when they are forced to deal with difficult choices and losses inflicted by war. Though action of the plot of this epic is "pre-political" and predetermined by the Lord of the Universe Zeus who sets the deeds of the mortals, no one is unaware of fate or destiny in this *Book XVI of The Iliad* where Zeus, the Almighty of the Immortals "wept tears of blood" of this "unhappy business" for his son's death becoming a victim of his own plot deceived by destiny. Here Hera's role as a mother consoling her husband clearly suggests her acceptance of the death of her son who dies like a hero in the battlefield like other gods. Homer depicts the burial rites as empathetically heroic when Zeus prepares for his son's burial in Lycia. Homer tries to negotiate the wounds of the mortals and the wounds of the Gods underlining the fact that the false sense of glory in war is basically a symptomatic strategy of incomprehensible loss.

Marina Berzins McCoy in her book, *The Wounded Heroes* insists that an awareness of vulnerability of human existence is central to the ethical framework of *The Iliad*. She argues that every hero of a war is impermanent and therefore fragile. My argument is that there is a fragile centrality to war. This fragility of human condition is a part of the centre's regrowth, this fragility is a part of centre denying its centrality and this fragility is also a part of a centre asking questions about the legitimacy of war. This epic argues the fluctuation of war and its fragile centre that no hero can escape the essence of vulnerable nature of human condition. However, the epic tries to sensitize the fury of war and the futility of life because war is not natural but man made. Homer raises a socio-political concern of the grim reality of war where honour, glory, heroism, pride, anger, vengeance, power float

towards the verge of death. It is true that war makes unity of social bond stronger within a community, but when a hero initiates a war, he is engaging himself in the pity and devastating loss of life. While he wounds his opponent, this wound makes him morally conscious that the dead person will not return to their community again. This ethicality is located in the idea that the hero should think of the wound of his fellow opponent. At the end of *The Iliad Book XVI Achilles* who was previously unaware of his vulnerability silently laments for the loss of Patroclus who is Achilles's soulmate and becomes aware of his own vulnerability. But from the ethical perspective both Achilles and Zeus who shades tears for the death of his son, lament for each other's loss. Throughout war humanity suffers ultimately. This is the moment of ethical transcendence where the loss of humanity in general is lamented neither from the part of the Trojans nor from the part of Greeks which universalises the pity of war.

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