



# War And Society In Ancient Epics: A Comparative Analysis Of The Ramayana And The Iliad

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**Abstract:** This research article explores the socio-political dimensions of warfare in two of the most iconic ancient epics: Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Homer's *Iliad*. By juxtaposing these texts, the study investigates how *social hierarchies, political structures, and alliances manifest and evolve during periods of conflict*. Both epics depict war as a multi-faceted endeavour involving honour, familial duties, alliances, and moral codes that extend beyond the battlefield. However, despite their unique cultural contexts, ancient India for the *Ramayana* and ancient Greece for the *Iliad*, they share resonances in how *warfare acts as a catalyst for reevaluating the existing power frameworks, alliances, and the moral obligations of individuals and states*.

In both epics, kings, nobles, and warriors occupy pivotal positions, and their decisions significantly affect collective fates. The article also investigates the role of divine intervention, religious obligations, and the moral codes that shape military strategies and alliances. Where the *Ramayana* highlights the dharmic obligations (or moral duties) of individuals and collectives, the *Iliad* emphasizes the heroic code (*time* and *kleos*) and the politics of pride and honour. These parallels and differences provide invaluable insights into how *war is conceptualized and operationalized within distinct socio-political frameworks*.

Drawing on both primary texts, through direct quotations and translations from the original Sanskrit and Ancient Greek, and secondary scholarship, this article methodically examines the respective social hierarchies and political infrastructures that gave birth to these poetic narratives. We further outline how the moral frameworks, deeply rooted in religious or quasi-religious beliefs, guide statesmen and warriors, even as these beliefs are tested or adapted during times of war.

Through a synthesis of close textual analysis, theoretical frameworks, and a review of key scholarly discourses, the study demonstrates that warfare in these epics cannot be wholly understood without considering their underlying socio-political and moral landscapes. Consequently, *these ancient narratives continue to offer enduring lessons on leadership, ethics, alliance-building, and the complexities of human conflict*.

**Keywords:** *Ramayana, Iliad, warfare, socio-political structures, moral codes, ancient epics, dharma, kleos, cross-comparative study.*

## Introduction

War has invariably acted as one of the most disruptive yet transformative forces in human history. In ancient literature, warfare is not merely about armed conflict; it is deeply woven into the social, political, and moral fabrics of societies.

Valmiki's Ramayana (circa 5th to 4th century BCE, though scholarly opinions vary) and Homer's Iliad (traditionally dated to the 8th century BCE) both narrate epic wars, featuring heroic leaders, divine interventions, and moral quandaries that transcend time and geography. Their thematic cores revolve around the interplay of duty, honour, power, and destiny. The present study examines the socio-political landscapes in which these wars transpire and investigates how moral codes, social hierarchies, and political alliances are negotiated and redefined during times of large-scale conflict.

This article posits that an in-depth comparison of the Ramayana and the Iliad, two epics foundational to their respective cultures, yields illuminating perspectives on the universal and culture-specific dimensions of warfare. Additionally, by analyzing the moral codes enshrined in these texts, dharma (righteousness or duty) in the Ramayana and arete (virtue) or time (honour) in the Iliad, the study underscores the intricate relationship between societal expectations and individual actions in the context of war.

## A. Background and Rationale

### 1. Historical Context of the Ramayana

The Ramayana has long been considered one of ancient India's most influential texts, shaping South Asian cultural, religious, and political thought (Goldman 15). Traditionally attributed to Valmiki, the epic narrates the life and trials of

Prince Rama, who is often deified as an avatar of Vishnu. The war against the demon-king Ravana is set against a socio-political backdrop of monarchies, kinship alliances, and varna (caste or class) structures that guide social and political interactions. The Ramayana remains one of the most revered and influential literary compositions in South Asia, traditionally ascribed to the sage Valmiki around the 5th or 4th century BCE (Goldman 15). Although scholars continue to debate its precise chronology, the epic's narrative framework offers crucial insights into the socio-political structures of ancient India. Valmiki's portrayal of the protagonist, Rama, often venerated as an avatar of Vishnu, reflects the cultural *ethos of a civilization that anchored rulership in the concept of dharma*, commonly translated as righteousness, moral law, and cosmic order (Pollock 103). One of the earliest examples of how dharma informs leadership comes to light in Valmiki's Ramayana when Rama is exiled from Ayodhya. Despite having a legitimate claim to the throne, Rama accepts his exile out of filial piety and respect for his father's oath (Valmiki, Ramayana, Ayodhya Kanda 20.28–32). This episode underscores the *sense of duty prevailing over personal ambition*, a principle that echoes throughout the text. By the time we reach the Yuddha Kanda (the Book of War), the sociopolitical stakes widen: the demon-king Ravana's tyranny threatens not only Rama's personal interests but also the moral balance of the world. Rama's decision to *wage war is repeatedly framed as an obligation sanctioned by dharma* (Valmiki, Ramayana, Yuddha Kanda 36.31), as in the famous line “धर्मो हि परमं बलम्” (“Righteousness is indeed the supreme power”). In addition to royal hierarchies, the text spotlights

alliances formed between humans and other beings such as the vanaras (monkey-warriors) and the rakshasas (demons). The acceptance of Hanuman, Sugriva, and even Vibhishana,

Ravana's brother, into Rama's circle illustrates how moral alignment can transcend varna- or species-based boundaries when existential threats loom (Goldman 97). Historically, this emphasis suggests that the epic draws on a cultural milieu where warfare, though confined by *rigid social structures*, *could expand its coalitional base in times of moral crisis*. From a political standpoint, the depiction of monarchic systems, tributary relationships, and counsel among wise advisors or sages outlines an organized society in which *warfare was sanctioned as a means to restore or uphold the moral-laden political order* (Pollock 105).

In both epics, then, war stands as a definitive stage for demonstrating courage and moral fibre, but while the *Ramayana casts it as an instrument of righteous duty*, the *Iliad predominantly emphasizes individual ambition and collective pride tempered by fate*.

## 2. Purpose of War

### Valmiki's Ramayana

Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Homer's *Iliad* each present war as a crucible for testing moral codes, individual character, and social or cosmic order, yet the rationale, divine involvement, ethical framework, and final outcome differ strikingly between these ancient texts. In the *Ramayana*, conflict arises as a sacred duty to restore *dharma*, most visibly illustrated by Rama's obligation to rescue Sita from Ravana. This imperative is not just a personal vendetta but a cosmic responsibility. Sita's abduction by Ravana violates fundamental

moral law, compelling Rama to undertake warfare as a righteous measure.

### a. Protection of Dharma (Righteousness)

Sita's abduction by Ravana is the principal catalyst that compels Rama to undertake a war to uphold dharma. As stated in the Yuddha Kanda:

“नह्यधर्मोऽस्ति रामस्य सर्वथा प्रथमतं जगत् ।”

(Valmiki, Ramayana, Yuddha Kanda 6.47.34)

“There is certainly no trace of unrighteousness in

Rama; the whole world knows of his righteousness.” In this sense, war is not driven by personal vengeance alone but by the imperative to restore moral order. Dharma (righteousness or cosmic order) underpins the moral universe of the *Ramayana* even in warfare, adherence to dharma is paramount—victory should not violate cosmic or ethical harmony धर्मो धि परमं श्रेयो लोके षु परगण्यते । धर्मेण लभते सर्ं धर्मवसारं इदं जगत् ॥

“Indeed, dharma is regarded as the highest good in all the worlds. By dharma one obtains everything; this whole universe is founded on dharma.” –

Ayodhya Kanda 2.21.15

### b. Defense of the Oppressed

The notion of protecting the oppressed echoes when Rama intervenes to aid Sugriva in his struggle against Vali in Kishkindha (Valmiki, *Ramayana*, Kishkindha Kanda 4.12-4.15). War in this context becomes permissible only when it safeguards justice and ensures the welfare of the powerless. Rama agrees to aid Sugriva against Vali's tyranny in Kishkindha, emphasizing that *just conflict is warranted to protect those wronged by oppressive power*. Rama's intervention against Vali, and later, against

Ravana, highlights the epic's view that warfare is permissible to free the innocent from suffering.

### c. Divine Mission of Vishnu's Incarnation

Still more significant is Rama's identity as an incarnation of Vishnu, a point established in the Bala Kanda (1.16, 1.18), where the gods plead for Vishnu's earthly descent to vanquish evil. His campaign against Ravana thus carries the stamp of divine mandate, marking war as a moral tool ordained to restore cosmic harmony. Rama is explicitly described as the incarnation (avatar) of Lord Vishnu tasked with eradicating evil.

### a. Honor and Personal Glory (Kleos)

By contrast, Homer's *Iliad* frames the Trojan War around honour and personal glory, beginning with the famous invocation, "*Sing, Goddess, the wrath of Peleus' son Achilles*" (1.1), which pinpoints

Achilles' wounded pride as the central drama. Although the abduction of Helen provides the initial casus belli, the deeper impetus lies in collective pride and competition for kleos

(renown). Agamemnon's ability to rally the Greek kings under a unified banner (Homer, *Iliad* 2.160-186) affirms that their sense of communal honour compels them to punish Troy.

On the contrary *Ramayana* starts with the invocation, mentioning that the story is of Rama who is Vishnu's incarnation) तपस्स्वाध्यायथनरतं तपवी  
र्ास्तिदां र्म ।

नारदं पररपप्रच्छ र्ाल्मीथकर्मवथनपुङ्गर्म् ॥

Sanskrit (Bala Kanda 1.1.1) While this opening does not describe warfare specifically, it establishes the poem's sacred context, Rama as an avatara (incarnation) of Vishnu receives divine support to

uphold dharma, including in battle. *Divine beings intervene to ensure righteousness prevails.*

### b. Collective Defense of a Shared Cause

Agamemnon rallies a coalition of Greek kings to retrieve Helen, who was taken by Paris (Homer, *Iliad* 2.160–186). While Helen's abduction is often seen as the situation that justifies war with Troy, the deeper cause is the collective honour of the Greek city-states. Defending this honour and punishing Troy unifies the Greeks under a single martial goal. The violation of trojan women by holding them as captives and distributing them as possessions of war was one of the aftermath of the war where innocent *Trojan ladies were the victims of the war and were prey to the sentiment of a shared cause of pride and retrieval of Helen.*

### c. Fulfilment of Fate (and Divine Plans) In

Book 4, Zeus openly contemplates how to steer events so that Troy will eventually fall, as prophesied (Homer, *Iliad* 4.1, 20). The epic frequently references an overarching moira (fate) that orchestrates key outcomes, implying that the Trojan War is, in some sense, *preordained by divine design*, even though mortals perceive it as a contest for honour. Adding to this, Zeus's decree that Troy must fall (4.1-20) makes the war seem inexorable, as if fulfilling an ancient prophecy. Such an emphasis on fate (moira) invests the conflict with a semblance of inevitability, though individual warriors pursue fame on the battlefield. In both epics, then, war stands as a definitive stage for demonstrating courage and moral fibre, but while the *Ramayana casts it as an instrument of righteous duty, the Iliad predominantly emphasizes individual ambition and collective pride tempered by fate.*

### 3. Role of Divinity

Divine agency likewise manifests in distinctive ways in each text. In the *Ramayana*, the gods unite behind Rama, who embodies Vishnu's power, thus imbuing each martial encounter with sacred purpose. Brahma and other Devas offer their blessings, highlighting that the entire pantheon endorses the campaign against Ravana (Valmiki, *Ramayana*, Bala Kanda 1.15-1.16). Hanuman's wondrous feats, such as his leap to Lanka and the rescue of Sita (Sundara Kanda 5.1-5.3), reflect divine assistance guiding and protecting Rama's cause. At every juncture, the *war is portrayed as a cosmic corrective measure, where deities and their emissaries collaborate to vanquish a demon-king* who threatens the balance of all realms. Homer's vision of the gods, on the other hand, is filled with the capriciousness of Mount Olympus. Athena halts Achilles' urge to kill Agamemnon in Book 1 (1.188, 205), not out of a grand moral imperative but because she favours the Greek cause and wants him alive for battle. Similarly, Hera's grudge against Troy stems from a personal slight (24.25, 45), and Aphrodite's partiality to Paris plunges mortals deeper into conflict. Zeus himself, though often described as supreme, weighs the destinies of warriors in his scales (22.208, 213) and sometimes lets the tide of fate move unhindered, revealing a pantheon driven by rivalries, love affairs, and grudges rather than the singular moral principle that animates the gods in the *Ramayana*.

### 4. Ethical Implications

The ethical dimensions of warfare accordingly diverge. In Valmiki's narrative, the war in Lanka is never stripped of moral restraint, as illustrated by

Rama's *refusal to strike a defenceless Ravana* (Yuddha Kanda 6.59.128).

**रामो थर्बुधसङ्काशो राणं युथध कथशवतर्म् । प्रथतपूज्य  
तदा र्वाक्यथर्मदं तत्राब्रर्ीद्वचः ॥**

"Rama, who shone like a god, seeing Ravana exhausted in battle, addressed him with respectful words..."

Despite the intensity of the combat, Rama abides by a standard of dharma yuddha: a righteous war should be waged openly and honourably, allowing the enemy to fight on fair terms. This spirit of compassion and moral conduct is likewise demonstrated when Ravana's brother *Vibhishana* seeks sanctuary; Rama, respecting the principle of giving refuge to the repentant, accepts him without hesitation (Yuddha Kanda 6.18.1, 6.18.30). While the destruction of Lanka by Hanuman shows that war inevitably leads to loss of life and property (Sundara Kanda 5.53, 5.57), the narrative frames it as a proportional response to Ravana's aggression, performed in the pursuit of cosmic justice. Conversely, Homer's Greek heroes adhere to a heroic code shaped by *arete* (excellence) and *time* (honour), but the tragedies that ensue underline the moral complexities of such a value system. Hector's conflict between filial duty and loyalty to Troy in Book 6 (6.441, 465) captures the high cost of abiding by a heroic ideal that demands constant readiness to sacrifice even domestic ties. Achilles, in *a stark deviation from heroic courtesy, drags Hector's body around the walls of Troy* (22.395, 410), an act betraying how unbridled rage can eclipse customary decorum. And yet, the poignant moment in which *Priam pleads for Hector's corpse* (24.468, 688) reasserts a moral boundary that even the fiercest warrior can recognize, offering a fleeting glimpse of empathy amid the carnage.

## 5. Resolution of War

Such contrasts are further crystallized in how each epic concludes. The Ramayana ends in the Uttara Kanda with Ravana's death and Rama's return to Ayodhya, an event heralding the advent of RamaRajya, a golden age wherein peace and prosperity flourish (Valmiki, Ramayana, Uttara Kanda 7.1, 7.5). This resolution restores cosmic equilibrium, implying that war, though destructive, has fulfilled its moral purpose. *Rama's magnanimity toward survivors and his integration of allies affirms that a just struggle aspires to heal and*

*unify after victory.* Homer's *Iliad*, by contrast, concludes not with a restored peace but with Hector's funeral (24.785, 804), *leaving the broader war unresolved.* Although Achilles momentarily experiences compassion for King Priam's loss, the fall of Troy still looms, echoing throughout the poem's final lines. Readers know from other sources that Troy will be sacked, Achilles will meet his own doom, and bitterness will persist among the survivors. Instead of a harmonious aftermath, the *Iliad presents a sobering reflection on fate and mortality, illustrating that even fleeting acts of empathy can be overshadowed by the inevitability of further bloodshed.*

Taken together, these ancient epics affirm that war can reveal the heights of heroism and the depths of tragedy in equal measure. In the *Ramayana*, the moral lens is clear: an ethically bounded conflict serves to protect the innocent and restore cosmic order, with godly forces unified behind a righteous champion. The *Iliad* ventures a more tragic vision: *war is a theatre where human passion, pride, and divine favouritism converge, frequently eroding moral boundaries, and only sporadic moments of*

*compassion redeem the carnage.* While both narratives unveil the destructiveness inherent in marital strife, their disparate resolutions, *one culminating in a rebalanced universe, the other in prolonged sorrow, reflect profoundly different cultural views on fate, the gods, and the ultimate value of victory in war both texts emphasize that moral codes guide warriors*

## B. Difference in the War Ideologies in ancient epics

Both the Indian epic *Ramayana* and the Greek epic *Iliad* revolve around large-scale conflicts and heroic figures, yet each epic reflects its own cultural and ethical framework. These frameworks shape the "rules of war" (both implicit and explicit) that guide how warriors conduct themselves in battle. Below is an overview of some of the key differences in these codes of warfare.

### 1. Cosmic Order vs. Personal Honor *Ramayana* (Dharma-Centered)

The concept of dharma (righteous duty or cosmic order) underpins the ethos of warfare in the *Ramayana*. Warriors are expected to align their actions with righteousness and the preservation of societal harmony. Lord Rama is often upheld as the embodiment of dharma. His choices, even in battle, are guided by moral considerations, maintaining fairness, honouring one's word, and ensuring the welfare of others. न िन्याद् रथथनं रथी नरश्चाश्वसाध्यं नरश्चसाध्यः । न आयुधं थर्मुक्तं च न पराङ्मुखमुद्यतम् ॥

"A charioteer should not strike one who is on foot, nor should a horseman strike one unprepared. One

should not attack someone who has laid aside their weapon, or who turns away (from the fight).” *It reflects the epic’s concern for righteousness (dharma) over mere victory.* (Yuddha Kanda 6.59.122)The epic emphasizes that victory should not come at the cost of adharma (unrighteousness). Actions violating fundamental ethical principles (e.g., attacking a defenceless opponent) are typically condemned.

### Whereas Iliad is moreover **honour- and Glory-Centered**

In Homeric Greece, personal honour (time) and glory (kleos) drive the warriors’ conduct. The battlefield is the stage on which heroes like Achilles or Hector gain renown.

While there are social norms, such as showing respect to the gods, observing certain rules of hospitality (xenia), and not desecrating temples, much of the warriors’ behaviour is shaped by individual prestige and the immediate demands of heroic competition.

“Then swift-footed Achilles glared and answered him:

‘No more entreating of me, you dog...’”  
(Homer, Iliad 22.337–339)

Although Hector pleads for mercy and promises honorable treatment of Achilles’ body should the tables be turned, Achilles refuses. This moment shows how Iliad heroes often make decisions based on personal honor, wrath, and glory (time and kleos) rather than a universal moral code. *Mercy toward a defeated foe is not guaranteed; it is subject to the victor’s temperament.* Acts are judged primarily through how they reflect on a warrior’s honour rather than a universal, cosmic moral code.

## 2. Treatment of Opponents and NonCombatants

### Ramayana

Although not always perfectly followed, there is a strong tradition in ancient Indian epics of not attacking unarmed or fleeing enemies. A certain code of chivalry is often emphasized, particularly in idealized scenes where *noble warriors refrain from striking an enemy from behind or at a disadvantage.*

“But Hector reached out with his strong hands from the polished helmet;

For Hector was determined to win great glory...”  
(Homer, Iliad 6.440–443)

Hector, like many Homeric warriors, is motivated by the pursuit of great glory. The Iliad repeatedly stresses personal honour and renown kleos , contrasting sharply with the Ramayana’s emphasis on upholding a cosmic moral duty. In many retellings, *warriors fight from dawn to dusk and respect breaks in battle.* Even while besieging Lanka, Rama’s army generally fights in a way that is portrayed as just and measured. *Non-combatants and women are usually treated with a degree of respect or spared from direct harm.* Sita’s capture by Ravana is framed as an extreme violation of dharma and is central to his villainy.

### Iliad

Greek heroes place significant value on individual prowess and skill in combat; however, there is also a harsh reality of war depicted. Warriors do sometimes kill or strip armor from wounded enemies, and *there is no absolute prohibition against killing a fleeing opponent.*

The notion of supplication exists (e.g., an enemy warrior might beg for mercy), but whether mercy is shown often depends on the mood, personal interest,

or anger of the victor (as in Achilles' merciless stance after Patroclus's death).

"But Achilles sat by the shore of the grey sea, gazing out upon the wine-dark deep..."

(Homer, Iliad 18.108–110)

Achilles, the paragon of Homeric heroism, is driven by honor and personal anguish (over Patroclus' death). His extreme responses—like dragging Hector's corpse—underscore the Iliad's focus on individual glory and the intensity of personal wrath.

Non-combatants can suffer greatly. The sacking of cities, taking spoils, enslaving women was considered part of the "normal" conduct of ancient warfare from the Greek perspective, albeit sometimes lamented or criticized by the poets for its brutality.

### 3. Divine Intervention and Moral Constraints

Though supernatural elements abound (Rama is an avatar of Vishnu, Hanuman has extraordinary powers, Ravana is a demon king), the warfare is still meant to uphold a moral cosmic order. *The gods typically assist righteous heroes, and their intervention is to ensure that dharma is ultimately preserved.*

The presence of powerful boons and weapons (such as the divine astras) is often *counterbalanced by ethical considerations*, Rama, for instance, hesitates to use overwhelming weapons that might harm innocents or wreak cosmic destruction.

Iliad

The gods of Olympus frequently intervene in battles, supporting their favored mortals, deceiving enemy

warriors, or even rescuing heroes at critical moments.

However, Greek gods in the *Iliad act more like powerful personalities than moral guardians of the universe*. They have personal vendettas, jealousies, and favoritism. Their involvement often *escalates* conflict rather than enforcing strict moral boundaries on the battlefield.

### 4. Ideal Warrior Archetype

Ramayana

The ideal warrior is *dharmic*, selfless, just, and protective. Rama personifies these virtues: he strives to correct a wrong (the abduction of Sita) and restore balance. Even when he kills Ravana, he performs the final rites for his enemy, showing respect to the fallen in line with higher moral standards - Yuddha Kāṇḍa 6.111.90, describing Rama's reaction after defeating Ravana: राघर्ो रार्णित्वा मूर्थनव र्ाणेन लक्ष्मण । ततो र्चनर्मुथिश्य र्धाय न र्मथतं दधौ ॥

"Having struck down Ravana with an arrow to the head, Rama then renounced all further thought of killing, speaking these words (to Lakshmana)." (Valmiki, Ramayana 6.111.90)

After the decisive battle, Rāma does not gloat or continue vengeful acts; instead, he shows restraint and even orders respectful funeral rites for his foe. The goal is restoration of cosmic and social order, not endless bloodshed.

Another important ideal is *compassion*, as warriors are expected to maintain empathy toward the defeated and even show them a path to redemption if possible.

Iliad

The ideal warrior is defined by *heroic excellence* (aristeia), indomitable in combat, seeking glory, and displaying great physical and martial prowess.

Achilles is the ultimate warrior, yet his pride leads to morally questionable actions (e.g., disrespect to Hector's corpse).

There is respect for one's enemies in the sense that a strong or skillful foe elevates the victor's honor, but this respect is often overshadowed by an individual hero's thirst for eternal renown.

## 5. Aftermath of Battle and Treatment of the Fallen

Even though combat can be fierce, there is an expectation of honouring the dead, friend or foe, and some retellings emphasize a sense of closure or reconciliation post-conflict (e.g., Rama's magnanimity toward Vibhishana and the slain Ravana).

The focus is on restoring moral and social order, rather than just accumulating spoils or celebrating victory. Iliad

**“But Achilles ... dragged (the body) behind him, the noble, great-hearted Achilles...” (Homer, Iliad 22.395–397)**

After slaying Hector, Achilles drags Hector's body around Troy, a final insult and denial of proper funeral rites. This act violates social norms of heroic respect but also underscores how personal rage can eclipse any broader code of conduct in the Iliad.

The treatment of the fallen can be harsh. Heroes may strip slain enemies of their armour or display trophies. Achilles' treatment of Hector's body, dragging it around the walls of Troy, is portrayed as the extreme violation of heroic norms, yet it underscores how personal anger can override conventional respect.

The funeral rites are significant (Patroclus's funeral is a major episode), but the emphasis often is on how

the funeral honours the dead hero's memory rather than restoring a moral balance.

## C. Socio-Political Dimensions of Warfare in Ancient texts

Homer's Iliad is a cornerstone of ancient Greek literature, capturing the climactic weeks of the Trojan War. This conflict sees alliances formed and broken among various Greek city-states and the city of Troy, highlighting the interplay of power, honour, and divine favour (Kirk 24). Heroic codes govern warriors, while kings and princes manoeuvre diplomatically and politically.

Homer's Iliad, composed around the 8th century BCE, is equally central to the literary and cultural heritage of ancient Greece (Finley 44). While it recounts episodes in the final stages of the legendary Trojan War, the text serves as a window into an archaic Greek world shaped by *basileis* (king-like chieftains), warrior assemblies, and the pursuit of time (honor) and *kleos* (glory). Scholars such as M. I. Finley emphasize how The Iliad captures an environment in which *power was neither absolute nor centralized, but rather negotiated* among competing kings like Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Achilles (Finley 69). A well-known line that exemplifies political tensions in the Iliad appears when Agamemnon, often styled as “lord of men,” provokes Achilles by seizing the latter's war prize, Briseis. Achilles, stung by the affront, declares: “But why must the

Argives fight the Trojans for your sake?” (Homer, Iliad 1.149). This short clause captures the precarious cohesion of the Greek coalition: though ostensibly unified against Troy, *internal disputes rooted in personal honour threaten the entire war*

*effort* (Kirk 45). In addition, Trojan leaders like Priam and Hector display *a dynastic system in which familial loyalty and civic duty converge*, evidenced by Hector's poignant conversation with his wife, Andromache, when he states he *cannot desert the battlefield despite the ominous fate awaiting him* (Homer, *Iliad* 6.441–446).

Historically, the poem is thought to reflect a cultural memory of *Mycenaean or early archaic Greek warfare*, wherein alliances arose from kinship, royal patronage, and mutual defense compacts (Nagy 210). These elements of the *Iliad* reveal *how war could shape, and be shaped by, rivalries, ambitions, and negotiations of power across various polities*.

Where the Ramayana tends to present a more cohesive monarchic order, the Greek world of Homer was politically fragmented, demanding delicate balancing acts among leaders whose personal grievances could imperil shared objectives (Finley 72).

## 1. Rationale for a Cross-Comparative Study

Despite their divergent cultural milieus, both epics mirror how wars can reshape communities, restructure political hierarchies, and test moral convictions. The *Ramayana* portrays the moral imperative to uphold dharma, while the *Iliad* foregrounds heroic honour and glory (*kleos*). A cross-comparative reading offers fresh insights into how seemingly distinct civilizations approach similar existential dilemmas: the justification of warfare, the responsibilities of leadership, and the moral constraints that define or limit acts of violence.

Furthermore, modern scholarship has increasingly advocated for interdisciplinary analyses, particularly

when studying epics that are nearsynchronous in global cultural memory. By exploring convergences and divergences, we gain a nuanced understanding of how war functions as a socio-political phenomenon in ancient narratives.

The *Ramayana* and the *Iliad* emerge from distinct cultural spheres, yet each explores the universal interplay of war, morality, and political order. In the *Ramayana*, *moral codes inform policy* and battle tactics to a remarkable degree. Dharma is not a mere philosophical construct but a guiding force shaping every conflict, alliance, and resolution (van Nooten 120). In the *Iliad*, the heroic code prioritizes time, compelling warriors to engage in combat and earn glory, even at the risk of fracturing collective unity (Redfield 35). Comparing these epics discloses how different social frameworks, *monarchy vs. coalition, divine sanction vs. divine partisanship*, nonetheless converge on the question of how war rearranges social and moral hierarchies.

In the *Ramayana*, divine interventions consistently uphold a singular moral principle: the restoration of *dharma*. The gods, acting as guardians of cosmic order, ensure that righteousness prevails in every conflict, and their appearances or blessings carry a sacred, purposeful weight (Valmiki, *Ramayana* 1.15–20).

By contrast, in Homer's *Iliad*, the gods frequently intercede in mortal affairs out of personal rivalry, favouritism, or grudges, creating a theatre in which human effort and valour are ultimately overshadowed by divine caprice (Homer, *Iliad* 1.530–545). Here, mortal warriors become “mere puppets” (cf. lines above) subjected to the shifting tides of fate—tides that are moved less by moral imperative and more by the gods' personal agendas.

In the *Ramayana*, **Hanuman** exemplifies the sacred intent of divine intervention by assuming a semi-divine role to assist Lord Rama, thereby demonstrating both devotion and moral fortitude (Valmiki, *Ramayana*, Sundara Kanda 1.43–55). Even **Brahma**, the creator deity, bestows boons on mortals in ways that reinforce the cosmic order, ensuring that virtues such as courage, loyalty, and righteousness are ultimately rewarded (Valmiki, *Ramayana* 1.25–30). These instances highlight a consistent and sacred motivation: the gods act to uphold *dharma*.

By contrast, Homeric deities in the *Iliad* frequently take sides or deceive mortals out of jealousy or personal fondness, thereby exacerbating the conflict. **Ares**, the god of war, is notorious for fighting alongside the Trojans, reflecting his capricious nature rather than any universal moral code (Homer, *Iliad* 5.498–502). **Athena** deceives Hector by appearing as Deiphobus—his brother—and lures him into a fatal duel with Achilles (Homer, *Iliad* 22.226–247). **Apollo**, disguising himself as Euphorbus, strikes Patroclus and paves the way for Hector's final, fatal blow, fulfilling a prophecy shaped more by divine rivalry than by any moral precept (Homer, *Iliad* 16.789–867).

Even **Zeus**, the king of the gods, cannot escape charges of favoritism. He promises Thetis that he will restore Achilles' honor by tipping the scales of battle in favor of the Trojans until Achilles reconciles with Agamemnon (Homer, *Iliad* 1.500–530). When Hera confronts Thetis in Book 4, her words illuminate the gods' personal investments in mortal affairs:

**“The white-armed Hera answered with words:**

**‘Most dread of gods, Thetis, why do you grieve so alone? ...’” (*Iliad* 4.27–30)**

Far from implementing any coherent or universal morality, these Olympian interventions reflect a tapestry of grudges, love affairs, and rivalry, often escalating the war rather than restraining it (Homer, *Iliad* 4.27–30). Consequently, the heroes—Hector, Patroclus, and even Achilles—find themselves mere instruments in divine scheming. This starkly contrasts with the guiding principle found in the *Ramayana*, where gods intervene primarily to preserve the moral order and ensure that virtue triumphs over vice.

Such a comparative lens is pertinent in modern scholarship. Conflicts around the world often raise parallel issues: the justification of warfare, *the pursuit of ethical constraints amid violence, and the forging of strategic alliances when confronted with large-scale threats*. By juxtaposing the *Ramayana* and the *Iliad*, one uncovers the extent to which moral imperatives and political exigencies have historically interwoven in shaping civilizations' approaches to war. This cross-cultural dialogue is further enriched by contemporary theoretical frameworks, which help decode the deep cultural codes embedded within these epics (Pollock 101).

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

### A. Structuralism

Literary scholars, anthropologists, and historians have engaged diverse theories to interpret ancient epics. Structural anthropology, as proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, suggests that *myths and epics function through systems of binary oppositions, such as good vs. evil or duty vs. desire* (Lévi-Strauss 112). Applied to these texts, one observes Rama's

unwavering commitment to righteousness in opposition to Ravana's brazen disregard for cosmic norms, while Achilles's wrath stands as a force that both subverts and reaffirms Greek honour codes.

Drawing on structuralist approaches, the article examines how each epic's narrative structure reflects and informs the social and political order. From a Lévi-Straussian perspective, the repeated motifs, such as the hero's quest, the divine-human interface, and the conflict between opposing moral stands, reveal cultural codes underlying each text (Lévi-Strauss 112). These structures can be "mapped" to illustrate how societies perceive war and hierarchy.

### B. Postcolonial and Comparative Literary Theory

Additionally, postcolonial and comparative literary theories, though more recent in origin, offer useful tools for questioning how power dynamics and cultural identities are constructed or contested in these texts (Spivak 285). While postcolonial frameworks might seem anachronistic when applied to ancient material, they can illuminate questions about subaltern voices, marginal characters, and *the ways in which epic literature served the interests of dominant groups* (Pollock 101). The lens thus shifts from the heroic main stage to the experiences of lesser-known figures, like the foils and marginalized characters in the Ramayana or the rank-and-file soldiers in the Iliad, who are nonetheless indispensable to the socio-political narrative of war.

Postcolonial theory, while typically applied to more recent texts, can illuminate how cultural identities and power dynamics are asserted or contested in ancient narratives (Spivak 23). A comparative literary lens encourages us to read the

Ramayana and Iliad on equal

footing, acknowledging the specificity of each tradition while seeking universal themes of conflict, power, and morality.

The foil characters, often referred to as the "lesser," serve a significant role in literature. They highlight the virtues or vices of the protagonist, thereby creating a deeper understanding of the central characters. Although these characters influence the development of the plot, they are seldom given the opportunity to grow; they remain the marginalized figures (Author, line 1-3).

For instance, in the Ramayana, characters such as Kandarp, Nisad, Trisanku, Mahodaya, Shakumba, and Sunahsepa represent marginalized figures who contribute to the narrative but remain in the background. Similarly, in Greek literature, Thersites serves as a cautionary tale of insubordination. His character exists to demonstrate the consequences faced by those who criticize war efforts in an unheroic manner. Another example is Dolon, a Trojan spy who volunteered for a night expedition in hopes of obtaining the horses and chariots of Achilles, further illustrating the limited yet pivotal roles of such characters in shaping the plot.

### C. Myth-ritual Theory

Myth-ritual theory, exemplified by Walter Burkert, posits that *epics are manifestations of communal rites and beliefs, serving to confirm or challenge societal values* (Burkert 55). In the Ramayana, the religious ritualism, including sacrifices and invocation of divine weapons, underscores a cosmic significance *that legitimizes*

*Rama's war*. In the Iliad, sacrificial offerings to the gods reveal an archaic Greek worldview in which divine approval or disapproval tangibly affects battlefield outcomes (Burkert 71).

Proponents of myth-ritual theory suggest that epics serve both as narratives and as ritual frameworks that codify societal values. Warfare in epics is thus not merely an event; *it is a performative moment in which the collective reaffirms or redefines social norms* (Burkert 55). In the Ramayana, the war affirms dharma and the rightful restoration of Rama, while in the Iliad, the war underscores the hero's pursuit of glory and the inevitable tragedy that accompanies it.

## Literature Review

In both Indian and Greek epic traditions, scholars have devoted significant attention to the interplay between warfare, social organization, and moral codes. This section synthesizes five major strands of research that inform the socio-political dimensions of war in the Ramayana and the Iliad.

### 1. Political Readings of Ancient Epics

Sheldon Pollock's extensive examination of the Ramayana contends that the text articulates not only moral narratives but also sophisticated theories of governance (Pollock 103). Pollock argues that Valmiki's emphasis on Rama's kingly virtues *demonstrates a paradigmatic model for leadership*, which in turn influences broader socio-political discourse in ancient and medieval India (Pollock 105). M. I. Finley's study of the archaic Greek world, on the other hand, emphasizes the centrality of council gatherings (agora) in the Iliad, where issues of honour and political expediency are debated (Finley 69). These assemblies illuminate how *power is negotiated among warrior-chieftains, reflecting an early form of collective decision-making in ancient Greece* (Finley 72).

### 2. Social Hierarchies and Class Structures

Robert P. Goldman's philological analysis of the Ramayana delves into the varna system, highlighting how warfare primarily falls under the jurisdiction of the kshatriya or warrior class (Goldman 94). Yet, his work also indicates that the alliances with vanaras demonstrate a functional, if temporary, *transcendence of rigid social boundaries in times of collective crisis* (Goldman 97). In his study of the Iliad, G. S. Kirk underscores the aristocratic ethos that pervades Homeric society, noting that while rank-and-file warriors exist, the text *privileges the exploits, conflicts, and reconciliations of elite heroes* such as Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector (Kirk 45). This focus mirrors a broader Greek cultural template wherein aristocracy underpins both social prestige and martial duty.

### 3. Moral and Ethical Analyses

B. A. van Nooten's work on the Ramayana characterizes Valmiki's epic as a grand exposition of dharma, arguing that *warfare becomes an acceptable, even necessary, instrument for restoring cosmic balance, provided it aligns with righteous purposes* (van Nooten 120). The debate surrounding Vali's killing, for instance, exemplifies how nuanced discussions of moral transgressions are woven into the narrative (van Nooten 124). James Redfield's comparative examination of the Iliad reveals a distinct heroic code centered on personal honour (time) and communal glory (kleos), elements that often catalyze conflict and shape battlefield ethics (Redfield 38). These moral imperatives, while lending grandeur to martial endeavours, can also lead to tragic outcomes, *highlighting the tension*

between heroic aspiration and collective welfare (Redfield 41).

#### 4. Role of the Divine and Religious Frameworks

James L. Fitzgerald and Arvind Sharma argue that the Ramayana deploys *divine interventions as a means to legitimize Rama's mission*, framing warfare as a sacred duty that supports the cosmic order (Fitzgerald and Sharma 58). By contrast, Walter Burkert's anthropological insights into ancient Greek religion suggest that

Homer's gods, while integral to human affairs, exhibit partisan loyalties, spurring or hindering warriors as extensions of divine rivalries (Burkert 71). The result is a more unpredictable divine landscape in the Iliad, one where fate, personal valour, and *divine caprice intersect in shaping the fortunes of individuals and states* (Burkert 75).

#### 5. Comparative Epics Scholarship

Paula Richman and Christopher Minkowski champion a broader cross-cultural approach, noting that epics from different geographies often contain parallel motifs of banishment, retribution, and the testing of moral codes (Richman and Minkowski 149). They posit that comparing these narratives highlights universal questions of leadership, justice, and collective identity that *arise whenever societies confront large-scale violence* (Richman and Minkowski 151).

Similarly, Gregory Nagy's work on Greek epic poetry demonstrates that martial values in Homeric tales serve as reflective devices through which communities *examine the costs and obligations of warfare*, a perspective that resonates with the dharmic inquiries in the Ramayana (Nagy 210). Such comparative insights underscore that, while distinct cultural and religious frameworks shape each epic's narrative, certain core concerns, like the

legitimacy of warfare and the ethical burden on leaders, transcend specific historical and geographical boundaries (Nagy 213).

## Results

This section distills key points derived from a close reading of the original texts and a synthesis of scholarly perspectives. The analysis underscores both convergences and divergences in how warfare is conceptualized and practiced in the Ramayana and the Iliad.

### 1. Alignment of Warfare with Moral Codes

In the Ramayana, the concept of dharma is paramount. Even amid war, Rama and his allies often seek to uphold moral righteousness. For instance, Valmiki's Ramayana (Yuddha Kanda 36.31) states in Sanskrit: "धर्मो हि परमं बलम्" (dharmo hi paramam balam, "Righteousness is the supreme power").

In the Iliad, moral or ethical considerations revolve around the heroic code, aretē (excellence) and timē (honour). Warrior conduct is measured against communal expectations of bravery and loyalty.

### 2. Social and Class Implications

The Ramayana demonstrates how warfare implicates individuals across varna lines; even vanaras (forestdwelling allies) become integral to the war effort. This alliance highlights a fluid aspect to class and species boundaries when fighting a just war.

In the Iliad, warfare remains predominantly the domain of the aristocracy, with foot soldiers generally relegated to the background. The text focuses on noble heroes like Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector, reflecting a more rigid social stratification.

### 3. Political Alliances and Hierarchies

Rama's war against Ravana underscores alliances that transcend typical political frameworks, such as forming a pact with Sugriva's vanara kingdom. This suggests a more inclusive or strategic approach to forging alliances.

The Iliad presents a fragmented coalition of Greek city-states under Agamemnon's leadership. Political tensions simmer beneath the surface, notably in the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, revealing how hierarchical power struggles can undercut unity.

### 4. Role of Divine Intervention

Divine sanction appears crucial to both texts, but the Ramayana attaches moral weight to such interventions. Rama is an avatar of Vishnu, signifying a divine mandate to vanquish evil.

In the Iliad, gods intervene in more partisan ways, Athena favoring the Greeks, Aphrodite supporting the Trojans, etc. Their interventions often complicate the socio-political situation rather than offering moral clarity.

### 5. Outcome and Reconfiguration of the SocialPolitical Order

The victory in the Ramayana restores Rama to the throne, signifying a return to cosmic and earthly order. The war validates a social-political system aligned with dharma.

The fall of Troy in the Iliad leads to a dispersal of Greek victors, many of whom face personal tragedies. Politically, the war shatters existing structures, paving the way for new power configurations in the post-war Greek world.

## Findings

**1. Universalizing and Localizing Elements** Both epics illustrate war as a moment of sociopolitical upheaval, yet each anchors itself in distinct moral

ontologies. While the Ramayana uses war to reinforce a universal moral order rooted in dharma, the Iliad treats war as a stage for individual heroism within a communal but often unstable political framework. **2. Socio-Political Agency**

Social hierarchies directly influence who commands, who fights, and who shapes the discourse on war. In the Ramayana, kshatriya responsibilities are foregrounded, but alliances break down varna barriers when necessary. In the Iliad, the aristocratic code dictates battlefield conduct, and the assembly of warriors is a microcosm of Greek socio-political life. **3. Tension between Individual and Collective**

### Goals

Rama's war is propelled by both personal duty (rescuing Sita, upholding dharma) and collective responsibility (protecting kingdoms from Ravana's tyranny). Achilles and other Greek heroes in the Iliad oscillate between personal honour and the collective goal of sacking Troy. These tensions underpin the political dialogues within the epics.

### 4. Durability of Moral and Social Codes

The conclusion of each war signals the resilience (or fragility) of moral and social codes. In the Ramayana, dharma triumphs as a guiding principle, whereas in the Iliad, the very concept of heroic honour is tarnished by the war's toll. This contrast reveals culturally specific conceptions of how and why societies mend or reconstruct themselves post-conflict.

## Discussion

**1. War as a Vehicle for Social Transformation** In both the Ramayana and the Iliad, war acts as a disruptive event that pushes societies to recalibrate their moral and political frameworks. While the

Ramayana champions the restoration of dharma through military victory, the Iliad shows a more ambiguous aftermath where victory itself becomes pyrrhic. Thus, war is not purely destructive but can be seen as transformative, compelling political systems to adapt in the face of existential threats.

## 2. Comparative Insights into Leadership

The epics highlight the burdens of leadership, Rama and Agamemnon embody kingly authority but are also morally and psychologically tested.

Rama's adherence to dharma sets a high bar for ethical conduct, whereas Agamemnon's failings in diplomacy and humility serve as cautionary lessons. Yet both must navigate alliances, broker power, and address ethical dilemmas inherent to war.

## 3. The Moral Imperatives of Warfare

In ancient Indian thought, war is permissible under dharmic guidelines, defending righteousness or eradicating evil. The Ramayana posits that moral constraints remain intact even in warfare (though certain episodes, like the slaying of Vali, spark debate regarding moral ambiguities). The Iliad underscores that war is justified by honour and retribution, yet the epic is critical of the human cost. Achilles's reconciliation with Priam in Book 24 highlights a human dimension that transcends heroic vendettas.

**4. Divine Endorsement and Human Agency** While both epics integrate deities into their narratives, their roles differ in function and implication. In the Ramayana, the divine presence largely legitimates Rama's cause, reinforcing moral clarity. In the Iliad, the gods serve as meddling figures reflecting the conflicting passions of humans on a cosmic scale. These differences underscore how ancient societies

construed the interplay between the sacred and the secular realms of war.

## 5. Relevance to Contemporary Discourses on War

Modern geopolitical conflicts similarly involve questions of legitimacy, alliance-building, and ethical boundaries. The Ramayana and the Iliad remind us that war's socio-political dimensions are deeply entangled with moral imperatives. Contemporary leaders, much like ancient ones, grapple with balancing national interests, ethical responsibilities, and public opinion.

## Conclusion

This cross-comparative study reaffirms that the Ramayana and the Iliad, despite their distinct cultural contexts, share profound thematic intersections in their portrayals of warfare as a complex socio-political phenomenon. The texts illuminate how social hierarchies, moral codes, and political structures are stressed, tested, and sometimes reconfigured by the exigencies of conflict. For the Ramayana, the restoration of cosmic and earthly order through war emphasizes the primacy of dharma. For the Iliad, the Trojan War both upholds and questions the heroic codes that define Greek aristocratic society.

In both epics, alliances and power struggles reveal that war is more than a matter of strategy, it is a crucible for redefining communal identities, forging new social compacts, and challenging moral beliefs. Crucially, warfare in these narratives fosters reflection on the merits and limits of human agency, tempered by divine intervention or moral codes. This comparative lens not only enriches our understanding of ancient epic traditions but also

resonates with contemporary discussions on the legitimacy and ethics of war. The lessons gleaned, on leadership, moral accountability, and social cohesion, underscore the timeless nature of these

ancient texts, situating them as enduring guideposts for examining the socio-political ramifications of human conflict.

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