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The *Mahābhārata* Similes and Their Significance for Comparative Epic Studies*

The ancient Greek epics are frequently treated by European scholars as models of epic poetry. However, from a universal perspective, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* represent a particular type of epic poetry: a mature, or a “classical heroic” epic. This is the reason why *Homer’s* poems cannot be used for an investigation into the origins of epic poetry and the early stages in the development of poetic means (particularly, of figures of speech). In search of data bearing on the origin and early history of epic poetry one should turn to the surviving archaic oral traditions and to those ancient written epics which preserve in their poetic systems some archaic, pre-classical elements.

The *Mahābhārata* (Mbh) is an epic poem which went through the stage of the classical heroic epic and was partly transformed into a religious didactic *épopée*. But, as I tried to demonstrate in some of my previous works,¹ during the process the Sanskrit epic paradoxically retained some features of all the three main historical stages of development: archaic, classical and late. The Mbh, in contrast to the Greek epics, preserves a considerable number of archaic elements that may help us reconstruct the earliest stages in the development of the epic genre. In this paper an attempt will be made at demonstrating how the study of Sanskrit

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¹ See, e.g.: Y. V a s s i l k o v, *The Mahābhārata’s Typological Definition Reconsidered*, “Indo-Iranian Journal”, vol. 38, no. 3, July 1995, pp. 249–255.

epic similes enables us to trace back the development of this figure of speech nearly to the point of its genesis.

I took the information on the Homeric similes mostly from the old and longforgotten, but extremely interesting and rich in ideas article by the classical scholar, Olga Freidenberg (Freidenberg 1946).² In her opinion, the figure of comparison can, historically, be traced to the ancient parallelism which implied the identity between some elements belonging to different aspects, or, as we would say now, different “codes” of the cosmogonic myth.³ The Mbh data seem to confirm the suggestion that at least some of the popular epic similes have developed from the statements of mythological identity. Another important conclusion of Olga Freidenberg is that in the course of time, as the rational way of thinking gains dominance and destroys the system of mythological identifications, the folklore starts to use old patterns in order to build its similes. But as soon as the simile as a figure of speech has been born, and the marker of comparison “like”, “as” has appeared to link two members of the former mythological identity, any mythological connection between the subject and the object of comparison — i.e., between *upameya* and *upamāna*, in Indian terminology — has ceased to exist. As we shall see, the Mbh data contradict this assertion.

The present study is based primarily on the material of the *Kaṇṇaparvan* (KP), one of the “battle books” of the Mbh (with comparative material drawn from the other books of the Mbh). It can be assumed that the KP more or less authentically represents the basic poetic technique used by the Sanskrit heroic poetry for the description of fighting.

There are 761 similes in 3871 stanzas in the KP, which indicates that every fifth stanza contains a simile. The rate is only slightly bigger than in *Rāmāyaṇa*’s *Aranya* and *Yuddha kāṇḍas* which are rich in descriptions of fighting (388 similes in 2066 stanzas of *Aranyakāṇḍa*⁴). But if we take into account that in some “nonbattle” chapters of the book (in the direct speech of the heroes, in the epic “catalogues” etc.) there are almost no similes at all, that apart from the similes in the battle chapters there are also some metaphors which differ from the similes only in the absence of the comparison’s marker — we shall have to

² O. Freidenberg, *Proiskhozhdenie epicheskogo sravneniya (na materiale «Iliady»)*, in: *Trudy jubilejnoj nauchnoj sessii. Sektsija filologicheskikh nauk*, Leningrad 1946. There is a dissertation in English bearing on this outstanding scholar: K.M. Moss, *Olga Mikhailovna Freidenberg: Soviet Mythologist in a Soviet Context*, Diss. Cornell University, 1984.

³ In other words, an epic hero’s fight with an enemy is nothing but a transformation or a metaphor of the primaeval cosmic fight; any image among the epic objects of comparison (such as a beast of prey tormenting an animal, or a violent wind breaking a tree) is merely another metaphor of the same cosmic myth.

⁴ See: J. Brockington, *Figures of Speech in the Rāmāyaṇa*, “Journal of the American Oriental Society”, vol. 27, no. 4, 1977, pp. 441; J. Brockington, *Righteous Rāma. The Evolution of an Epic*, Delhi 1984, p. 33.

admit that the battle narrative in the KP is extremely rich in comparative imagery.

In contrast with Book 3 (*Āraṇyakaparvan*) which contains texts of different genres and, consequently, the subjects and objects of its similes are various and heterogenous, the KP consists predominantly of the battle narrative and it can be said, by way of generalization, that its similes are more or less homogeneous or even that they have one common subject. This common *upameya* for all similes of the KP's battle narrative is the image of the epic battle with the figures of its participants etc. Consequently, the *upamānas* in the KP are more homogenous than the *upamānas* in the *Āraṇyakaparvan*. In the same way as the above-mentioned "common *upameya*" of the KP's similes contains an inner conflict, an antithesis (the Pāṇḍavas' army fight with the army of the Kauravas, a hero triumphs over an adversary or is defeated by him), the *upamānas* too inevitably contain a conflict which may take some particular forms (the fight between *devas* and *asuras*, between a certain god and his mythic adversary; the tormenting of an animal by a beast of prey; a violent thrust of nature's elements [wind, fire] causing damage to the woods or mountains; rarely — a man's everyday activity, destructive to nature, e.g. woodcutting [8, 12.39; 16.31; 33.5; 60.5; 65.29] etc.). This gives us an opportunity to classify the variety of the *upamānas* (objects of comparison) in the KP into several basic semantic groups.

According to O. Freidenberg, the Homeric similes are divided into: 1. "animalistic"; 2. "cosmic" (referring to nature's elements); 3. "plant" similes (most often — a tree broken by the wind, i.e. the passive aspect of the same "cosmic" or naturalistic comparison) and 4., supposedly the latest by their origin, "cultural" (i.e., the similes referring to everyday life and work processes). The KP material provides us with a similar classification, but there is a major difference: in Homer's epic the largest semantic group of similes with reference to their objects is the one involving animals, while gods and goddesses appear in similes extremely seldom,⁵ if at all. According to O. Freidenberg, it is typical that "the subject of comparison is mythological, whereas the object is realistic. Athena standing in a cloud is likened to a real rainbow... But when the mythological rainbow, goddess Rainbow Iris, appears, she is likened to snow falling from the cloud, to the cold hailstorm."⁶ This peculiar situation may be linked with the fact that gods and goddesses in the Greek epics became maximally anthropomorphized, whereas the mythology in them already had become distinctly poetic in its nature.

In the Mbh the situation is entirely different. The most numerous and semantically most significant group of similes in its battle narrative is barely represented in Homer's epics. This group, on which we shall concentrate in this paper, consists of mythological similes, i.e. the similes which use as their

⁵ Brockington 1977, op. cit., p. 444.

⁶ Freidenberg, op. cit., p. 107.

upamāna images of explicitly mythological nature. In the KP, 292 similes (out of total 761) belong to this group, while “animal similes”, H o m e r’s favourites,⁷ constitute only 76.

Within this group of mythological similes, the largest sub-group is formed by the similes which somehow refer in their *upamānas* to the so-called “basic”, or “principal”, myth of Indo-European and archaic Indo-Aryan mythology: the myth of the Thunder-God as Dragon-slayer, in Indian garb — the myth of Indra’s fight with Vṛtra, or of the fight between *devas* and *asuras*, in all its details, variants and transformations. The epic battle is constantly likened to the cosmic (cosmogonic) fight in the mythical time, the epic hero is compared to the victorious Indra, his adversary — to Vṛtra or to any other of Indra’s demonic enemies (Vṛtra’s counterparts). Again it can be said, by way of generalization, that all similes of this sub-group have one common *upamāna*, which is, in short, the myth of Indra-Vṛtra fight. The content of this “common *upamāna*” perfectly coincides with the mythical story of the cosmic fight which is repeated many times in the Mbh (e.g., 3, 99; 5, 9; 12, 272–274; 14, 11 etc.) as a kind of mythological “digressions” which, at first glance, have no direct logical connection with the events of the heroic narrative. But, according to some scholars, the constant repetition of the “basic” myth’s story fulfills a specific function: it serves to stress the “paradigmatic” nature of the “basic myth” in relation to the epic action.⁸ As we shall see, the function of the mythological similes, referring to the “basic myth”, is similar or the same. These similes serve to remind the bard’s audience from time to time that the epic action is based on the pattern of the “basic myth”, or even, in some sense, is identical to the action of this myth.

Sometimes the Mbh (KP) similes simply liken the battle on the Field of Kuru to the primaeval mythic battle of the gods with the *asuras* (one of the most popular formulas: “Now there started a battle between Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas similar to that which took place between gods and *asuras* in mythical time [*purā*]”⁹). But the epic is more interested in the heroes’ individual actions and destinies: therefore the hero fighting his enemies is more often likened to Indra, the Thunder-god, fighting hosts of the *asuras* (8, 12.9; 10.33; 14.6; 37.23; 51.49), or personally their chief Vṛtra (e.g., 8, 4.52; 48.14; 65.7), or one of Vṛtra’s “counterparts”, such as, e.g., Śambara (8, 9.21; 52.24; 64.8), Jambha (8, 9.27; 55.63; 62.18), Namuci (8, 62.56, 57; 65.19), Bala (8, 5.43; 55.9; 66.30), or Bali Vairocana (8, 63.5; 65.5), Tāraka (8, 37.23). A simile sometimes refers to a particular episode in Indra’s endless fight against *asuras*, e.g. his fight with them over *amṛta* (8, 43.7). The hero fighting his enemy (enemies) is often

⁷ In the list of the most frequent similes in H o m e r, used by J.L. Brockington, there are 143 animal similes and only 14 similes “involving gods and goddesses” (Brockington 1977, op. cit., p. 444).

⁸ S. Neveleva, *Makhabharata: Izuchenie indijskogo eposa*, Nauka, Moscow 1991, p. 86.

⁹ Cf. 8, 8.1; 36.62; 57.67; 60.27 etc.

supported by his allies and friends in the same way “as Indra was supported” in his struggle by his mythological helpers — Maruts (8, 60.26), or Aśvins (8, 45.71), or simply “by the hosts of gods” (8, 12.23). Sometimes a pair of heroes is likened to a pair of triumphant gods: Karna and Śalya, appointed to act as his charioteer, resemble Śiva and his charioteer Brahmā attacking the “Triple city” of the *asuras* (8, 23.5; 24.125, 127; 25.7), Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as his charioteer in their fight against Kauravas are constantly likened to Indra and Viṣṇu respectively fighting the *asuras* (6, 55.77; 7, 124.6–9; 8, 68.53–54; 68.62). In the latter case the mythological similes reflect the historical dynamics in the alignment of two members of the pair. Originally, Indra was the main *asura*-fighter, while Viṣṇu played the role of his mythological assistant. With the development of Hinduism, Viṣṇu turned into a more important figure and replaced Indra in his function of the chief *asura*-slayer. In KP there are several similes which attribute the victory over *asuras* to Viṣṇu alone (“Having stricken them down, like Viṣṇu — *daityas* and *dānavas* in the days of yore, entrust the earth to the king Yudhiṣṭhira, as Viṣṇu — to Indra”; [8, 51.53; cf. 8, 6.30; 35.34; 51.31, 54; 55.5]).

Rarely another great Hindu god, Śiva (without Brahmā, 8, 15.18; 65.36), or Skanda, the Hindu god of war (8, 6.46), appears as the *asura*-fighter,¹⁰ but the corresponding myths are, in fact, merely late Hinduized versions of the archaic myth or the episodes in the basic picture of the cosmic battle between *devas* and *asuras*. It is the archaic Indra-Vṛtra myth which plays the principal role in mythological similes and absolutely prevails by the number of references.¹¹

Practically, any character can be likened to the victorious Indra if only he at this particular point in the narrative overpowers his opponent; the text of the KP associates with this god Arjuna (many times, see below) and other Pāṇḍava heroes (Bhīma [8, 34.42; 43.7, 74; 51.49; 60.30; 61.17], Sātyaki [8, 9.27], Pāṇḍya [8, 16.64; 15.8], Nakula [8, 62.18], Prativindhya [8, 10.33]), but also Kauravas (such as Duryodhana [8, 4.105], Karna [8, 5.31; 6.29; 6.42; 22.38; 26.19; 32.31; 33.40; 43.31; 52.6 etc.], Śakuni [8, 18.40], Kṛpa [8, 18.60]; in some of these cases the Kauravas’ opponents, Pāṇḍavas, are likened, respectively, to the *asuras* suffering defeat). The majority of “basic myth” similes are situational, merely implying that the winner resembles Indra (or other god) whereas the loser resembles an *asura*. The tertium comparationis (*sādhāraṇadharmā*, common feature of the subject and object) in such similes is a superhuman victorious might (and/or its opposite). In fact, such a simile is just another way of saying that a hero is god-like in his might and prowess. These similes are the artistic means which serve to idealise

¹⁰ The similes which liken Karna and his charioteer Śalya to Śiva (as the *Asura*-slayer) and his charioteer Brahmā deserve to be mentioned separately. The myth of Śiva and Brahmā destroying Tripura is inserted in the KP (8, 24.1–124) as a kind of a “paradigm” or a “sacral precedent” in relation to the story of Karna and Śalya. No wonder that the similes likening the two heroes to the respective gods seem to frame the text of the myth (8, 23.5; 24.125, 127; 25.7).

¹¹ Cf. J. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, Brill, Leiden 1998, pp. 99, 362.

the heroes. That was why in our joint paper with my colleague Svetlana Neveleva on the subject we suggested referring the “basic myth similes” of this kind to the category of “artistic” or “idealising” similes.¹²

But there are also “constant” comparisons which systematically liken a particular hero to a particular god and imply that there is some mythological connection, perhaps even a relation of identity between the hero and the god. Firstly, there is still a general tendency towards likening Pāṇḍavas, much more often than Kauravas, to the gods. In the KP we find 75 similes likening the Pāṇḍava brothers to the victorious gods (most often — Arjuna to Indra), and only 32 similes likening Kauravas to the gods. As a rule, Kauravas are likened to the gods in the boastful speeches of Kaurava heroes or in the battle descriptions by the Kaurava bard Saṁjaya when he speaks of the Kauravas’ temporary successes. This fact only adds significance to the tendency towards likening the Pāṇḍavas to the gods, a tendency, which was obviously motivated by the fact that the Pāṇḍavas had been perceived by the epic singers and their audience to be children of the gods, their partial incarnations and, in fact, to be the gods themselves in human form, in earthly disguise.¹³ Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as his charioteer are constantly, as was pointed out above, likened to Indra and Viṣṇu respectively (6, 55.77; 7, 124.6–9; 8, 68.53–54; 68.62),¹⁴ and there is no doubt that since earliest times both have been thought to be the incarnations of the two gods, in fact, to be the gods themselves. In the KP Kṛṣṇa at least twice appears to be identified with Viṣṇu (“The *Creator of this world*, Kṛṣṇa himself guards his chariot...” 22.49; “The home of Yadus was guarded by the *younger brother of Indra* [Viṣṇu = Kṛṣṇa]...” 26.63).

As for Arjuna, who is, of all Mbh heroes, most often likened to Indra (see in the KP only: 8, 4.52–54; 5.43; 12.9, 66; 13.23; 14.6, 15, 23; 19.22; 37.23; 40.100; 47.12; 51.9; 52.24; 55.3, 9; 57.65; 62.56, 57; 63.5, 16, 19, 29, 63; 64.8, 11; 65.5, 7, 19, 37; 66.30; 68.52–54, 62), he is identical to Indra even in some old Vedic texts, like *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (2, 1.2.11: “Indra is also called Arjuna [= Phalguna, as follows from the context], this being his mystic name...”). Arjuna’s mythological

¹² Y. Vassilkov, S. Neveleva, *Rannjaja istorija epicheskogo sravnenija (na materiale VIII knigi “Makhabharaty”)*, in: *Problemy istoricheskoi poetiki literatur Vostoka*, Nauka, Moscow 1988, pp. 161, 173.

¹³ The sage Narada warns Duryodhana: “Bhīma, best of the warriors, mighty son of Vāyu, and Dhanamjaya, the son of Indra — whom will they not kill on the battlefield? Viṣṇu, Vāyu, Śakra, Dharma and the Āsvins — you will not dare even to face these gods!” (5, 103.32–33). Here we unmistakably see the equation of the heroes with their “heavenly fathers”. It would be tempting to interpret the passage in the light of the epic view according to which the father regenerates himself in his son (see, e.g. 3, 13.61–62). According to another version of their mythological kinship, the five Pāṇḍavas, as is well-known, are “five Indras” born on earth (see, e.g. 1, 189.33).

¹⁴ There is one “situational” exception from this rule: in 8, 12.16 Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, appearing in one chariot in the battlefield, are compared with Śiva and Brahmā as an ideal pair of a noble chariot-warrior and his charioteer.

connection and, in a sense, identity to Indra in the early layer of the Mbh's content is indisputable. Arjuna repeats or reproduces in the epic plane many mythical feats of Indra: he recaptures Virāṭa's cattle herds, stolen by Kauravas, in the same way as Indra recaptured the cows from the Paṇis. Twice he performs a strange act, which the epic narrator calls "similar to the feat of Indra": Arjuna pierces the earth with an arrow, and a spring spurts out of the hole (6, 22–25; 7, 75.55–56). This is unmistakably an analogy to the ancient myth (or a motif, an episode in the "basic myth") about the "liberation of waters" by Indra, well-known from the *R̥gveda*. Arjuna inherits and possesses some "historical" attributes of Indra (his chariot on which he fought the *asuras*, his weapon etc.) which serves additionally to stress the links between the elements of the epic and mythological planes. Direct analogies between Arjuna's acts and the mythic feats of Indra are constant in the KP (e.g.: "O Arjuna, this feat of yours, which you accomplished in this battle, is a deed worthy both of you and of the King of the gods himself in heaven" — 8, 14.58).

Especially noteworthy is the use of Arjuna-Indra comparisons in the chapters 63–68 of the KP describing Arjuna's final duel with Karṇa. Alf Hiltebeitel seems to be the first who noticed the unusual concentration in these chapters of the similes referring to Vṛtra and Namuci.¹⁵ He also points out that "in this particular duel comparisons are made to Indra's combats with many other enemies besides Namuci and Indra". Arjuna and Karṇa "are compared to Indra and Bali (8, 63.5; 65.5), Indra and Śambara (63.19 and 63; 64.8), Indra and Jambha (64.11) and Indra and Bala (66.30)."¹⁶ But all these myths are merely versions of the "basic" Indra-Vṛtra myth, all Indra's opponents are only counterparts of the asura Vṛtra. What is important is that Arjuna in all these similes is constantly likened to the *Asura*-slayer. Let us mention all such similes in chapters 63–68 successively:

63.5 — Arjuna and Karṇa are likened to Indra and (Bali) Vairocana;

63.16 — to Indra and Vṛtra;

63.19 — to Indra and Śambara;

63.29 — to Indra and Vṛtra;

63.30, 63.63 — to Indra (Śakra) and Śambara;

63.31, 64.8 — to Indra (Vāsava) and Śambara;

64.11 — to Indra and Jambha;

65.5 — to Indra and (Bali) Vairocana;

65.7 — to Indra and Vṛtra;

¹⁵ "...As a glance at Sørensen's *Index* will show, the description of Arjuna and Karṇa's duel that appears in the Northern recension... includes five out of the forty-two references to Vṛtra that occur in all the four battle *parvans* and four of the ten references that are made in the same immense span to Namuci"; A. Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle. Krishna in the Mahābhārata*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca – London 1976, p. 262.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 262.

65.19 — to Indra (Śakra) and Namuci;

65.37 — Arjuna looks like Indra (Lord of the Thirty [gods]);

66.30 — Arjuna, son of Indra, pierced the life-centers (*marmans*) of his opponent, like Indra with all his strength hitting Bala;

68.52 — Arjuna, after his victory over Karna, shines with his *tejas*, like Indra when he defeated Vṛtra;

68.53–54 — Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are likened to Indra and Viṣṇu standing on one chariot;

68.62 — Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa — the winners — are compared to Indra (Vāsava) and Viṣṇu (Acyuta).

We must also take into account several similes which were not included into the text of the Critical edition, but moved to the Appendices:¹⁷ Kṛṣṇa calls Arjuna to “slay Karna... as the Slayer of Vṛtra [slew] Namuci” (App. I, No 36, ll. 31–32), to “strike this one as Hari (Viṣṇu) struck Namuci” (Ap. I, No 41, ll. 19–20; here the reference is to a Vaiṣṇava transformation of the myth); in the end of the duel victorious Arjuna removes “[Karna’s] head as Indra [removed] Vṛtra’s with *vajra*” (8, 1159*). To summarise, all this can be characterised as the unprecedented concentration in the *adhyāyas* 63–68 of the “basic myth similes”, and primarily of the similes which hint at a mythological connection between Arjuna and the mythic Asura-slayer.

Towards the culmination-point of the battle narrative, with the growth of tension, this piling up of “basic myth similes” eventually resulted in the sudden awareness by the audience of the fact that the participants of the fight (Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa, Karna) were connected and, in fact, identical with the superhuman characters of the myth. First, Arjuna’s mythic connection with Indra comes to the bard’s mind in 66.30 (“son of Indra”¹⁸). And then, when the fight is over, after the tragic hero Karna was killed, comes a cathartic revelation. Kṛṣṇa addresses Arjuna with what A. Hiltebeitel calls “the most mystifying words of all”: “Slain by the Destroyer of Bala [= Indra] was Vṛtra, by you — Karna, o Dhananjaya! [From now on] people will relate, indeed, the [story of just one] Karna-Vṛtra murder! Vṛtra was slain in battle by the much-splendoured bearer of the *vajra*; by you, then, was Karna slain with bow and sharp arrows” (8, 69.2–3).¹⁹

A. Hiltebeitel interpreted the “mythical and secret” meaning of these words as a hint at the fact that both Vṛtra and Karna had been “undone by the same device: a violation of friendship.”²⁰ However, I am inclined to think that the

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 262–263.

¹⁸ See above; on the father–son relationship as a kind of identity see footnote 13.

¹⁹ I use here a slightly modified translation by A. Hiltebeitel. The key phrase *vadham vai karṇavṛtrābhyāṃ kathayiṣyanti mānavāḥ* in his interpretation runs as follows: “Men shall talk of just [one] death for Karna and Vṛtra”; op. cit., p. 263.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 264.

“mystical and secret”, “divine” knowledge revealed in these words is rather the knowledge of the mystical identity of Arjuna with Indra, the identity of his heroic feat with the primaeval deed of the Asura-slayer. The revelation of 96.2–3 was anticipated in 65.18 where a comparison of Arjuna with the Asura-slayer is combined with their direct identification. Before the last, decisive encounter of Arjuna with Karna, Kṛṣṇa (the worthy bearer of the “secret knowledge”) addresses the former: “With that resolve, with which you destroyed the weapons of *tamas*, (with which you) used to kill in different yugas (*yuge yuge*) horrible *rākṣasas*, *dambhodbhavas* and *asuras* — with that very resolve kill the Son of a *sūta* (= Karna)!”. This verse at least partly refers to Nara — Arjuna’s previous birth, a member of the pair Nara-Nārāyaṇa and a notorious fighter, particularly with king Dambhodhava and his soldiers (Mbh 5, 94). But Nara is nothing but another son (or a form) of Indra, and the pair Nara-Nārāyaṇa is considered by scholars to be “a counterpart of a mystical alliance between Indra and Viṣṇu”.²¹ In other words, Nara-Nārāyaṇa myth is merely a Vaiṣṇava version of the “basic” myth. That is why we see not a contradiction to the revelation of 8, 69.2–3 (Arjuna = Indra), but the development of the same theme, an additional exposure of the “secret knowledge” in Yudhiṣṭhira’s words (with reference to sages Nārada and Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana) further in the same final *adhyāya* of the KP: “...You two are the gods, Nara and Nārāyaṇa, two ancient Highest Puruṣas (*purāṇau puruṣottamau*), always busy with re-establishing *dharma* [in this world]...” (8, 69.22²²). The meaning is still the same: Arjuna is the cosmic Asura-slayer, with Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu) being his ally.

Parallel to the sequence of similes comparing (and identifying) Arjuna with Indra, there is in the description of Arjuna’s final duel with Karna (adh. 63–68) one more set of comparative imagery similar in character and functions. They are the similes likening Arjuna’s antagonist, Karna to the Sun, Sūrya. Here, again, we must specify that in the Mbh there is a widespread “artistic” or “idealising” simile comparing a hero to the sun as a natural object. The common feature of both the hero and the sun, on which such similes are based, can be splendour, brightness, greatness or “scorching heat”. The eternal struggle of the sun with rainclouds in the Indian sky provided bards with a perfect metaphor, or *upamāna*, for any epic battle. Any hero, according to the situation, can be compared with the sun dispelling darkness or, on the contrary, with the sun obscured by clouds. For example, it is said once that Arjuna “covered Aśvatthāman with arrows like the wind covers the rising sun with multitudes of huge clouds”, but at the next moment “Aśvatthāman himself obscured Arjuna

²¹ J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, Oosthoek, Utrecht, 1954, p. 161; cf. J. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata. 1. The Book of the Beginning*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1973, p. 435.

²² Cf. 8, 12.66 and also 1, 1.117; 210.5; 219.15; 5, 94.42.

and Vāsudeva with his arrows like the raincloud obscures the sun and the moon at the end of the hot season (*ātapānte*)” (8, 12.61–62). In specific situations Arjuna is likened to the sun 5 times (8, 29.13; 31.57; 57.62; 58.11; 59.9), Duryodhana — in 3 instances (4.97, 99; 51.33).

In sharp contrast, Karṇa is likened to the sun, or Sūrya, in as many as 26 instances, to which we could add 8 more instances when Karṇa is compared with Agni — i.e., Fire, identical to the Sun/Sūrya by its substance (e.g. 8.45.40: “Karṇa, as the fire burning without smoke, shone brightly while turning his enemies to ashes”²³). These similes hinting at Karṇa’s mythological kinship with the Sun-god and at his own superhuman, divine, nature tend to concentrate in the key points of the KP’s narrative. There are three such clusters in the KP. The first one is in the 6th *adhyāya* (8, 6.32, 40–41, 43), where the rite of Karṇa’s *abhiṣeka*, i.e. investiture into the rank of the commander-in-chief, is described. In this context the “solar” comparisons for Karṇa (“like the second Sun” in 6.43, etc.) appear to be predetermined by his mythological connection with Sūrya and are anticipated (probably even triggered) by the words close to the end of the previous chapter where Kauravas in general are designated as “the kings who came (down) to the earth in order to fight” (8, 5.99).

The second cluster of Karṇa-Sūrya similes is in the 26th *adhyāya*. This time the series of the “solar” similes for Karṇa is probably triggered by a direct reference to his mythological connection with Sūrya: before mounting the chariot and starting for the battle, Karṇa performs a rite of Sūrya-worship (*upasthāyaca bhāskaram*, 26.9). Immediately after it there follows a compact sequence of “solar” similes: when Karṇa mounts his chariot, with his charioteer Śalya already standing there, he looks like the Sun, “mounting the cloud in which the lightning shines” (26.11); Karṇa and Śalya, equal in brightness with the Sun and the Fire, standing in one chariot, shine “like Sūrya and Agni who have ascended the same cloud in the sky” (26.12); Karṇa “was stretching his fearful bow like the Sun spreads a halo of light” (26.14); “stationed on this excellent chariot, Karṇa, ... whose arrows were his rays, shone like the Radiant Sun (*aṁśumān*) standing on the top of the Mandara mountain” (26.15). On this chariot Karṇa attacked the enemies “striking them with his arrows like Savitar (Sun) strikes darkness with his rays” (26.73).

The third and the largest cluster of “solar” similes for Karṇa coincides with the concentration of “Indra similes” for Arjuna in *adhyāyas* 63–68, describing the final duel of the heroes. And again we can see that the appearance of “constant” mythological similes is preceded and, as can be suggested, provoked by the bard/narrator’s recollection of the epic action’s mythological background. In the first *adhyāya* of the sequence (8, 63) there is a passage (verses 30–41) in which the two planes, that of the epic action and that of myth, suddenly merge:

²³ Cf. 8, 26.13.

the gods and other mythological beings divide into two parties, some taking the side of Arjuna, others supporting Karṇa. Indra, Agni, Soma, Vāyu and many other gods join Arjuna, whereas on Karṇa's side we can see the *Ādityas*, i.e. the group of solar deities headed by Sūrya (63.39)!

In the subsequent description of the battle, Karṇa and Arjuna are likened respectively to the Sun and the Moon (64.9; cf. earlier: 63.4, 16). Several times (64.6, 7, 10) the heroes are compared to two dreadful suns standing in the sky at the time of the *pralaya* (64.10); but this simile betrays the influence of a different ("eschatological") set of comparative mythological imagery (see below). Then follows a series of similes which is definitely motivated by the presence in the narrator's mind of the "secret" knowledge about Karṇa's kinship/identity with Sūrya. In these similes Karṇa's doom is stressed by way of likening him to the evening sun which will inevitably go into the sunset: "Karṇa, who was shooting multitudes of arrows and had them for his rays, shone like the copper-red Sun (Creator of the Day), who, in a halo of scarlet rays, moves towards the Sunset mountain" (66.40). In the final episode of Karṇa's death we find a true crescendo of such similes: "The head of this military leader, equal in splendour to the rising sun, resembling the autumn sun in zenith, fell to the ground like the blood-red disc of the sun falls down from the Sunset mountain" (67.24); "Wounded on all sides, Karṇa's body bristled with arrows, as if the Radiant One (*aṁśumān*) were spreading his rays" (67.30). Then follows a complex metaphor: "With his fiery arrows-rays he burned the multitudes of enemies; but mighty Arjuna-Time, however, made him decline towards the sunset" (67.31). Still more similes: "Karṇa's head fell on the ground as the Thousand-rayed Sun at the end of a day" (67.37); warriors look at Karṇa lying on the ground "as at the Sun which fell from heaven" (68.3); "Karṇa, with his body pierced by golden-winged arrows, was beautiful like the Sun in the halo of his rays" (68.37).

What is particularly important, at the culmination point of the narrative we find, side by side with the "solar" similes for Karṇa, a direct indication of the "solar" nature of this hero: the fiery substance (*tejo dīptam*) went out of the fallen hero's body and immediately entered the disc of the sun (*khaṁ vigāhyācireṇa* — 67.27)! As if that were not enough, Karṇa's divine father, Sūrya, appears in person in the next *adhyāya* to mourn over him: "Bhagavat, full of compassion for his *bhaktas*",²⁴ Vivasvat (= Sūrya), whose body (at this hour of sunset) was of blood-red colour, touched with his rays-hands Karṇa's blood-stained body and proceeded to the far-away ocean to perform his ritual ablutions there (68.38).

Plainly, such concentration of "Thunder-god imagery" for Arjuna and "solar imagery" for Karṇa in the final *adhyāyas* of the KP, combined with a direct identification of each hero with a particular god, could not have escaped the attention of the Mbh scholars. E.W. Hopkins wrote: "It is possible that

²⁴ *bhaktānukampī bhagavān*; this is surely a late bhakti reinterpretation (cf. 3, 284) of the original father-son relationship between Sūrya and Karṇa.

Karṇa himself... represents the sun... His death at the hands of (Indra as) Arjuna might point to a sun and storm myth.”²⁵ Later G. Dumézil proved that the story of Arjuna’s duel with Karṇa followed the pattern of a particular (though not clear in its details) archaic myth — the myth of Indra’s conflict with Sūrya. If in the description of the epic duel Karṇa loses and dies because a wheel of his chariot has got stuck in the ground (8, 66.59–60), in the corresponding episode of the Vedic myth, Indra “steals” or “presses to the ground” a wheel of Sūrya’s chariot.²⁶ So, the unusual concentration of Arjuna-Indra and Karṇa-Sūrya comparisons in the *adhyāyas* 63–68 cannot be accidental; it proves that at that moment the epic bard recollects and keeps in his mind the mythological relations between the heroes and the gods.

To summarise, side by side with the “idealising” or “artistic” mythological similes, whose only function is projecting the picture of an epic battle onto the background of the cosmic myth in order to provide it with a deeper perspective and additional greatness, the Mbh (namely, the earliest stratum of its tradition represented in the battle books) uses also mythological similes of different kinds which I prefer to designate as “identifying” or “evocative” similes. These similes which constantly link a particular hero with a particular god, not only fulfil a poetic function, but also bear some mythological information. They connect and/or identify the personages of the epic plane with the personages of the myth. Together with the “artistic” or “idealising” mythological similes, the “identifying” similes formed a system in the Sanskrit epic which provided for the constant oscillation of the poet’s mind and of his audience’s between the poetic likening of the epic heroes to the gods, on the one hand, and a mythological knowledge of their connection and, possibly, their identity, on the other.

What is the place of the “identifying” similes in the historico-typological scheme? Where should we place them in the light of comparative data?

It must be said, first of all, that in no other classical heroic epic can we find this particular type of relationship between epic heroes and the gods, the type which is implied by the Mbh’s “identifying” similes. It is only by way of meticulous and painstaking reconstruction that scholars sometimes manage to discover that, e.g., Helen of Troy is remotely connected in her origin with the goddess of fertility, or that the Armenian epic hero Mher was somehow related in the distant past to Mehr/Mihr, i.e. to the ancient Persian and Armenian god Mithra. But this is all a matter of reconstruction only, the characters in both cases were entirely human, their mythological connection did not exist at all in the active memory of ancient Greek or Armenian bards.

The situation similar to that in the Mbh, where a human hero is at the same time, in a certain sense, a god, can be found only in the *most archaic* epic traditions, for example in the oral epics of some tribal peoples in Siberia. I would

²⁵ E.W. Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (“Grundriss der Indo-Arischen Philologie and Altertums-kunde”, III, Band I, Heft B), Truebner, Strassburg 1915, pp. 87–88.

²⁶ G. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée*, vol. I, Gallimard, Paris 1968, pp. 130–138.

refer specially to the Selkup ("Ostyak-Samoyed") epic of Ite, a human hero, who shares his many acts and attributes with the Moon-god and whose name coincides with the archaic term designated for the "moon". Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the hero Ite and the god Ite in the old Selkup tales.²⁷

The line of historical development which might have led to this specific type of hero-god relationship may be reconstructed as follows. In some pre-epic forms, i.e. folklore genres which, typologically speaking, precede the epic, such as, e.g., the so-called "serial songs" of some tribes in New Guinea, the narrative goes all the time along the line of intersection between the two planes: the "real", i.e. the plane of the here-and-now reality, and the plane of the myth. The function of "serial songs" is to keep up a constant correlation between the ritual which is being performed at the moment, with all its details, and mythic events, especially the acts of a god or a "cultural hero", who had established the ritual in the mythical time.²⁸

The proto-epic genres which immediately preceded the birth of epic poetry: the ritual panegyric (eulogy, hymn) for a military leader, chief, or a "sacral king", and the solemn lament for him at the time of death²⁹ still strive to combine and coordinate the two planes: the "real", or even "historical" plane (which implies a eulogising of the chief or the hero, the glorification of his deeds and, possibly, the deeds of his ancestors) and the plane of the myth (which could include, in particular, a glorification of the mythic deeds done by the god whose incarnation or whose human counterpart the chief/king was believed to be). Certain passages in the Mbh can give us some idea of what such a panegyric could have been like, e.g. the episode in the *Kairātaparvan* (Book 3), where the gods, in the situation closely resembling a *kṣatriyan* initiation rite, sing glory to Arjuna, enumerating not only his own heroic deeds (past and future), but also his feats in his past life as Nara, a divine *Asura*-slayer (3, 41–42). See also numerous eulogies to Kṛṣṇa, where side by side with the deeds of the human hero the acts of *asura*-slaying are listed, performed in the mythical time by the god Viṣṇu whose incarnation the hero was considered to be.

Pre-epic and proto-epic genres do not need to use similes: a correlation between the "real" and the "mythic" planes in them is too obvious. But in the

²⁷ See: N.A. Tomilov, *Astral'nyje predstavlenija narymskikh sel'kupov*, in: *Ranniye formy religii narodov Sibiri. Materialy III sovetsko-frantsuzskogo simpoziuma*, Nauka, St. Petersburg 1992, pp. 166–175.

²⁸ Boris Putilov, *Mif-obrjad-pesnja Novoj Gvinei*, Nauka, Moscow 1980, pp. 236, 239–240, 243.

²⁹ The existence of such Indo-European formulas as the well-known common source of the Homeric κλέος ἀφθίτον (Il. 9.413) and Rigvedic śrávas... ákṣitám (1, 9.7bc; see the most recent treatment of this formula in: C. Watkins, *How to kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, Oxford University Press, New York–Oxford 1995, pp. 173–178) speaks in favour of the suggestion that at least some Eastern Indo-European tribes (Aryans and Proto-Greeks) were well acquainted with these genres before their final separation.

most ancient epic forms the action in the “real” (quasi-historical) plane already gets separated from the planes of the myth and the ritual. However, at the archaic stage, it is still necessary for a long time to coordinate somehow the real plane with the plane of the myth. And there is no better means for it than the mythological simile which, on the one hand, has a marker of comparison and in this way demonstrates the separation of the historical and the mythic planes. But, on the other hand, mythological similes constantly remind the audience that there is a mythological background to the epic action, and even if a simile constantly links a particular subject with a particular object, a certain hero with a certain god (Arjuna-Indra, Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu, Karna-Sūrya, Bhīma-Vāyu etc.), then it suggests to the audience the idea of their secret identity. Such a simile gives the listener an opportunity to take part in the creative activity and to arrive, seemingly independently, at a sudden realisation of the hero’s secret identity with the god.

There is a certain parallelism, as it seems, between the situation in the Mbh, where the bard has from time to time to remind the audience about the identity of a hero to a god, and the situation in the archaic layer of the priestly Vedic tradition, where the priest (or, sometimes, a sacrificer) while performing a certain ritual action, had to pronounce a certain word and also to recollect and to keep in his mind a certain image: and this image, of course, was nothing but a detail or an episode of the same “basic” Indra-Vṛtra myth. The texts say that as long as the participant of the rite keeps this mythical image in his mind — he “knows”; as soon as this image leaves his mind — he “does not know” any more.³⁰

The difference is that the Vedic priest had to try to keep images of the “basic myth” before his “mental eye” as often as he could, preferably all the time, whereas the epic bard had to recollect the mythic background of the epic action only at the key-points of the narrative. At all other times the bard pretended not to know that Kṛṣṇa was a god, or Arjuna was a god, etc. It was not the bard’s “strange forgetfulness”, as so many European scholars thought, especially as regards Kṛṣṇa, who is now the greatest God, but in the next chapter — merely Arjuna’s relative and friend. It is a part of the game, a part of the Mbh’s poetic system.

I am inclined to think that the specific suspense of the Mbh’s narrative was based on this alternation between *knowledge* and *ignorance* of the action’s mythological background. The story proceeds for a long time on the “profane” level, but then the bard starts to prepare the audience for a revelation — this is the moment when the “identifying” similes are used — and then the revelation comes, and the listener not only suddenly sees all the picture of the epic battle in the new light, he feels himself to be a participant in the discovery. At such a moment he could probably say: “Yes, it is true, Arjuna is Indra (or Kṛṣṇa is

³⁰ V. Sementsov, “*Bhagavadgita*” v traditsii i v sovremennoj nauchnoj kritike, Nauka, Moscow 1985, p. 60.

Viṣṇu, etc.) — it is so evident, I felt it myself, but could not formulate it, just a few moments ago; I anticipated it all the time!” But soon the vision fades, and the bard continues his narrative in such a way, as if he had never seen behind the epic action the deep perspectives of its mythic background.

* * *

It is very difficult to find any formal analogies to the Mbh’s “identifying” (“evocative”) similes in other epics. The main reason why I have chosen this topic for the paper read at the Conference on Modern South Asian Studies was my hope that probably somebody from the audience, a specialist in the modern Indian folklore traditions, will respond with a similar example. At the moment I can refer to one instance only, when we find something showing a distant likeness to the Mbh’s “identifying” simile in a modern folklore tradition. In his analysis of figures of speech in the Toda songs, M.B. E m e n e a u describes a specific type of Toda poetic comparison which “involves *equation* of the subject with the object of the comparison, and frequently there is no specific statement of the tertium (...). In these comparisons the verb *o’x-* (...) ‘to become’ often appears, but *-ik*³¹ does not.” M.B. E m e n e a u illustrates this type of comparison with a formulaic expression:

īry o’yad īrciθik / mic o’yad micīθik //

‘You thundered, becoming thunder. / You lightened, becoming lightning.’ //³²

Here, in fact, “a man’s vigorous activity” is described as a result of his “becoming thunder” or “becoming lightning”, i.e. as a result of revealing by him his “thunder” or “lightning” nature, his mythological connection with these elements. The plane of the “here-and-now” action and the plane of the mythological reality meet. The comparison implies at the same time the equation, or identification of its subject and object. This is the closest approximation to the Mbh “evocative” similes in other folklore traditions that I know of at the present moment.

One more thing should probably be said before we finish with the “identifying” similes. Comparisons of this type seem to be firmly rooted in the earliest level of the epic form and content. This implies that the principle of correlation and identification of the heroes with gods has been inherent in the Sanskrit epic since its very beginning. And this, in its turn, indicates that many European and Indian scholars committed a serious error when they based their *Mahābhārata* studies on the assumption that all “mythological paternities” and

³¹ The suffix usually used as a marker of comparison (Ya.V).

³² M.B. E m e n e a u, *Style and Meaning in an Oral Literature*, “Language”, vol. 42, no. 2, April–June 1966, pp. 340–341.

other mythological ties of the heroes with gods were merely “inept mythifications”, “pious transformations”³³ or “late additions made to explain away the human weaknesses” of the heroes.³⁴

Already at the archaic stage of its development, ancient Indian epic poetry might have employed side by side with the “identifying” similes, mythological similes of another kind — “idealising” or “artistic” similes, which did not presuppose a truly mythological connection between a hero and a god. When the Mbh had turned into a classical heroic epic, the number of such “artistic” similes had to grow significantly. There occurred also some changes in the imagery used as the objects of comparison, in the *upamānas*. It was at that time that the bards started to prefer the so-called “eschatological” similes, referring to the images of the end of the world, *pralaya* (the second largest group among mythological similes, after the “basic myth” similes). Their obvious popularity in the “classical heroic” layer of the Mbh is due to the fact that the “eschatological” similes, projecting the picture of the epic battle onto the background of the *pralaya*, gave a particularly sinister colouring to the picture, which was in perfect harmony with the fatalistic worldview typical of the “heroic age”.³⁵

* * *

In conclusion, a few words must be said on the “nature” similes of the KP and the Mbh in their relation to the mythological similes. At least some of the nature similes betray their mythological origin. Below there are examples of this.

Twice in the KP a hero’s chariot is compared to a cloud. In 56.11 Karna’s chariot is said to be “looking like a cloud” (*meghasamkāśa*), in 47.3 Arjuna calls his own chariot “resembling a cloud” (*meghanibha*). At first glance, this is a normal “nature” simile, though, probably, a bit “impressionistic”. But even the context of 56.11 speaks in favour of another opinion; in the following verse it is said that the roar of Karna’s chariot is similar to the voice of Parjanya (the Thunder-god of Indo-European antiquity, predecessor of Indra) or to the voice of the rain-cloud (*parjanyaśamanirghoṣaḥ*), and to the sound of a mountain split. Here, without any doubt, we meet the old Indo-European imagery of the “basic myth” — the Thunder/Storm god, on the cloud as his vehicle, cleaves the primeval mountain with his thunderbolt. The epic comparison originally referred directly to this picture: the hero’s chariot was meant to be in the same way fearful and dangerous to enemies as the Thunder-God’s raincloud was dangerous to the *asuras* and to mountains as their strongholds. In the case of Karna, however, the comparison of his chariot with a cloud could have aroused

³³ Buitenen, op. cit., pp. XIX–XX.

³⁴ I. Karve, *Yugānta: the End of the Epoch*, Sangam Books, Poon 1969, p. 69.

³⁵ Vassilkov and Neveleva, op. cit., pp. 168–170.

one more chain of mythological associations, this time connected with this hero's "solar" nature. The simile could have referred to and have evoked in the minds of the audience another simile which had been used by the narrator previously and was undoubtedly mythological: "Karna mounted his excellent chariot, on which Śalya already stood, like the Sun ascends the cloud in which there is lightning" (8, 26.11).

There are many similes in which a wounded or fallen hero (or his elephant) is likened to a fallen, ruined mountain; he bleeds like a mountain, spills waters coloured with (particles) of red sandstone (8, 10.9; 19.30; 36.13 etc.). Again, this simile at a glance seems to be "naturalistic". But there are many variants of the same simile where it is explicitly stated in the *upamāna* that the mountains were ruined by nobody else but Indra with his *vajra*.³⁶ The streams coloured with particles of red sandstone is no doubt a naturalistic detail, but the total picture is based on the mythic image of Indra splitting the mountain with his *vajra* and "letting loose the waters" imprisoned inside by the *asura*.

One more example: the hero's hands have been cut off but continue to twist on the ground like wriggling serpents (8, 36.25). The simile is seemingly naturalistic. But it proves to be merely a reduced form of the mythological simile: "Cut off hands wriggle on the ground like the bodies of five-headed serpents, killed by Garuḍa" (8, 8.6). The myth of the divine bird Garuḍa's fight with serpents is nothing but a version, a counterpart, or an "animalistic code/aspect" of the "basic myth".

All these examples give us some grounds to conclude that in many cases the "nature" similes originated from mythological similes by way of reduction or omission of explicitly mythological elements. The images of their *upamānas* are not "realistic" — they were not taken by the bards directly from nature, but belonged originally to the "nature code/aspect" of the "basic myth". The reduced forms of such similes could have originally had the function of hinting at the mythological background of the epic action. In the course of time the mythological context of these similes had been forgotten, or rather, had been forced out into the unconscious, but continued to exist in the form of latent overtones, which strengthened greatly the artistic impression of such similes. The hidden ties between *upameya* and *upamāna* continued to exist even in Indian classical poetry, and this predetermined the essential difference between Indian classical similes and the similes in Western classical (Greco-Roman) poetry, formulated by Father Robert Antoine: in the West the simile "is based on a conception of the literary image taken as an analogy. The parallelism between the image and the object it illustrates... needs not be very strict or accurate in all details."³⁷ "The

³⁶ See, e.g. 8, 62.45: the wounded elephant falls spilling streams of blood in the same way "as the mountain of red sandstone [spills streams of] water when hit by Indra's *vajra* at the beginning of the rainy season."

³⁷ R. Antoine, *Classical Forms of the Simile*, "Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature", vol. 9, Calcutta 1971, p. 11.

juxtaposed image... may, at times, be developed for its own sake. Its function is to provide a visual or emotional echo orchestrating the theme". On the contrary, "in the classical image of India the parallelism between *upamāna* and *upameya* is usually minute and is faithfully observed... Indian classicism prefers superimposing various levels of imaginative vision, thus allowing their hidden correspondences to create a kind of verbal and visual harmony in which *upamāna* and *upameya* lose, as it were, their separate identity by being fused into the unity of the image."³⁸ In fact, this merging of the *upamāna* and *upameya* in Indian classical poetry is possible exclusively due to the former mythological identity of images in both parts of the comparison, the memory of which the Western (Greco-Roman) culture lost, but the Indian culture preserved, in some hidden form, for many centuries.

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³⁸ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

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