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Chapter 1

Introduction

Epics are one of the oldest forms of literary endeavour. Man's desire for listening to and narrating tales finds fulfilment in epics. Almost all cultures have a tradition of celebrating heroism of the past age combined with the cultural experience of that society and its myths and legends. The oral recitation of these narratives during religious ceremonies and social assemblies conditioned the elevated style and diction of the epics. When epics were transmitted from one place to another and from one age to another they accumulated into their framework the folklore, cultural elements, customs and beliefs of the people. The poets who finally collected and organized these narratives might have included or enhanced the descriptions and didactical and spiritual material. Once such a pattern is established, others followed it making the necessary changes to suit their specific needs.

Just as the epic form is common to most cultures, the main character or characters of the epic have several common features. One of the chief characters (the hero) undergoes many experiences in his quest. A skilled author can introduce another principal character (the protagonist) who will be the prime mover of the epic plot. It is also possible for the hero to function as the protagonist.

Paradise Lost and Mahabharata are epics belonging to different cultures, regions, times and forms. Yet, as discussed above, it is to be expected, that these two epics to have some common features and their main characters to possess some common characteristics. It is, therefore, proposed that a comparative study of the main characters of these two epics will shed illumination on the understanding of basic human nature and on the thinking of the two great minds separated by time and space.
In the Greek dramatic tradition where the protagonist was first introduced, the protagonist also functioned as the voice of the author by delivering the prologue of the play. In today's usage, the terms hero and protagonist are used as synonyms and refer to the main character in a composition. In Chapter 3 these subtle differences are traced from the original usages of these terms and the functions of the hero and protagonist are identified. The biography of the epic hero is traced with special reference to the Western epics.

Western epic tradition starts with the works of Homer and continues to date, incorporating the cultural and social changes down the ages. Paradise Lost, one of the recent additions to this long list of great literatures, is taken as one of the two epics for this study. This is a secondary epic styled in the Virgilian form. In the 17th century, John Milton wrote Paradise Lost with the deliberate intention of composing an epic on a Christian theme.

In the Sanskrit tradition epics have evolved into two different forms, *itihasas* and *mahakavyas*. Many other Indian languages have either translated or adopted versions of the two *itihasas*, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. They also have their own *mahakavyas*. Tamil, the other classical language of India apart from Sanskrit, has evolved its own epic structure. The first epic in Tamil sings the deeds not of a heroic prince or warrior but of the virtuous life of an ordinary woman.

There are excellent reviews (Bowra, 1965; Merchant, 1971; Toohey, 1992) that study the pattern of the evolution of the Western epics. They have evolved a coherent pattern for the epics that have come out in different Western languages. These are discussed in Section 2.2. In the Indian tradition, studies have been carried out on the development of epics in individual languages (see for example, Nayak, 1985) but no coherent approach unifying the epic development in all Indian languages can be found.
Hence, in Chapter 2, while presenting a unified approach to the Western epics, it has not been possible to do the same for the Indian epics. Proposition of a unified theory of the Indian epics requires a separate study and is beyond the scope of this work. Therefore, in Chapter 2, the epic tradition of the two classical languages of India (Sanskrit and Tamil) is discussed in two different sections to give an idea of the Indian epic tradition. As already mentioned the Sanskrit epics evolved in two different forms. There are only two works known as *itihasas*. One of them, *Mahabharata*, is taken for this study, and is discussed in detail in this chapter.

Rhetoricians of the Sanskrit *mahakavyas* have set up a framework for this genre. These are also discussed in Chapter 2. They have also given the basic requirement of the *nayaka* (hero) of a *mahakavya*. Apart from this Sanskrit theoreticians have devised an elaborate classification of the *nayaka* according to some basic characteristics. Some have given a broad definition of the *nayaka*. These have been discussed in Chapter 3.

Some important analyses of the epic hero in the Western tradition have been carried out by Levy (1953), Hagin (1967) and Miller (2002). They have not only traced the development of the hero character through the ages but also identified the common features of the epic hero that have defied time. Their works and those of some other authors are reviewed in Chapter 3. The *Time* magazine of America published a list of ‘twenty heroes and icons’ of the twentieth century. An original study has been carried out on these characters for this thesis and the observations on the specific characteristics of the ‘twentieth century heroes’ are given at the end of this chapter.

As already stated no study of the Indian epic heroes is available similar to the studies of Levy, Hagin and Miller on the epic heroes of the Western tradition. Again, a coherent approach on the development and characteristics of Indian epic heroes requires a separate study; this is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, only the basic characteristics of the hero and the classification of the hero in the traditions of the two Indian classical languages (namely Sanskrit and Tamil) are given in Chapter 3.
Assuming epics have a universal nature, the theories of the Western epic hero are applied to both Paradise Lost and Mahabharata. The analysis and findings relating to the major characters of these two epics are given in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, compares the structure of these two epics in the light of these findings.

References