

PROTEAN TRUTHS
Concepts of the Heroic
A Comparative Study of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and
the *Mahabharata*



SUMMARY

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This dissertation examines the concept of the heroic as depicted in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Mahabharata*, with a view to studying the origin, treatment and appeal of heroic characters in the epics. The emphasis of the study is on the comparative evaluation of the concept of the heroic in the epics under discussion. A comparison and contrast of the common elements and differences in the treatment of the heroic in the Greek and Indian epics will, it is hoped, throw light on the universal and the culture-specific qualities of heroism.

The conventions of a typical hero reflect the need of the human mind to transcend itself. The psyche is the birth place of a hero-myth. The duality of the conscious and unconscious, good and evil, is inherent in the human psyche. The conflict between these calls for a mediating influence to resolve the tensions. Since maintaining life-order involves resolving the tensions between these opposites, the heroic characters are usually mythicized or romanticized. Consequently, the myths related to the heroes in the epics focus on their birth and death, and on the creation and destruction of good and evil. Epic literature suggests that the friction is vital for sustaining the order of the universe.

The three epics selected for examination belong to the oral, bardic tradition and are generally accepted to have been composed a few centuries before the Christian era began. The evolution of the epic form during what is broadly defined as the 'Heroic Ages', reflects a certain social milieu in the Greek and Indian culture. These

were the times of social transition, when an older order in the form of a declining grand civilization was being replaced by an invading, fluid civilization. Such conditions necessitated the emergence of the warrior or *kshatriya* class, which played a major role in the annexation and protection of territories. The individuals belonging to this class are accepted as 'heroes' because of their exceptional physical courage and valour, the prerequisites of heroism in the widely-understood terms. The deeds of these individuals are recorded by the epic-composers for posterity. Thus, the Homeric epics and the *Mahabharata* describe a forgotten epoch relegated to the domain of myth, now lost to human memory and history.

The dissertation comprises an introduction and three chapters, followed by a conclusion. The introduction puts forward a hypothesis about the concepts of the heroic. It begins with an examination of the assumption that strength and courage are heroic qualities commonly taken for granted for the leading protagonists of a work of art like an epic. Male characters are endowed with such qualities and hence they are the 'heroes' examined. However, a discussion about the heroism of the female characters is included in the second chapter. It is proposed that the very endeavour or struggle to go beyond the limited sphere of humanity renders these individuals heroic, regardless of the success or failure of the venture. While doing so, the protagonists grow as individuals, gaining an access to knowledge and truths hitherto unknown or hidden. The moment of self-recognition, as being human and at the same time as the

recipients of divine attributes, is the point of realization for the heroes. It is this simultaneous awareness of divinity and humanity which makes them heroic. Further, the relationship between the human and the divine is instrumental in bringing about a deeper comprehension of certain absolute, unviolable truths like Death, Destiny and Fate. The question of the need and possibility of having a single, cohesive and unified image of the heroic is also raised. This is examined with reference to a discourse arising out of the different perceptions of the writers, the characters themselves and the readers about the heroic, as per the beliefs and ideologies of their specific ages and cultures.

The first chapter outlines the scope of the dissertation. It gives a brief outline of the plot-structure of the Greek and Indian epics, listing the major protagonists in the story, and describes various theories of composition of the epics. The other sections discuss the views of several critics on the epics. Ancient critics in Western and Indian traditions are discussed so as to understand the form of an epic or a *mahakavya*. A detailed descriptive outline of Carl Jung's theory of Individuation in the field of psychoanalysis, and of Joseph Campbell's theory of the Emergence of a hero in the area of mythography, forms the last part of the first chapter. These two theories enumerate the emergence and development of a heroic personality. The study of characters reveals that conform to some stages of development listed by Jung and Campbell.

The second chapter examines in detail several major characters in the epics. A discussion of the situations peculiar to the development of their character aids the understanding of their complex personalities. Arjuna, Karna, Bhishma, Krishna, Yudhishtira and Duryodhana are discussed at length. The one trait that emerges as common amongst the protagonists is the awareness of being human despite the heroism they display. The same awareness is the key quality in Achilles, Hector and Odysseus. These heroes are acutely conscious about their limited powers as humans and yet they strive to transcend them in a bid to reach the heights of heroism.

The third chapter, divided into six sections, discusses certain formal elements as the building bricks of the concept of the heroic. The first section puts forth the notion of the heroic as a dynamic concept, as it acquires significance when seen in the light of certain situations and circumstances. The section that follows examines the idea of heroism as an immutable concept, which remains unchanging so far as the basic characteristics of a heroic personality are concerned. Characters generally show an understanding of the heroic through their actions and world-views. This is the point taken up in the third section, which discusses the approach that such self-knowledge makes their heroism highly distinctive. The next section examines certain principles as they are perceived by the characters. Axioms like Death, Destiny, Fate, et al. and the attitudes of the heroes towards these determine the quality of heroism. The fifth

section includes a discussion of how the response of writers and readers determines the heroic among the characters. The last section underlines the probabilities of cultural delimitation. The attitudes and responses of the characters are analysed with reference to the specific culture or civilization in which they are premised.

The conclusion, while reviewing the earlier discussions, sums up the hypothesis put forward in the introductory chapter. It states that a virtual heroic image is possible so far as the context and background of the epics under discussion are taken into account. The same parameters of heroism cannot be applied to characters in every literary genre of every age or era. The dissertation includes a select bibliography at the end.