(DIS)SIMILARITIES IN GILGAMESH AND ARJUNA'S JOURNEY[1]

Abstract: *That the ancient epic remains a provocative topic is demonstrated by the significant number of the research papers. The explanation for this constant interest comes from the exemplary status of the protagonists that in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid, Ramayana or Mahabharatha accomplish great deeds told in an aesthetic manner with a moral goal. The ancient epics "speak to hearts and minds concerned about human potentiality and limitation, about the consequences of passion (righteous anger, sexual love, intense grief, or desire for honour), and about the competing claims of civilization, the environment, and the need to reconcile self-interest with the common good." (Callen King, 2009: 2) The aim of this paper is to highlight several (dis)similarities revealed by the journey of two ancient epic heroes, namely Gilgamesh from the Babylonian epic and Arjuna, the protagonist of Bhagavad-Gita. The poems share different layers of ellaboration whose significant meaning gives us the possibility to better understand the evolution of the primary status of the protagonists.*

Keywords: *heroic status, royal status, divine status.*

The endless number of publications indicates that the ancient epic remains a provocative topic. There are a lot of influential studies on each epos that reveal interesting connections among them despite the temporal or spatial differences. This paper intends to underline the (un)common features of the Babylonian and Hindu epics taking into account their different layers of elaboration whose significant meaning gives us the possibility to better understand the evolution of the primary status of the protagonists.

"Conflict hero versus man"

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* refers to a legendary king believed to have ruled in the great Sumerian city of Uruk in 2750 BCE. Around 2100 BCE, five Sumerian cuneiform texts about Gilgamesh's adventures were composed and they reflect a long oral tradition: *The Death of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh and Akka, Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh and Huwawa, Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld.*

In the *Ancient Epic*, Katherine Callen King presents these Sumerian stories as "the literary antecedent to the epic that was created in Akkadian, or Old Babylonian, around 1700 BCE, and was reworked around 1200 BCE by a scholar-scribe named Sin-leqe-unninni." (*ibidem*: 15) This scholarly composition, known as Standard Version or the Eleven Tablet Version, was preserved in a Babylonian copy made around 700 BCE that completed the previous one. These two versions, the Old Babylonian version and the Standard one, can be distinguished after their starting line. The first one begins with *Surpassing all other kings*, a line which appears after the twenty eight line proem in the Standard Version, while the second one starts with *He who saw the Deep*. Nevertheless, Katherine Callen King does not take into discussion the Twelve Tablet, created after the Sumerian tale *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* that ends the image of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* without diminishing the unity of Sin-leqi-unninni's version. In his study: *The development and meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh. An Interpretive Essay*, Tzvi Abusch interprets these periods of elaboration as having different meanings embodied by the evolution of the main hero, these being: "the conflict of the hero versus man, the conflict of the hero versus king and the conflict of the hero versus god." (Tzvi Abusch,

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2001: 617) I have noticed the same correspondence between different layers of elaboration and the meaning in *Bhagavad-Gita's* episode and my intention is to draw several affinities as well as differences between this and the Babylonian epic.

In the Old Babylonian version Gilgamesh is the tyrannical king of Uruk who oppresses his people. In order to stop this destructive energy, Enkidu is created by Gods not only to oppose to Gilgamesh, but also to be a complementary force that determines the king to do heroic deeds. After their struggle, which gives birth to the closest friendship ever known, their goal is to obtain heroic achievements and the lasting fame. They defeat and kill Huwawa, the master of the Cedar Forest and the Bull of Heaven sent by Isthar. Their *hybris* against divine entities does not remain unpunished and Enkidu is sentenced to death. Overwhelmed by that loss, frightened by death for the first time, Gilgamesh renounces to his heroic and royal status, assumes the original primitive identity of his dead friend and starts his journey to his ancestor, Ut-napishtim, in search for the secret of physical immortality. On his way to the Flood survivor, he meets Siduri, the divine tavern keeper who counsels him to appreciate normal life and especially to return to it. The teachings of Siduri were not included in some later versions, but they are referential for the conflict of the hero versus man, as Tzvi Abusch underlined in the above mentioned study. It seems that earlier versions of the Old Babylonian Tablet even ended with Siduri's encounter who tried to humanize Gilgamesh, as the hierodule Shamhat did with Enkidu. On the one hand she makes Gilgamesh see the joy of life, ensured by a loving wife and many children who can guarantee the paternal lineage, and on the other hand his utopian quest: "The life that you seek you never will find / When the gods created mankind / Death they dispensed to mankind / Life they kept to themselves. //" (*OB Sippar Tablet*, iii 1-5)[1]

Her advice gives the king the possibility to renounce at his heroic status and to assume an "identity as a normal man of the royal class who can hope for no more than achievements and descendants." (*ibidem*: 618)

The *Bhagavad-Gita*'s episode[2] is set within the extent epic of *Mahabharatha* the Hindu epic written between 500 BCE and 100 CE. Its elaboration shows the same heterogeneity as its Babylonian counterpart. Vyasa is considered the author of an original 7000 verse-epic and to Vaisampayana is attributed the subsequent elaboration. (Flood, 1996: 105) The final version of the epic belongs to the "Brahman family of Bhargava, descended from Bhrgu, an ancient sage, who added the final verses to the texts" (Johnson, 2007: 658)

Arjuna, the protagonist of *Gita* corresponds to Gilgamesh in his semidivine nature and in his epic evolution. Considered to be the third son of Pandu[3], in reality Arjuna is the offspring conceived by Kunti through her magic spell with Indra, the most significant god among gods who "is endued with immeasurable might, energy, prowess and glory." (*Mahabh*. I: 123) Apart from his two elder brothers, the virtuous Yudhishthira and the instinctive force, Bhima, Arjuna seems to embody perfection. He "will promote the welfare of Brahmanas, kine and all honest men, […] will be the

[1] I used in this paper quotations from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* translated by Andrew George and the electronic resources in order to quote from *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Mahabharatha.*

[2] I will prefer the short form *Gita* for references.

[3] Pandu was cursed not to have children. But his first wife, Kunti, who knew a magic spell that had the power to invoke a god and to oblige him to do what she requested, gave him three sons conceived with three different gods. The first one was Yudhisthira, whose father was Dharma, the second one Bhima, whose father was Vyasa and the third one was Arjuna, Indra's son.

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smiter of the wicked and the delight of friends and relatives. Foremost of all men, he will be an irresistible slayer of all foes. He will be the oppressor of all enemies and possessed of great wisdom." (*Mahabh.* I: 123)

Despite all these qualities, Arjuna is confronted with a deep crisis at the beginning of *Gita*. Standing on the battlefield together with his charioteer, between the two armies ready to fight, Arjuna suddenly foresees that he is to kill his relatives, the Kauravas, Bharatha's descendants. That moment he realizes "the destruction of the kingdom, the carnage of the elders, the collapse of the family and tradition, the ruin of his Gandava missile, the demise of his invincible golden chariot." (Bilimoria, 2004: 222) Arjuna's fear of killing his kinsmen equals Gilgamesh's fear of death in front of Enkidu's corpse. This dilemma annihilates the heroic status of the protagonists and reveals their human nature overwhelmed by unexpected emotions. They have come to another level of understanding and they need guidance. Gilgamesh finds it through Ut-napishtim's benevolence and Arjuna through the dialogue he initiates with his charioteer, an avatar of Krishna's god. Nevertheless, an important difference occurs. Arjuna faces not only an emotional dilemma, but also a moral one. He has to slay people, something that Gilgamesh did not do. The Babylonian hero easily renounces to his social status as his gesture of getting rid off his royal garments suggests: "His curly [hair] he tore out in clumps, / he ripped off his finery, *[like]* something taboo he cast it away." (*Gilgam*.: VIII, 63-64) The Hindu hero has to struggle between virtue ethics and duty ethics (*dharma)*.

In her interpretative study, *The Social Construction of Emotions in Bhagavad-Gita*, Katherine Ann Johnson relies on the studies of Bina Gupta, Bilimoria Purushottama and R.A. Shweder and his team to present the relation between "the redacted textual layers of *Gita* and three different ways of relating emotions and moral judgement." (Johnson, *op .cit.*: 656) In this way the redacted text of *Gita* is thought to have "three primary layers: the original verse, the Samkhya/Yoga layer, and the devotional *bhakti* layer" (*ibidem*: 655) which correspond to three possible moral codes.
As theorized by scholars, "original *Gita* includes 7000 verses (slokas) 1.1. to 2.10 and from 2.31 to 2.37." (*ibidem*) In this section, when Arjuna faces his hostile relatives his physical reaction determines his moral judgement. The normal emotion for a soldier about to fight alienates the man forced to raise his bow against his family: "My limbs sink, / my mouth is parched, / my body trembles, / the hair bristles on my flesh. //" (*Gýta:* 1.29–31b)

The respect for life, "for the emotional, social, and physical well-being of the individual" (*ibidem*: 666) is much more important than the battle itself and than the desired kingdom. So, Arjuna decides to stop fighting.

The same interest in his well-being defines Gilgamesh. He forces the young men to compete or to build projects or uses the king's right to sleep with all virgins before their marriage. His nonheroic behaviour opposes to that of the Hindu warrior. Gilgamesh's physical and sexual energy must be stopped as well as the lack of Arjuna's energy, more concerned at the beginning of *Gita*, with his personal and unexpected *pathos*. In each case the solution is offered by gods. They will create Enkidu who will attract Gilgamesh's energy. Their encounter will limit Gilgamesh's social and political values and open his interest for the heroic deeds. Meanwhile Gilgamesh is in search for heroic fame, Krishna tries to replace Arjuna's fear of slaying his kinsmen with the terror of dejection and shame: "People will tell / of your undying shame, / and for a man of honor / shame is worse than death. / The great chariot warriors will think / you deserted in fear of battle; / you will be despised / by those who held you in esteem. / Your

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enemies will slander you, /corning your skill / in so many unspeakable ways- / could any suffering be worse? //" (*Gýta*: 2.34–35)

For the moment Arjuna's moral code does not consist in duty but in the *Ethic of Authonomy* a concept provided by R.S Shweder and his research team (Shweder, Richard A., Nancy C. Much, *et alii*, 1997). This type "of moral reasoning is focused on individual concerns, such as personal rights, justice, well-being and the right to non-injury." (Johnson, *op. cit*.: 673) By choosing virtue instead of duty, Arjuna will suffer shame and this contradicts his well-being. He acts as a normal human being, but this is not allowed for a learned man.

In conclusion, the first layer of both epics in discussion illustrates a deeper conflict of hero versus man and "a greater emphasis on the individual, his private story and immediate future." (Tzvi Abusch, *op. cit*.: 620)

"Conflict hero versus king"

If the Old Babylonian version tought Gilgamesh how to deal with his double nature, the Standard Version gave him the chance to assume his role as a king who "came a far road, was weary, found peace." (*Gilgam.*: I, 9) The version of Sin-leqi-unninni reveals several significant differences from the Old Babylonian one. The encounter of Gilgamesh with Ut-napishtim is developed, the walls of Uruk frame the beginning and the end of the version and the episode of Isthar is inserted in the VIth Tablet. We are in front of a written text where the stress is on the conflict of the hero with the king and where the proem added by Sin-leqi-unninni emphasizes the benefit of Gilgamesh's knowledge. It highlights that the physical journey of the hero got an intellectual meaning. Gilgamesh "saw the Deep" (*Ghilgam.* : I, 1), brought to the world the story of Ut-napishtim and of the Flood and wrote his own story, inscribing his adventures on a stone tablet, in order to offer a cultural achievement to his people and to the abstract reader. Gilgamesh has no material gain in his quest. Furthermore he is astonished to see that his ancestor looks like an ordinary man and to realize that the secret of immortality will not be revealed to him through the power of a heroic act, but being aware of gods' will. In this way "the resolution of the conflict between the virtues of individualistic heroism and public responsibilities and leadership will come when Gilgamesh recognizes that he must give up the illusion of living on an extraordinary plane, learn to value normality, and assume the role of a normal and therefore, effective ruler." (Tzvi Abusch, *op. cit*.: 619)

Through his behaviour and especially through his story Ut-napishtim disciplines his guest. Gilgamesh "has learnt that the sorrow, fear and disillusionment are inseparable from the human condition." (Callen King, *op. cit*.: 28)

In *Gita*, Krishna is in charge to teach Arjuna how to return to his "duty ethics" as Bina Gupta points out in his study (Bina Gupta, 2006: 380). He manages to do this by means of Samkhya/Yoga which represents the second layer of the Hindu epic. In the extent of the *Gita* this layer is inserted in chapters two through six, thirteen to fifteen and seventeen to eighteen.

The dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer will allow him to accede to Samkhya ontology, a philosophical system "that references a dualistic cosmology in which nature consists of pure consciousness which is the real self (*purusha*) and matter (*prakriti*). (…) The Samkhya system supports the discipline of yoga, an ascetic tradition that asserts that one must gain control of consciousness (which presumes control of the emotions) with the goal of overcoming the dualism in nature." (Johnson, *op. cit*.: 667)

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Krishna does not endorse the passions of Arjuna. The god's avatar insists on detachment from afflictions, because they produce confusion and ruin. (*Gita,* II, 62-63) Arjuna should have the self control over emotions because what he sees on the battlefield is only matter (*prakriti*) and this is temporary and changeable, meanwhile the real self (*purusha*) of his uncles and of his cousins never dies because this is indestructible. Being a member of *ksatrya* Arjuna has to accomplish his duty that is to fight and win the kingdom. Even if Yudhisthira is the oldest son and is entitled to rule, the leadership after this atrocious battle will be assumed by all the offspring of Pandu because they all belong to ksatriya group. In fact Arjuna has to reconcile his *ksatriya*[1] function with that of *brahman* and this cannot be realized by "the man of personal pride and honour, but rather by the disciplined man." (*ibidem*: 669) This idea is sustained by the following lines: "A man of discipline should always / discipline himself, remain in seclusion, / isolated, his thought and self well controlled, / without possessions or hope. //" (*Gýta* 6.7–10).

Arjuna's individual concern must be abandoned in social order's favour. A new moral reasoning should define his acts, this being the *Ethic of Community* whose objective consists of "social cohesion and support of the group rather than one's self interest." (*ibidem*: 673)

"Conflict hero versus god"

In the Twelve Tablet, added much later, we discover a cultic vision of Gilgamesh. He fulfils Innanna's request to craft her bed from the *huluppu* (willow) tree that becomes an unexpected home for a snake, for the thunderbird and for the female demon. Gilgamesh gets rid of the evil inhabitants from the tree and gives the goddess the timber she needed for her furniture. Having some extra wood he makes for himself two playthings a *pukku* and a *mekku* (probably a ball and a mallet) that accidentally falls into the netherworld. Assuming the role of a servant, Enkidu volunteers to go and fetch them, but disregards Gilgamesh's advice to behave properly there and remains trapped in the world of Ereshkigal. The anabasis of his shadow gives Gilgamesh the opportunity to find out what kind of immortal life is destined to each social class and which the rules of this world are. In this episode Tzvi Abusch sees a solution to the conflict between the divine and human nature. (Tzvi Abusch, *op. cit*.: 621) Being one third human and two thirds god, Gilgamesh must choose his final identity. In Tablet VI he rejects Isthar's proposal to become her husband, being afraid of replacing the archetypal Tamuz in the netherworld. To this hybris the epic adds the failed initiation in the world of Ut-napishtim that seems to restrict the hero's access to a divine leadership. In his journey, Gilgamesh has reached only the god's gate where Ut-napishtim imparted to him the secret of his immortality and the story of the Flood, but Gilgamesh's fate has been decided by the polytheistic Babylonian cosmology. Killing Humbaba with his friend, he offended major divinities as Anu and Enlil and in consequence they sentenced Enkidu to death. Although in his struggle to defeat death Gilgamesh will be defeated, the favour offered before to Ut-napishtim is never granted again. Gilgamesh's encounter with Ut-napishtim gives him the opportunity to become "wise in all matters!" (*Gilgam*.: I, 4) Yet, Gilgamesh's reign in the netherworld to which he belongs according to

[1] Georges Dumézil, in his work *Mythos and Epic*, underlines that all Pandu's children belong to *ksatriya* group. As they were destined to share Draupadi, Arjuna's bride, through Kunti's word, they must be able also to assume the kinship of the country.

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Mesopotamian religion requires another type of knowledge and this is the role of the Tablet XII that "serves to teach Gilgamesh how to be a normal god and to induct him into his new identity." (Tzvi Abusch, *op. cit*.: 621)

In *Gita*, from chapter seven through twelve and in chapter sixteen devotional love for Krishna is emphasized. The entire *Gita* and especially this *bhakti* layer could be interpreted as atypical for the ancient epic because the anger of a divinity is missing. Moreover the androgynous pair seems to be reconfigured by the special attention Arjuna receives from Krishna. When the battle begins Krishna enlists himself for Pandu's camp and no one or nothing can break the connection between him and Arjuna as Vidura pointed out: "I tell thee, however, that thou are unable, by wealth, or attention, or worship, to separate Krishna from Dhananjaya. I know magnanimity of Krishna; I know firm devotion of Arjuna towards him, I know that Dhananjaya, who is Kesava's life, is incapable of being given up by the latter." (*Mahabh*.: V, 87)

The conflict of the hero versus god does not presume a duality in Arjuna's divine/human nature. It rather implies a communion with Lord Krishna whose revealing overwhelms Arjuna "with awe, an emotional response to the perception of the vastness and power of God, stretching his joy into ecstasy and placing his emotions at the outer boundaries of fear." (Johnson, *op.cit*,: 671) Deity's sermon teaches Arjuna how to understand god's "All Forms" and how to come to Krishna through devotion. At this point Hindu religion differs a lot from Babylonian cosmology. J. Assmann interpreted Hindu theology rather as *cosmological monotheism* whose "characteristic features is the acceptance of other gods either as partial manifestations of the one and only, transcendent god, or as lower divine powers responsible for certain task or domains in the world." (Malinar, A., 2007: 7)

The moral code followed now by Arjuna should be in Shweder et alii's conception the *Ethic of Divinity*, which includes "subservience to the commands and purposes of the deity as well as concern for the cosmic order." (Johnson, *op. cit*.: 674)
The vision of the netherworld offered to Gilgamesh by Enkidu completes king's knowledge and prepares him for the divine kinship he must assume; meanwhile Krishna's "All Forms" reconcile Arjuna's awe for god with his social responsibilities and his individual concern.

In conclusion, the (dis)similarities between Gilgamesh's and Arjuna's journeys are obvious. Both heroes have a semi divine nature, aspire to lasting fame, act as normal people and are confronted with an important dilemma, whose key is provided only by the seeing of *"The Deep"*.

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