

Fernando Wulff Alonso, *The Mahābhārata and Greek Mythology*, Translated by Andrew Morrow from *Grecia en la India: El repertorio griego del Mahabharata* (Ediciones Akal Madrid, 2008) written in Spanish, Hindu Tradition Series 1, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2014, 523 Pp., Rs. 1495. (Hardback)

For Indological studies is not frequent to have a book originally written in Spanish translated into English. The normal course of things goes the other way round: books that matter are written in English and only if they happen to become extremely well known or discipline-building, they might be made available in Spanish, often with a long delay after their first publication. That means that the book *The Mahābhārata and Greek Mythology* by Fernando Wulff Alonso is a rare case of success, for it has managed to stir the interest of the English-speaking public even if originally written in a non-standard language, considering the history of Indological studies so far.¹ Furthermore, the fact that this work has been chosen as the first volume of the new “Hindu Tradition Series” of Motilal Banarsidass, sanctioned by a robust editorial board, underlines the novel paths that the discipline is willing to explore nowadays.

As stated in its presentation, the aim of this series is to “critically interrogate Hindu tradition in the widest sense” and certainly Wulff’s book manages to touch some neuralgic points in regards to one of the bastions of Hindu culture: the *Mahābhārata* and its process of composition. In very short words, the theory proposed by Wulff affirms that Greek materials (particularly from the *Iliad*, but also from other sources) were systematically reworked into the Indian epic. Therefore, his book provides a long series of what he considers to be the similarities and the common themes of both epics.

The author opens the discussion by pointing out what has been seen by many as one of the basic problems of Classical Indology: the lack of what is called “solid chronologies”. That lack of chronology is consequently extended to the date of composition of the epic, which Wulff locates after the arrival of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Furthermore, the self-claim of the *Mahābhārata* as an encyclopaedia of all Indian knowledge and its particular style of assembling material (emboxing of stories, incorporation of different layers of discourse, etc.) serve as perfect arguments to open the possibility that Wulff is looking for: the modelling of the Indian epic according to “a complete written index of a variety of Greek materials on hand which were used for the main body of the book” (p. 10).

He then moves on to make a retelling of both the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*, book by book (a recount of potential value for students in their first encounters with the epic genre), emphasizing the characteristics that later will help him tie up

¹ In regards with the original in Spanish this version has undergone important changes. On the one hand, it has been trimmed and organized to offer a single main hypothesis (e.g. what the author sees as the incontrovertible influence of Greek sources in the *Mahābhārata*). On the other, the bibliography has been enriched and revamped.

his hypothesis about what both epics are about: a divine plan to destroy a generation of heroes, which will bring about the beginning of the world the way we know it; a world where divinity and humanity are completely separated. As expected, the body of the book is mostly made of comparisons in regards to general topics (the female figures, the heroes, the warfare, the master plan behind the battle, the futility of human effort, etc.). The way of proceeding is orderly and often the sections are named in an appealing fashion (e.g. *The end of both colossal battles, Troy and Kurukṣetra, are at night, by surprise, and entail a terrible massacre of not only soldiers but innocent civilians as well*, p. 290). Even if the whole book is about proving the extensive employment of Greek sources, the borrowings Wulff ascribes to the Indian epic do not work on detriment of its originality. On the contrary, he regards them as an example of the capacity that Indian culture has shown in several circumstances to appropriate foreign influences and give them a full and authentic meaning in their own parameters, or as he himself puts it “it is merely the discovery of an unknown facet of their genius” (p. 11).

One thing worth mentioning is that at every point of the book the author seeks to prove his theory in full. He does not compromise: to him the similarities he sees in both epics are not cases of parallelism stirring from a shared Indoeuropean past, his theory is thoroughly difussionist, and it only goes in one direction, from Greece to India, and not the other way round. Strong reactions may be expected. Nevertheless, even those that would not come out totally convinced by the author’s theory, would find valuable insights and alternative interpretations worth exploring. One should keep in mind that the book actually accomplishes a task not undertaken by others so far: to make a systematic comparative study of the epic works of two foundational cultures such as the Greek and the Indian. Classical Studies, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies and many other disciplines are likely to benefit from an effort like this, for it also helps building connective tissue between Indological studies and such other fields of knowledge.

No doubt Wulff’s hypothesis is bold, interesting, an example of out-of-the-box thinking, and extremely discussion-stirring. All that together makes it for a worthwhile reading, both for scholars and the general public (one point should be added for readability, which the translation into English manages well to preserve). It is true, on the other hand, that his method of analysis, based more on motifs and topics, may leave some scholars used to work with finer-grained material wishing for more convincing arguments. However, in an equation with too many variables, as it proves to be every study regarding the *Mahābhārata*, hypotheses are the only thing in order. May they keep being creative and thought-provoking.

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