



Female and male attractiveness as depicted in the *Vanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the bodily attractiveness of heroines and heroes, as described in one of the two most important epics of India. The basis for this analysis is the love stories and episodes included in the main plot of the *Vanaparvan*, the third book of the *Mahābhārata*. The stories from this book have been taken into consideration due to their numerous occurrences, which are a sufficient ground for generalizations. Many characteristic features of their protagonists are repeated in different sub-stories. Also, the images of female and male characters, princesses, queens and kings are presented and discussed in detail. The external beauty of such female heroines as Damayantī, Sāvitrī, Sukanyā, Suśobhanā and Sitā; as well as the attractiveness of two semi-goddesses, called Apsarases, are described and analysed. The names of the Apsarases discussed in the context of female beauty are Urvaśī and Menakā. Besides this, the image of an unnamed courtesan is discussed, as it is the most detailed description of a female character and probably follows the ideal of female beauty as shown in the *Mahābhārata*. As far as the male protagonists are concerned, the images of heroes such as Nala, Bhīma, Aśvapati, Rāma and Daśaratha are taken into consideration. The examples of male attractiveness also include features of the five main heroes of the *Mahābhārata*: the Paṇḍava brothers.

KEYWORDS

Sanskrit literature; Indian epics; *Mahābhārata*; beauty; female and male attractiveness

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Sanskrit epic literature contains a comparatively large number of descriptions of heroines and heroes who participate in the main plot of the epics, or in the included tales which form independent sub-stories and episodes. On the basis of these descriptions, it is possible to form some general observations concerning the *topoi* of the attractiveness of the protagonists. The *Mahābhārata* (further referred to as Mbh.), which is one of the two most important Sanskrit epics, is a good source of information on this topic. In this article, I will focus on excerpts taken from the *Mahābhārata* and, in particular, from its third book, the *Vanaparvan*.¹ This book of the epic contains, comparatively, a lot of love stories which often form separate units. The information about female and male beauty included in these stories allows for the formation of general observations, as well as descriptions of the particular *topoi* of the beauty of the *Mahābhārata* protagonists.

The main basis of this analysis is constituted of: the stories of Nala and Damayantī (Mbh.III.50.1–78.23), with special attention given to the episode concerning the meeting of Damayantī and an unnamed hunter (Mbh.III.60.20–60.38); the story of R̥ṣyaśṛṅga and an unnamed courtesan (Mbh.III.110.20–113.9); the episode concerning the beautiful wife of an ascetic and two gods Aśvins (Mbh.III.123.1–123.23); and the story of Sāvitrī and Satyavan (Mbh.III.277.5–282.44). Further examples will be taken from the stories of Sukanyā and Cyavana (Mbh.III.122.1–123.26); Suśobhanā and Parikṣit (Mbh.III.190.3–190.46); and Sītā and Rāma (Mbh.III.258.1–275.68). Also, additional information concerning the beauty² of the heavenly beings known as the Apsarases,³ which is provided in the episode of Urvaśī and Kāśyapa

¹ All fragments of the original text come from the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* prepared by Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar *et al.* (The *Mahābhārata* 1933–1966).

² In this article, I will use the word ‘beauty’ interchangeably with the word ‘attractiveness’ to express the meaning ‘physical attractiveness’, even though Daniel Ingalls in his article *Words for beauty in classical Sanskrit poetry* (Ingalls, 1962: 87–107) suggests that Sanskrit has an extremely wide spectrum of words which, in certain contexts, express the different shades of meaning of this English word. According to Ingalls, it is due to this fact that one should be very careful when translating Sanskrit into English. However, David Smith in his article *Beauty and words relating to beauty in the Rāmāyaṇa, the Kāvyaś of Aśvaghoṣa, and Kālidāsa’s Kumārasaṃbhava* (Smith, 1990: 36–52), on the basis of the selected texts which he took into consideration, has shown that it is definitely possible to translate at least several fragments from those texts which feature words such as ‘beauty’ or ‘beautiful’. It is worth adding that both articles contain texts which come from a period which is later than the *Mahābhārata* stories. Most probably, the notions used in the *Mahābhārata* fragments did not feature such subtle differences as were suggested by Ingalls.

³ Even if they are not human beings, Apsarases are used as paradigms of beauty in many works of Sanskrit literature. Their images, given in the episodes, definitely influence the paragons of female beauty as shown in the *Mahābhārata* stories. According to Monier-Williams’s dictionary, the main meaning of the term *ap-saras* or *apsarā* is: ‘going in the waters or between the waters of the clouds’ or ‘a class of female divinities (sometimes called

(Mbh.III.110.6–110.15),⁴ will illustrate the subject of the bodily attractiveness of female heroines, as the Apsarases are often shown as symbols of female beauty.⁵

The images which appear in these stories and episodes are typical of the examples of bodily attractiveness shown in the *Mahābhārata*. In the majority of cases, these descriptions of the external beauty of the protagonists appear in love stories. The bodies of princesses, queens, princes and kings are depicted, most often, in order to impress their future wives or husbands. Physical descriptions are definitely of vital importance in the scenes concerning their first meetings. However, sometimes the descriptions also concern other protagonists, who are not involved in love stories. In these examples, descriptions of heroes are mostly found (cf. Bhīma, Daśaratha or Aśvapati). Certainly, there is a typical collection of features which constitute the general character of the perfect body of the *Mahābhārata* protagonist. It is worth adding that, apart from their external beauty, particularly attractive character traits are also mentioned fairly often in these characterisations. Thus, it is obvious in the many passages of the text which will be analysed below, that these qualities were highly valued.⁶

As far as the *Vanaparvan* is concerned, young heroines (who appear in the contexts of descriptions of their qualities) are depicted, first of all, as innocent and virtuous. A general rule is that the heroines are obedient to their fathers during their younger years.⁷ Later, when they become wives, they follow the instructions of their husbands. This is in accordance with *Manusmṛti*, the ancient book of Laws. During this period of their life, their main role is to take

“nymphs”); they inhabit the sky, but often visit the earth; they are the wives of the Gandharvas and have the faculty of changing their shape at will’ (Monier-Williams, 1995: 59).

⁴ Urvaśī is one of the most famous heroines in the ancient literature of India. Her image, originating in Vedic times, has influenced not only epic works but also many works of later literature (Upadhye, 1980/1981: 487–494).

⁵ Most of the stories mentioned above are available in many different translations. There are also paraphrases of them, e.g. *Nal i Damajanti. Baśń staroindyjska z ksiąg Mahabharaty* (cf. *Nal i Damajanti...*, translated by Antoni Łange in 1921). Additionally, there is a wide spectrum of texts discussing these stories from many angles. Just one of them is an article by Morton R. Smith *The story of Nala in the Mahābhārata* (Smith, 1960: 357–386). The discussion concerning these various discussions goes beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ Some detailed information on this topic may be found also in the article by Iwona Milewska *The problem of childlessness in chosen stories of the Mahābhārata and the interrelation between dharma and kāma* (Milewska, 2010: 247–260).

⁷ One of the most famous exceptions to this rule is included in the story of Sāvitrī. This girl, even though she is still under her father’s orders, decides to marry Satyavan, a young man who was destined to die within the year of their marriage. Her father, who has obtained knowledge of Satyavan’s future fate, is forced by his daughter into agreeing to the marriage, despite his initial misgivings. As a consequence, she marries the young man according to her own will. Such behaviour was definitely a rarity among daughters who generally behaved in a proper way (Mbh.III.277.5–282.44).

care of their husband and to fulfil all his needs without any negligence. They are also the bearers of children and should take care of the future descendants. It is worth adding that as soon as the female heroines become wives, in most cases, there are no descriptions of the beauty of their bodies.⁸ During their whole lives female protagonists, often princesses or queens, should have full control of their senses (*saṃyatendriyā*). As young girls, they should not tempt unknown men and later they should be completely faithful to their husbands. One of the questions which may be asked here is whether the external beauty of the heroine is connected with her inner beauty in the sense of particular, well-defined character traits, which in turn may make her even more attractive?⁹ It is impossible to answer this question only on the basis of book three of the *Mahābhārata*, due to the lack of examples illustrating this at full length.

In the *Vanaparvan*, heroes are described less frequently than female protagonists. As far as they are concerned, what prevails in many episodes, regardless of the period of their life, is information concerning their attractive character traits. In many examples, their physical appearances are also at least partly described, but these are often far from complete descriptions. Such features as religiousness, wisdom, knowledge of the laws of proper moral behaviour, truthfulness, justice and generosity are in many cases listed at the very beginning of the character descriptions. Thus, the adjectives often connected with the image of a hero are: 'the knower of *Veda* or *dharma*' (*vedavid*; *dharmavid*); 'the one who says the truth' (*satyavādin*); 'the one who pursues the way of the truth' (*satyavikrama*); or 'the one who is munificent' (*udāra*). Ideal heroes are, similarly to the heroines, in full control of their senses (*saṃyatendriya*). Many different kings follow this pattern, such as: Bhīma, the father of Damayantī (Mbh.III.50.3–4); Daśaratha, the father of Rāma (Mbh.III.261.10); and also Aśvapati, the king of Madras, and the father of Sāvitrī (Mbh.III.277.5–7). These lists of features re-appear in so many descriptions that it is definitely correct to describe them as important elements of the topos of the *Mahābhārata* hero.

The hero's inner perfection was at least as important as his external appearance. This is acknowledged *expressis verbis* once again in passages from the text included in one of the sub-stories concerning king Sagara. It says there (Mbh.III.104.6; Mbh.III.106.20) that 'King Sagara was beautiful by his handsomeness and strength' (*rūpasattvabalopeta*) and some verses later 'He was great

⁸ However, at least some exceptions to this rule may be found. One of them is included in the sub-story about Damayantī, the wife of King Nala who in one of the episodes is shown as attractive (due to the beauty of her body) to a man other than her husband. She is met alone in the forest by a hunter who falls in love with her, and is tempted by her external attractiveness (Mbh.III.60.20.1–60.38). Madeleine Biardeau, in her book *Le Mahābhārata. Un récit fondateur du brahmanisme et son interprétation* discusses the topic of fidelity of wives at length, which is also a matter in this story (Biardeau, 2002: 621–632).

⁹ I was inspired to ask this question by Joanna Sachse.

as far as his inner soul (*ātman*) was concerned'. In this example, the image at first seems to be incomplete and due to this imperfection it seems that other qualities should have been added immediately. The same kind of description concerns Rāma, who 'knew completely all the Laws and was the master of his senses'. Moreover, he was 'pleasing to the eyes even of his enemies'. In this last example, his external handsomeness was so great that apart from his male friends or heroines, it was noticed even by his male rivals (Mbh.III.261.11–12).

In most of the stories of the *Mahābhārata*, as far as the descriptions of physical beauty and attractiveness of female or male characters are concerned, first of all, some general terms do occur.¹⁰ The list of words used to denote a beautiful woman is comparatively large (*śubhā*; *śubhānānā*; *śobhanā*; *sundarī*). If the author of a certain fragment wants to stress the beauty of the heroine the prefix *su-*, which in this case means 'very', is added (e.g. *su-śobhanā*, etc.). Sometimes the attractiveness of the body is expressed by the use of adjectives that refer without any doubt only to the heroine's body. Compounds are used, such as 'the one whose body is beautiful' (*vibhrājamānā vapuṣā*) and 'the one having beautiful body parts' (*subhagā*). It is not rare that the beauty of the main heroine of the story is presented as a feature that prevails over the attractiveness of the other females mentioned. Comparisons such as 'the one whose body is better than the bodies of all the other women on earth' (*rūpeṇa samatīkrāntā pṛthivyām sarvayoṣitā*) do occur.¹¹ Their beauty is also said to be comparable, or sometimes even more attractive than the beauty of the goddesses or semi-goddesses who inhabit the world of the gods. One example is the beauty of Damayantī. She is described (Mbh.III.50.13) as the one 'whose body has no equivalent even in the world of the gods or semi-gods' (*na deveṣu na yakṣeṣu tādrig rūpavatī kvacit*). Sukanyā, the young princess who appears in the story concerning the ascetic Cyavana, is described as being 'like the daughter of the king of the Gods' (Mbh.III.123.2). Quite often, the beauty of the heroines is shown as being similar to one of the Apsarases, heavenly maidens who live in the domain of gods and only come to earth from time to time, after being sent

¹⁰ Another question which may be posed is what general terms are used to denote a young girl or a woman in the *Mahābhārata*. However, that is not the subject of this analysis. It is worth mentioning that there is a study concerning the general terms used for a young girl or a woman (*kanyā*, *strī*, etc.) in the *Meghadūta*, the work of Kālidāsa, which comes from a later period and is a part of the literature of the *kāvya* style (cf. Pigoñowa, 1996: 161–172). To my knowledge, there is no such analysis as far as the epics are concerned. Moreover, until now the general terms used for male characters have not been discussed in a comprehensive manner.

¹¹ The word *rūpa* as explained by Monier-Williams may mean not only 'body' but also 'any outward appearance or phenomenon or colour, form, shape or figure'. It may also, depending on its context, mean a 'handsome form, loveliness, grace, beauty, splendour' (Monier-Williams, 1995: 885–886). As a consequence, in certain examples, its meaning may be wider than simply a 'body'. It can cover not only the protagonist's bodily outlook but also his clothing, grace of movement, ornamentation, make-up, etc.

here for different reasons. Sometimes the heroines are also compared to the goddess of fortune and wellness — Śrī — who is known for her extreme beauty. Additionally, just like the goddess, they are often described as charming, lovely, splendid or glorious. Their bodies are, in these examples, often shown as emitting light or radiance. This light is, in many instances, shown as a synonym for beauty. One of the passages (Mbh.III.50.13) concerning Damayanti's attractiveness reads as follows: 'In her splendid body she is similar to the goddess Śrī. She is also large-eyed' (*atīva rūpaśampannā śrīr ivāyatalocanā*). In the story of Sāvitrī, the heroine is described as 'Śrī incarnated' or as 'being beautiful as a goddess' (Mbh.III.277.30–31).

Comparatively often, young girls are depicted with their girlfriends (*sakhigaṇavṛtā*; *sakhigaṇasamāvṛtā*). Bhīma's daughter Damayanti was seen by the hero Nala 'in the middle of her girlfriends' (*dadarśa tatra vaidarbhī sakhigaṇasamāvṛtām*). In these examples, the female characters are always shown as the most beautiful of the girls (Mbh.III.122.126–127). The heroines, even if they are not compared to Śrī, are also often described as shining from the beauty of their bodies and, probably, also with all the embellishments they are wearing. This shining quality is sometimes compared to a flash of lightning — 'Among her girlfriends she shines with her faultless body which is similar to a flash of lightning' (*sakhīmadye'navadyāṅgī vidyut saudāminī*) says a verse from the *Mahābhārata* (Mbh.III.50.12). The feature of shining, connected with the heroine's external (and maybe also internal) beauty, is mentioned many times and it is expressed by different words such as 'shine, brilliance' (*tejas*; *yaśas*) or, in other examples, by comparisons such as 'by her brilliance she was glimmering like moonshine' (*ākṣipantīm iva ca bhāḥ śaśiṇaḥ svena tejasā*). The attractiveness of the female body is sometimes stressed *expressis verbis* by the images of the heroines wearing all sorts of embellishments. It is not rare to find sentences like 'There was Bhaimī there who shone with all the embellishments' (*tatra sma rājate bhaimī sarvabharaṇabhuṣitā*) inserted into many descriptive passages of the epic (e.g. Mbh.III.50.12). Such common details of these images often concern heroines who are princesses or queens.

In one of the passages of Book III of the *Mahābhārata*, there is a much more detailed description of a female character. The description concerns the courtesan who arrives to tempt the young ascetic Ṛṣyaśṛṅga. Some vital fragments of this description are important for understanding the complexity that can occur in the image of an attractive female protagonist. She is depicted as having hair in braids 'which were well-combed and so arranged that they split in equal halves'. They are 'blue and black, translucent and fragrant, fastened with gold thread and very long'. She is described as 'not short neither too tall', 'of a golden colour and wide lotus-eyes'. It says that 'about the navel her waist was pinched' and that she 'had very full hips'. Her body is shown as 'a wind-tossed tree' and she is described as the one who 'shines like the sun'. Her eyes

are 'white and black like *cakorās*'.¹² She also has some jewellery which serves to make her even more beautiful. She 'wears what looked like cups that shone as lightning shines in the sky' and her 'ears were surrounded by circles, which were full of colour and finely shaped'. Moreover, under her dress there 'glittered a girdle made of gold' (Mbh.III.112.1–112.11).¹³ As may be seen, the image of the courtesan is in agreement with all the previous features of the external beauty of an attractive female heroine, but in this case it is rendered in a much more complex way. As far as these typical features are concerned, this is the most versatile example of the topos of an attractive heroine found in the third book of the *Mahābhārata*.

What was the image of the body of a *Mahābhārata* heroine, as far as her general features were concerned? Apart from adjectives like 'beautiful', they were always shown as 'fine-waisted' (*sumadhyā*) meaning 'narrow-waisted'. Sāvitrī is one of these (Mbh.III.277.25; Mbh.III.277.30). The next feature which completes the image is the description of heroines 'having beautiful hips' (*sudvijananā*) meaning 'having broad hips'. These features appear in many descriptions and are the most typical and, at the same time, the most expected features of a heroine.

Their beauty is also emphasised in the context of particular parts of the face. What are depicted in most cases are the eyes and their shape. Thus, the heroine is often described as 'having very beautiful eyes' (*sulocanā*). What does this mean, in particular? First of all, the ideal eyes had to be large, so the adjectives that were used mean 'the one whose eyes are large' (*āyatākṣā*; *āyatalocanā*). Such an image is included, for example, in the description of Sītā's beauty. She is shown as a 'wide-eyed woman' (Mbh.III.264.2). The same is also true of the eyes of Sāvitrī (Mbh.III.280.30). Damayantī is described as 'long-eyed' (Mbh.III.60.25) and as a 'doe-eyed woman' (Mbh.III.60.29). In many examples,

¹² As this harlot is being described by an ascetic boy who has never seen a woman before, he thinks that she must be another boy. This is why he uses masculine forms in his description. His comparisons are often relating to the world of creatures such as geese or cuckoos, etc., as these were the beings he was most acquainted with. In this sentence, the birds known as *cakorās* are used to describe the beauty of her eyes. They are shown as white and black in colour. In later literature, these birds (quails) were 'better known for their red eyes and their supposed feeding on moonbeams' as writes Klaus Karttunen in his article *Sparrows in love* (Karttunen, 2000: 199).

¹³ It is not a matter for detailed discussion here, but there are many translations of this image of the courtesan in which subtle differences occur (cf. e.g. the nineteenth century translations to English by Manmatha Nath Dutt, modern edition of which was released in 1988; the one by Kisari Mohan Ganguli in an edition from 1970; the translation to Russian prepared by Jaroslav V. Vasilkov and Svetlana L. Neveleva, published in 1987; or the Polish translation included in the book by Iwona Milewska (2013: 147). In this article, the English translation of the text concerning the courtesan is provided in the translation of Johannes Adrianus Bernardus van Buitenen (cf. *The Mahābhārata*, 1973: 436–437). Other longer fragments are also taken from the translation of van Buitenen.

the eyes of heroines are compared to the petals of a lotus or to the leaves of a lotus. Sāvitrī is described as ‘having lotus-petal eyes’ (Mbh.III.277.23; Mbh.III.277.26). Other phrases concerning the heroines’ faces are ones meaning that they had ‘the eyes similar to lotuses’ which can be understood as the whole plant (*rājīvalocanā; kamalāyatākṣā*).

Apart from their splendid eyes, the heroines are also described as ‘having beautiful eyebrows’ (*subbruḥ*), ‘having beautiful teeth’ (*sudatī*) and ‘having very nice hair’ (*sukeṣī*). It seems correct to think that the beautiful hair was always of a black colour. Such a suggestion, even if rarely, does appear in some other stories apart from the information included in the description of the courtesan above. However, it is not frequent that all the elements of the beautiful faces of the heroines are described in a detailed way. In most cases what precedes the presented part of the face is the positive prefix *su-*. Most probably the canon of beauty was known to the listeners to such an extent that there was no need to add many adjectives or comparisons.¹⁴ The face of the heroine is sometimes compared to the beauty of the moon, or of the sun. To make the image of a beautiful heroine more attractive, adjectives like ‘smiling’ (*vismayānvitā*) or ‘with a charming smile’ (*cāruhāsini*) are added from time to time. As mentioned above, many of the images of a heroine are not complete. Nevertheless, in the episode included in the story of Damayantī and Nala, one can find a description pointing to the main features of her body and her charm: ‘Her hips and breasts were heavy, her limbs delicate and flawless, her face like a full moon, her eyes shaded by curved lashes, and her speech honeyed’ (Mbh.III. 60.31–32). This is not the only example, and a *topos* may be built by summarising the features already mentioned.¹⁵

¹⁴ This tendency changed in later periods. The works of authors belonging to the *kāvya* period were full of more detailed descriptions. Daniela Rossella in her article *The feminine beauty in the classical Indian poetry: ideas and ideals* discusses these canons at length, giving many examples which occur in a variety of after-epic texts (Rossella, 2002/2003: 465–477). Some information about these images is included in an article by Gyula Woytilla. The article is entitled *On some natural devices describing female beauty in Sanskrit poetry* (Woytilla, 2006: 23–36). The author writes there that in this period, descriptions of female beauty followed very specific patterns. He points to the fact that beautiful parts of the bodies of heroines (e.g. the face, eyebrows, lips, neck, breasts, arms or thighs) were often compared to various physical phenomena, various plants or particular fruits. This is also the information included in an article by Giuliano Boccali (2004: 17–19). These fossilized comparisons formed canons which were often repeated, with only minor changes. In the stories of the *Mahābhārata* the comparisons, whenever they appear, are built in a very simple way. The picture of a beautiful *Mahābhārata* heroine or hero, as visualised by the recipient, is at least partly based on his or her former knowledge of conventions which were not yet so much fossilised.

¹⁵ In this context it is worth to mention that, e.g., for the authors of modern film versions of the *Mahābhārata* it is unavoidable to choose a certain way of showing the heroines and heroes of the epic. Two versions are the one by Peter Brook (Carriere, 1989; Carriere, 1990), as described in the book by Garry O’Connor *The Mahabharata. Peter Brook’s epic in the making*

Here the question arises as to whether the comparatively detailed image of the courtesan, as presented above, can be treated as a typical one. What is visible in this example, when we compare this image with other ones, is that the female character is shown as an individual who has the right to tempt the hero with the whole range of bodily tricks. It is not only her appearance but also her behaviour that appeals to the hero. As a consequence, not only his sight but also his other senses such as hearing, smell, touch and taste are addressed. The courtesan is shown as the one whose feet tinkle and whose hands are tied with some strings which produce music similar to the sound of wild geese shouting in a pond (Mbh.III.112.5–6). Her voice is described as similar to that of a cuckoo (Mbh.III.112.7). It is also said that her fragrance is extremely beautiful (Mbh.III.112.8). She is shown as decorated with garlands of flowers (Mbh.III.112.16), and she touches the hero and embraces his body from time to time. Then she kisses him (Mbh.III.112.12). She feeds him with extraordinary fruit and liquids that have a splendid taste (Mbh.112.13–14). Her attractiveness is helped by all of these factors.¹⁶ However, this is definitely not the *Mahābhārata*

(O'Connor, 1989); and the second one by Ravi Chopra, photos of which are included in the very popular comics series *Mahabharat* reprinted many times in India since the time the film series was shown on TV. For the most popular modern Indian visualisations of the protagonists of the *Mahābhārata*, some other modern Indian TV films were discussed in detail by Ananda Mitra in his book concerning versions of the epic and their influence on popular culture (Mitra, 1993). Manohar Laxman Varadpande also adds some information on modern versions of the *Mahābhārata* in his book *Mahabharata in performance* (Varadpande, 1990). The tradition of performances of the *Mahābhārata* is also described in an article by Suresh Awasthi (1990: 183–192). The version by Brook, discussed at length by David Williams (1991), was shown all over the world and was greatly acclaimed everywhere except in India. Brook decided to simplify the epic as much as was possible. His choice was to include the actors from different countries and cultures of the world. Chopra's version was totally different, as far as its aesthetics were concerned. The heroines and heroes followed the Indian canons of attractiveness as expected by modern, mainly Indian, viewers. It is unavoidable to see major differences between the Indian and European imaginary figures of the *Mahābhārata* protagonists in these two films. Consequently, it must be said that in the modern reception of the epic there is not one canon of beauty for the heroines and heroes, as far as their bodies, clothes, etc. are concerned. The epic figures can, and in fact are, visualised in modern times in a multitude of ways (Deshpande, 1978). Whether these visions are in accordance with the original epic images is a matter of discussion (Milewska, 1999: 169–178). Daniela Rossella, in an article concerning Indian stories in Western music, describes the history of European operas between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. But for information on their librettos she touches the problem of Indian heroines and heroes as shown in Europe (Rossella, 2001: 107–122). In another article (Rossella, 2006: 53–78) she discusses whether and what influence Indian canons of a different kind, including the ones concerning the beauty of heroines and heroes, has had on the Western 'collective imagination', as she calls it. She inserts into her article a set of images illustrating the topic of imaginary Indian protagonists (Rossella, 2006: 67–78).

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion of this topic in the article by Milewska *Kobieta jako pokusa ascety w literaturze indyjskiej* [Woman as a temptation of the ascetic in the Indian literature] (Milewska, 2005a).

topos of a heroine appearing in royal circles. These ladies had to be much more shy. Even if they behaved from time to time in such a way, this was not mentioned in the stories.

To juxtapose the courtesan's image, the *Mahābhārata* also includes some descriptions in which female ascetics are described — however, there are not too many visualisations of them.¹⁷ One of these images is included in the story of Lopāmudrā and Agastya (Mbh.III.94.1–97.21), and another one in the story of Sukanyā and Cyavana (Mbh.III.122.1–123.26). What is typical in these descriptions is that the heroines are at first described as being physically attractive young girls who have splendid thighs, great eyes *etc.*, which is in accordance with the *Mahābhārata* topos of attractiveness for heroines marrying the ascetic heroes, but the women hide their physical beauty under ascetic clothes. What seems important is that they always keep their inner positive qualities. The positive traits of their characters are unchangeable regardless of the other contexts of their lives. They shine with positive traits rather than with physical beauty and embellishments.

As far as the topos of the *Mahābhārata* heroine is concerned, it seems justified to look now at some examples of female beauty exhibited by the Apsaras, the semi-goddesses, who are the paragons of attractiveness and are always sent to the earth to tempt the heroes with their physical charm. There are several fragments of the *Mahābhārata* where these divine beings appear. Even if in some episodes there are only lists of their names (Mbh.III.44.29–32; Mbh.II.10), it is worth noticing that these names, at least sometimes, are meaningful. For example, there is the Apsaras whose name means 'the one whose eyes are beautiful', (*cārunetrā*) or 'the one whose voice is as sweet as honey' (*madhurasvarā*). Thus, their names denote features which are of importance when considering the different elements of beauty of the heroines. In Book III of the *Mahābhārata*, an episode is included concerning the Apsaras Urvaśī who was seen by the ascetic Kāśyapa. As soon as the ascetic noticed the Apsaras, he was tempted by her external beauty (and it is obvious that what was important was her physical attractiveness, as he did not have the chance to notice any of her potential attractive character traits) and broke his vow of celibacy (Mbh.III.110.15). Additionally, in Book I of the epic, there is one more famous episode in which the external appearance of a tempting Apsaras is of importance. This passage, as far as the attractiveness of a heroine is concerned, is more versatile than the previous one, and it seems right to add here some details of the features of her beauty. The name of this Apsaras was Menakā, and she was sent to the earth by the god Indra to make the ascetic Viśvāmitra renounce his austere ways. She is described as

¹⁷ According to John Brockington, as expressed in his book on Sanskrit epics: 'The poets of the *Mahābhārata* do envisage women becoming hermits or ascetics, although the number of instances narrated in any detail is small' (Brockington, 1998: 216).

beautiful, pretty-waisted, young, sweet and smiling. Additionally, she is buxom and fair-skinned (Mbh.I.65.18–66.9). Moreover, she is seen partly naked and the god of love, Manmatha, as well as the wind helped her in the task.¹⁸

In the stories and sub-stories of the *Mahābhārata*, as far as handsome male characters are concerned, there are not so many specific terms used to describe them as in the case of the heroines. Due to this, the descriptions of the heroes are not so versatile. The most common adjectives are connected with the general beauty of their bodies.¹⁹ The hero is often described as ‘handsome’ or, in other words, ‘one whose body is beautiful’ (*rūpavat*). His body ‘shines with beauty’ (*mahāyaśas*), and he is ‘splendid while seen’ (*dr̥ṣṭi manohara*). Sometimes, his body is shown as ‘having no equivalent on earth’ (*rupeṇāpratimo bhuvi*). Sometimes the question is asked whether he is ‘a god or one of the semi-gods’ (*ko’yaṃ devo nu yakṣo nu gandharvo nu bhaviṣyati*). Also, sometimes he is compared to a particular figure from the distant past — ‘looking like Manu, the forefather of humankind’ (*sākṣad iva manuḥ svayam*),²⁰ or to gods known for their handsomeness — ‘as beautiful as Aśvins’ (*aśvinoḥ sadr̥śo rūpe*). The hero’s handsomeness can be compared to the one of the god of love (*kandarpa iva rūpeṇa*). Nala was described in this way (Mbh.III.50.15).²¹ The hero may also be shown as ‘by his beauty similar to the lord of the gods’, namely Indra (*devarājasamadyuti*).²²

Common terms used to stress the hero’s handsomeness are directly connected with the phenomenon of shining. He is ‘the one who shines with his beauty’ (*mahāyaśas*) or ‘the one who, in his radiance, is like a descendant of Aditi’ (*ādityaiva tejasā*). The glimmering sometimes comes from the jewellery the heroes wear, especially when they are dressed for important occasions. The kings who came for the *svayamvara* of Damayantī are depicted as ‘wearing shining earrings’ (Mbh.III.54.4). In this picture, what makes them even more handsome are the fragrant garlands which they wear around their necks. As far as the particular features of their bodies are concerned, quite often the information we are given concerns their faces. From time to time, there are

¹⁸ In the dictionary of Indian civilisation by Louis Frédéric, there is a short description of the appearance and the roles the Apsarases play in different stories of Sanskrit mythology. According to the entry, they can be heavenly beings (*daivika*) or the earthly ones (*laukika*). They are described as having beautiful, long hair (Frédéric, 1998, 1: 70).

¹⁹ As far as the meaning of the Sanskrit term ‘*rūpa*’ used in the examples concerning handsome heroes is concerned, cf. footnote 11 of this article.

²⁰ Manu is identified in mythology as Vaivasvata, which means ‘sun-born’ (Dowson, 1987: 199). What may be meant in this comparison is the common feature of shining.

²¹ Kandarpa, more commonly known as Kāma (the god of love) was depicted in different ways during the ages of development of Sanskrit literature. What is important here is that, comparatively often, he is shown as a handsome youth attended by the Apsarases.

²² Indra is often described as having skin of a golden colour and as having arms of enormous length (Dowson, 1987: 124).

comparisons indicating that the face of a hero resembles the moon or the sun — or sometimes even both of them. In these examples, the hero is described as the one ‘having the face like the moon’ (*candrābhavaktra*; *induvadana*), or as ‘having the face as perfect as the moon and the sun’ (*ravisomasamaṣṭrabha*). Nala’s face is ‘beautiful as the moon’ (*candrābhavaktra*). Sometimes other phenomena of nature are also mentioned. The faces of heroes are compared to the stars shining in the sky (Mbh.III.54.7). The details of their faces are depicted with a special focus on their eyes. The texts say that this or that hero is the one who is ‘large-eyed’ (*viśālākṣa*), or sometimes he is depicted as ‘the one whose eyes are similar to lotuses’ (*padmanibhekṣana*). King Rāma is one of these, as in his description the adjective ‘lotus-eyed’ (Mbh.III.264.50) appears. Also, quite often the hero is ‘black-haired’ or ‘black, curly-haired’ (Mbh.III.264.50).

However, what prevails most often in the images of male protagonists is their physical strength. This is probably also the feature which makes their bodies the most attractive. It goes without saying that the hero has to be ‘strong’ (*balin*), and adjectives like ‘the one whose arms are great or strong’ (*mahābāhu*; *dirghabāhu*) appear very frequently. Rāma and many other heroes are depicted in this manner (Mbh.III.261.9). Interestingly enough, this strength is often shown as joined with gentleness. Thus, the heroes are spoken of as ‘having delicate arms’ (*suslakṣṇabāhu*). This term occurs in the description of heroes who have come to the *svayamvara* of Draupadī (Mbh.III.54.6). In one of her monologues, Damayantī, while praising Nala’s virtues mentions as well as his threatening strength also the gentleness of his embrace (Mbh.III.71.10). Only this unity gives the full picture of an attractive, good and long-awaited husband.

The heroes are often also compared to tigers or lions (*puruṣavyāghra*; *naravyāghra*) or (*rājasārdūla*; *rājasimha*). In this respect, what is meant is not only their physical strength but also their proud gait. Such comparisons are made in the story of Damayantī and Nala (Mbh.III.50.15; III.54.5). In the story of Sitā and Rāma, the hero is depicted as ‘the one whose gait is similar to that of an elephant in rut’ (Mbh.III.261.9). In one fragment of the main plot of Book III of the *Mahābhārata*, where Draupadī praises the features of her husbands, there are some recurrent as well as some new features of the handsome heroes. The oldest brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, is depicted by her as ‘the one who is pure and fair like gold, with an aquiline nose’. He is, additionally, ‘wide-eyed’ (Mbh.III.254.7). Bhīma, the next one, is ‘strong-armed and similar to a full-grown *śāla* tree’ (Mbh.III.254.9). Arjuna is described as ‘gentle, generous, famous, and grave, in control of his senses’. He also excels in ‘paying heed to the old’ and is ‘in splendour the match of the Fire God’ (Mbh.III.254.12–13).²³ Nakula is depicted as the one ‘whose body is the fairest on earth’. He is also

²³ In mythology, as shown in literary works Agni, the Fire god, is described as appearing in three phases — in heaven as the sun; in mid-air as lightning; and on earth as ordinary fire. As may be seen, the feature of light is stressed in all three phases.

shown as 'true to his vows' (Mbh.III.254.14–15). Finally, Sahadeva, one more of Draupadī's husbands, is 'mighty and sagacious' (Mbh.III.254.15). Moreover, he is 'in splendour the peer of the moon and the fire' and he is 'high-minded and firm in the Law of the Barons' (Mbh.III.254.17–18).

It is clear that, as far as the attractiveness of *Mahābhārata* heroines and heroes is concerned, there are several features which they share concerning their bodily image. Their eyes are definitely, in shape, similar to lotus flowers. If they are to be beautiful the eyes should also be large. Both female and male characters 'shine' with their beauty. Often their faces are compared to the moon or to the sun mainly in order to make the association with their glimmering quality. Heroines and heroes also often wear embellishments which add attractiveness to their external appearance. These embellishments are described more often in the images of women, but men are also depicted as being decorated at least with golden earrings.

As may be noticed in the *Vanaparvan* book of the *Mahābhārata*, what appears most often are separate adjectives or stereotyped expressions, rather than long descriptions of female or male beauty. However, extended descriptions are to be found in abundance in later literature, and the period of the *kāvya* style is particularly full of them. Nonetheless, the *Mahābhārata* has inspired many poets of later times not only by its stories which became the bases for later variations, but also by its poetic values, including the descriptions of the beauty of its heroines and heroes.²⁴ Thus, many of the images included in the *Mahābhārata* hold the germ of later descriptions. Kālidāsa, who is known as the best poet in ancient India, included in his works a lot of examples of attractive heroines and heroes. One of the images 'painted' by him is included in the *Kumārasaṃbhava*,²⁵ and is a long description of the attractiveness of Śiva's wife to be, Umā. In this example, Umā's beauty made Śiva, who was deeply involved in ascetic practices, pause in his meditation and glance at her for a short moment (*Kumārasaṃbhava* III.67).²⁶ This glance was the first step in the chain of events which finally made Śiva give up his deep meditation. The external beauty of a heroine was not enough to tempt the god, but it was an important part of the very beginning of this love story.²⁷ Later Umā, in order to be

²⁴ This opinion is expressed e.g. by Pandurang Vaman Kane in his book *History of Sanskrit poetics* (Kane, 1998: 332).

²⁵ Cf. Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhava* (Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhava*, 1917), or Kālidāsa. *Granthavali. Complete works of Kālidāsa* (Kālidāsa, 1976).

²⁶ In Smith's translation, this passage goes on as follows: 'But Shiva, the Destroyer, his calm slightly disturbed, like the ocean at the rise of the moon, let his eyes fall on Umā's face, with her lower lip like a *bimba* fruit' (cf. *The birth of Kumāra by Kāli-Dāsa*, 2005). This is slightly different in the translation of Hank Heifetz (cf. *The origin of the young God. Kālidāsa's Kumārasaṃbhava*, 1985).

²⁷ A more detailed analysis of the whole story is provided in the article *Love and ascetics in the Mahābhārata as compared to the Umā and Śiva story from the Kumārasaṃbhava* (Milewska, 2005b: 41–52).

successful in the task of temptation, converted herself to an ascetic woman. Only the joining of her external beauty and her attractive character traits made her good enough to become the wife of Śiva. This love story resembles ones from the third book of the *Mahābhārata*, with the main difference being that it happens at the level of gods rather than of human beings.

The attractiveness of the protagonists was definitely a quality that was sought after by the heroes and heroines of many stories of the *Mahābhārata*. The best characters were the ones who were perfect at the level of their attractive character traits joined with the fossilised features of their outer appearance. From the passages described above, it is apparent that there are a comparatively large number of instances where the heroines and heroes are shown in the context of a love story, but they also appear in passages of a different kind. In all of them, the characteristic features re-appear.

In one of the passages of the *Mahābhārata*, namely in the story of Lopāmudrā and Agastya (Mbh.III.94.1–97.27), there is even a recipe for creating an excellent woman who is the paragon of attractiveness. The ascetic Agastya, who was looking for a proper candidate for his wife, and could not find one, decides to create an excellent female. What did he do in order to achieve such a result? He simply gathered the parts of many different creatures and put them together. The word *anuttamā*, which is used in this context (Mbh.III.96.17) with regard to the created female character, and is explained in the dictionary as ‘unsurpassed, incomparably the best or chief, excellent’ (Monier-Williams, 1995: 33) allows for the translation of the passage in slightly different ways. One of them, offered by Manmatha Nath Dutt, is: ‘He then, taking those parts of creatures that are considered beautiful, created an excellent woman with them’ (*Mahābhārata*, 1988: 152). The translation of Johannes Adrianus Bernardus van Buitenen goes as follows: ‘Then he collected from different creatures such limbs as were matchless; and with those limbs he fashioned a superb woman’ (*Mahābhārata*, 1973: 413). The translation can also be: ‘He took those parts of the creatures that are considered the best’. This may mean that what was considered beautiful was also considered the best. Unfortunately, in the *Mahābhārata* there is no direct recipe, as far as male heroes are concerned.

However, from what has been written above, at least some vital features of attractiveness of the *Mahābhārata* heroines and heroes, on the basis of the descriptions included in its *Vanaparvan* book, can be described without any hesitation. The topoi of beauty, even if not complete, do appear there and form the basis for further development.

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Mbh — *Mahābhārata*

Ksambh — *Kumārasambhava*

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