

ANNA TRYNKOWSKA

THE MAKING OF A HERO: KRṢṢA  
IN MAHĀBHĀRATA 2.30-42 AND IN MĀGHA'S  
ŚĪSUPĀLAVADHA

## 1. Introduction

The *Śīsūpālavadhā* (*The Slaying of Śīsūpāla*) by Māgha (7<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>1</sup>), one of the best and most famous Sanskrit court epic poems (*mahākāvya*, *sargabandha*), is based on an episode of the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, in which Kṛṣṇa kills Śīsūpāla, the villainous king of the Cedis, during Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* sacrifice (MBh 2.30-42, pp. 154-209; tr. van Buitenen 1975: 86-106).

However, in his adaptation, Māgha introduced some changes into the original story.

The commentator Namisādhu (11<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>2</sup>) must have considered them very serious indeed: in his gloss on the sixteenth chapter of Rudraṭa's treatise on poetics *Kāvyaḷamkāra* (9<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>3</sup>), while discussing the classification of literature proposed by this theoretician, he counts the *Śīsūpālavadhā* among *utpādyā* ('invented') literary compositions, i.e. literary works with completely fictitious and original plot; to be more exact, he mentions Māgha's poem as an example of a literary composition in which the hero is well-known but all his actions are the products of the author's own creative imagination (Namisādhu on KA-R 16.3, p. 167).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Warder 1983: 133.

<sup>2</sup> According to Grincer 1987: 21.

<sup>3</sup> According to Gerow 1977: 239 and Grincer 1987: 21.

The present paper compares the plot of the *Śiśupālavadhā* with the original story of the killing of Śiśupāla told in the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* and discusses how the changes made by Māgha alter the status and characterization of Kṛṣṇa in his poem.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. *Mahābhārata* 2.30-42

*Let us first analyse the original story itself. Here is its summary by van Buitenen:*

- MBh 2.30: Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom thrives because of his virtue (1-5). While he is being pressed to perform the sacrifice, Kṛṣṇa arrives with rich gifts (10-15) Yudhiṣṭhira praises him and declares that he owes all to him; he asks permission to sacrifice (15-20). Kṛṣṇa approves (20-25). Dvaipāyana brings in the priests for the ritual. The sacrificial site is built up (30-35). Yudhiṣṭhira instructs Sahadeva to invite kings and brahmins; messengers are sent out (40). Yudhiṣṭhira is inaugurated, and the guests arrive and are housed and feasted. Yudhiṣṭhira sends Nakula to invite his Hāstīnapura kinsmen (50).
- MBh 2.31: Nakula invites the Kauravas, and they accept (1). They arrive and are welcomed; many other princes arrive (1-20) and are sumptuously quartered (20-25).
- MBh 2.32: Yudhiṣṭhira asks for the affection of the Kauravas; he gives each an official function (1-5). Great gifts are made by the kings who have come (10-15). The sacrificial site is opulent (15).  
(van Buitenen 1975: 86).

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<sup>4</sup> It is partially based on my earlier paper, presented during the International Seminar on Narrative Techniques in Indian Literature and Arts (Department of Sanskrit, University of Calicut, India, January 2010), unpublished, in which, however, I concentrated exclusively on the comparison of the plot of Māgha's adaptation with the original *Mahābhārata* story and on narrative techniques employed by the *mahākāvya* poet.

- MBh 2.33: On the day of the Uction brahmins and kings assemble at the altar; Nārada and the great seers appear (1-5). Nārada remembers that all these kings are partial incarnations of Gods and that Kṛṣṇa is Nārāyaṇa (10-20). Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira to offer gifts to the guests. Yudhiṣṭhira asks his guidance in deciding precedence (20-25). Bhīṣma decides on Kṛṣṇa; Sahadeva offers the gift, and Kṛṣṇa accepts (25-30).
- MBh 2.34: Śiśupāla protests vehemently. Kṛṣṇa is not a king and is outranked by many present (1-10). The Pāṇḍavas show their lawlessness, Kṛṣṇa his unworthiness (15-20). He rises to leave with other kings (20).
- MBh 2.35: Yudhiṣṭhira urges Śiśupāla to consent (1-5). Bhīṣma extols the virtues and divinity of Kṛṣṇa (5-25).
- MBh 2.36: Sahadeva challenges any king who protests Kṛṣṇa's honor; no one accepts the challenge (1-5). Śiśupāla's party plots to disrupt the sacrifice (5-15). (van Buitenen 1975: 91).
- MBh 2.37: When the kings stir angrily, Bhīṣma assures Yudhiṣṭhira that Śiśupāla is no match for Kṛṣṇa (1-15).
- MBh 2.38: Śiśupāla berates Bhīṣma, belittles Kṛṣṇa's feats, and accuses Bhīṣma of hypocrisy (15-25). [...].
- MBh 2.39: Śiśupāla berates Kṛṣṇa and Bhīṣma (1-5). Bhīma is enraged but restrained by Bhīṣma (5-20).
- MBh 2.40: Bhīṣma describes Śiśupāla's birth: he is born four-armed and three-eyed, but it is predicted that two arms and the third eye will disappear when he is taken on the lap of his future killer (1-10). Once Rāma and Kṛṣṇa come to Cedi, and the queen, who is Kṛṣṇa's paternal aunt, puts Śiśupāla on Kṛṣṇa's lap; the arms and eye disappear (10-15). The mother asks a boon of Kṛṣṇa, that he will pardon Śiśupāla; Kṛṣṇa promises that he will pardon him a hundred times (15-20).
- MBh 2.41: Bhīṣma assures Bhīma that Kṛṣṇa must want Śiśupāla's challenge (1). Śiśupāla indignantly invites Bhīṣma to praise other kings than Kṛṣṇa, who is a mere serf (5-15). [...]. Bhīṣma belittles the other kings who

stir indignantly (25). Bhīṣma tells them to challenge Kṛṣṇa (30).

MBh 2.42: Śiśupāla challenges Kṛṣṇa (1). Kṛṣṇa describes the misdeeds of Śiśupāla, including his wooing of Rukmiṇī (5-15). Śiśupāla jeers, and Kṛṣṇa cuts off his head (15-20). A divine radiance rises from the dead body and enters Kṛṣṇa's; the kings are divided (20-25). The Pāṇḍavas perform the funerary rites; the Consecration is concluded, and Yudhiṣṭhira is blessed by the kings (30-35). The kings take leave and are conducted to the border (35-40). Kṛṣṇa takes his leave (45-55). Yudhiṣṭhira follows on foot, then is dismissed with a blessing.  
(van Buitenen 1975: 96-97).

As we can see, the story is relatively simple: its hero, Yudhiṣṭhira, in spite of an obstacle, which is easily removed by his powerful ally Kṛṣṇa, successfully completes his *rājasūya* sacrifice. The passage begins with Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom flourishing under his rule and him thinking of performing his *rājasūya*; it ends with Yudhiṣṭhira receiving a blessing from his protector after the conclusion of the rite.

The episode of the killing of Śiśupāla forms here only a part of a larger whole and Kṛṣṇa is only a secondary, although essential character (very appropriately, he appears only after the hero Yudhiṣṭhira has been duly praised).

Kṛṣṇa kills the villain, to be sure, but he does it on behalf of Yudhiṣṭhira, to prevent the disruption of the hero's sacrifice. Admittedly, other reasons are also given in the passage: Kṛṣṇa is angered by Śiśupāla's present insults (MBh 2.42.12-14, 21); the king of the Cedis committed numerous offences against Kṛṣṇa and the Yādavas in the past (MBh 2.42.5-15); it has been predicted that Kṛṣṇa will kill him (MBh 2.40.1-17); moreover, 'He [i.e. Śiśupāla] of a certainty is a particle of the glory of Hari [...] and widely famous Hari wants to recover it'.<sup>5</sup> However, the

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<sup>5</sup> MBh 2.41.3, p. 196:

*eṣa hyasya mahābāho tejomśaśca harerdhruvam /*

main concern here is that Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* should not be disrupted, as one is reminded again and again in the passage (MBh 2.36.15, where Śiśupāla plots with other kings 'to disrupt the sacrifice';<sup>6</sup> MBh 2.37.4, where Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma for advice on how he should act to 'prevent the sacrifice from being disrupted';<sup>7</sup> MBh 2.42.33, where, finally, the sacrifice shines forth with 'its disruptions appeased'<sup>8</sup>).

Moreover, the killing of the villain does not seem a great feat in the passage: Kṛṣṇa does it with the utmost ease, as Śiśupāla is no match for him. The king of the Cedis is all talk. He goes berserk, protests, shouts insults and plots, but he challenges Kṛṣṇa to a duel only when urged by Bhīṣma to do so. He is sure that he will kill his enemy (MBh 2.42.1-4); 'what could possibly befall me from you?' (MBh 2.42.20),<sup>9</sup> he asks him with contempt. However, Kṛṣṇa does not give him the honour of accepting the challenge. Instead, he almost casually cuts off his head, while he is still speaking, with his discus (MBh 2.42.21). Thus, after so many stanzas of Śiśupāla's insults, boasts and empty threats, it takes just one stanza to depict his sudden, honourless and shameful death! This ultimate humiliation of the king of the Cedis, which is totally unexpected not only for him, but also for the listeners or readers, has a strong comic effect. It could perhaps be seen as an awe-inspiring moment as well, showing the listeners or readers how powerful Kṛṣṇa is (or how powerful is his weapon), but this effect is diminished by the fact that Śiśupāla has not been presented here as a worthy adversary.

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*tameva punarādātumicchatprthuyasā hariḥ //*

Tr. van Buitenen 1975: 101-102.

<sup>6</sup> p. 181: *yajñopaghātāya*. Tr. van Buitenen 1975: 96.

<sup>7</sup> p. 182: *yajñasya ca na vighnaḥ syāt*. Tr. van Buitenen 1975: 97.

<sup>8</sup> p. 205: *śāntavighnaḥ*. Tr. van Buitenen 1975: 104.

<sup>9</sup> p. 203: *kṛṣṇa [...] kiṃ me tvatto bhaviṣyati //*

Tr. van Buitenen 1975: 104.

### 3. Māgha's *Śiśupālavadha*

We shall now examine the plot of the *Śiśupālavadha*. Here is my summary:

The hero of the poem, Kṛṣṇa, one of the *avatāras* of the great god Viṣṇu, while living in the city of Dvāravatī, the coastal capital of the Yādava state, notices the sage Nārada descending from the sky (ŚV 1.1). Nārada arrives in Kṛṣṇa's palace and is greeted by him with joy and respect (ŚV 1.11-24). The hero praises his guest and asks him the purpose of his visit (ŚV 1.25-30). The sage first praises his host, mainly as a god who descends from heaven to earth to kill evil human rulers, such as Kaṁsa, and demons, such as Hiranyākṣa (ŚV 1.31-40); then he passes him a message from the king of the gods Indra. Indra reminds Kṛṣṇa of the fate of two demons: the mighty Hiranyakaśipu, who terrorized the heaven dwellers and was eventually killed by Viṣṇu's Nṛsiṁha *avatāra*; and his reincarnation, the horrifying Rāvaṇa, who waged war against the gods for control over the universe until slain by another *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, namely Rāma (ŚV 1.41-68). Next, the king of the gods points out that Rāvaṇa has been reborn as the wicked Śiśupāla, the king of the Cedis, who surpasses the rest of the human rulers, demons and even gods in power; he laments over the suffering of the world caused by the villain, and finally asks the hero to kill him (ŚV 1.69-73). Nārada echoes Indra's request (ŚV 1.74). Kṛṣṇa agrees; the sage leaves (ŚV 1.75).

However, Kṛṣṇa has been invited by his cousin Yudhiṣṭhira to attend his *rājasūya* sacrifice and he hesitates over whether to march against Śiśupāla at once or to accept the invitation (ŚV 2.1). The hero meets his two relatives, Balarāma and Uddhava, in his assembly hall, to take counsel (ŚV 2.2-5). Kṛṣṇa speaks first. The hero adduces arguments in favour of immediate marching against the king of the Cedis and thus suggests that this is the option which he is inclined to choose; still, he asks Uddhava and Balarāma their opinions (ŚV 2.6-13). Balarāma takes the floor next. Similarly to Kṛṣṇa, his brother argues for immediate marching against the capital of the Cedi state

Māhiṣmatī and puts forward further arguments in support of this course of action: e.g. he points out that Śiśupāla, despite being Kṛṣṇa's cousin, has wronged him many times; the king of the Cedis hates the hero, who has abducted and married his bride-to-be Rukmiṇī (ŚV 2.22-66). Uddhava speaks last. He recommends caution and warns that Śiśupāla has many allies, so it is not easy to defeat him; then he puts forward arguments against immediate war with the king of the Cedis: e.g. he reminds Kṛṣṇa that he should not kill the villain yet, as he has promised his mother Śrutaśravas, who is a sister of the hero's father, to endure his hundred insults, and this number is still not exhausted; he argues for the acceptance of Yudhiṣṭhira's invitation (ŚV 2.69-117).

Now Kṛṣṇa, who no longer wishes to march against Śiśupāla at once, travels with the army of the Yādavas to Yudhiṣṭhira's capital Indraprastha (ŚV 3-12).

The Pāṇḍava brothers greet the hero outside the city and accompany him inside (ŚV 13.2-29). Kṛṣṇa reaches Yudhiṣṭhira's royal court (ŚV 13.49-50). They begin to talk (ŚV 13.61-69). Yudhiṣṭhira praises Kṛṣṇa, points out that it is thanks to the hero, who is the lord of the universe, that he has achieved sovereignty over the whole of Bhāratavarṣa, and asks him for permission to perform the *rājasūya* sacrifice (ŚV 14.1-11). Kṛṣṇa praises Yudhiṣṭhira, approves of his intention and promises to assist him (ŚV 14.12-16). Yudhiṣṭhira inaugurates his *rājasūya* (ŚV 14.17). The rite is being performed without any obstacles (ŚV 14.18-52). Bhīṣma, asked by Yudhiṣṭhira for advice on who should be given the gift of honour, decides on Kṛṣṇa, and then, by praising him, justifies his choice (ŚV 14.53-87). Yudhiṣṭhira offers the gift to the hero (ŚV 14.88).

Śiśupāla, who is also present, is filled with envy and goes berserk (ŚV 15.1-11). He belittles Kṛṣṇa and berates Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira for honouring him (ŚV 15.12-39). Kṛṣṇa is not disturbed and keeps the promise given to Śiśupāla's mother; for the first time, however, he silently counts the offences committed against him by the king of the Cedis (ŚV 15.40-43). Bhīṣma challenges everyone who does not approve of honouring the hero (ŚV 15.44-46). Śiśupāla's allies run amok

(ŚV 15.47-61). The king of the Cedis reviles Bhīṣma and Kṛṣṇa; he challenges the hero to a fight: it will show which one of them truly deserves the gift of honour! (ŚV 15.62-66). He storms out of the sacrificial assembly and returns to his encampment; on his orders, the army of the Cedis prepares for battle (ŚV 15.67-96).

An envoy sent by Śiśupāla to Kṛṣṇa arrives in the sacrificial assembly (ŚV 16.1) and delivers an ambiguous speech: he either 1) praises the hero and persuades him to forgive the king of the Cedis, who is friendly towards him and wishes for reconciliation, or 2) reviles the hero and challenges him on behalf of the king of the Cedis, who hates him and seeks vengeance (ŚV 16.2-15). Kṛṣṇa's *sūta* Dāruka, who discerns both meanings of the speech, assures the envoy that Śiśupāla may behave towards Kṛṣṇa however he chooses, and the hero will react accordingly; he will not be hindered by the promise given to Śiśupāla's mother any more, since this message counts as the hundredth offence perpetrated against him by the king of the Cedis (ŚV 16.16-37). The envoy speaks again, this time unambiguously, and informs Kṛṣṇa that Śiśupāla intends to kill him; he praises the might of the king of the Cedis and advises the hero to pay him homage, or else he will certainly die (ŚV 16.38-85).

Kṛṣṇa's allies run amok (ŚV 17.1-17). However, the hero is not disturbed (ŚV 17.18). The envoy leaves; Kṛṣṇa and the army of the Yādavas prepare for battle; both armies arrive at the battlefield (ŚV 17.20-69).

The battle begins; it is long and fierce (ŚV 18-19).

In the decisive duel between Kṛṣṇa and Śiśupāla, they first shower each other with arrows (ŚV 20.7-31), and then use various spells and magical weapons (ŚV 20.32-75). Having withstood all the attacks, the hero cuts off the head of the king of the Cedis with his discus (ŚV 20.78) and absorbs the opponent's *dhāman*<sup>10</sup> (ŚV 20.79).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> ŚV 20.79, p. 520; glossed by the commentator Mallinātha (14<sup>th</sup> century AD – according to De 1923: 228, or 15<sup>th</sup> century AD – according to Kane 1923: CXIX) as *tejas*.

<sup>11</sup> For a summary of the poem, see also, e.g., Cappeller 1915: XVI-XVIII; Warder 1983: 135-143 and Trynkowska 2004: 63-73.



It is easy to notice that the proper retelling of MBh 2.30-42 starts only in the thirteenth canto (*sarga*) of the *Śiśupālavadhā*. On the whole, it is done quite faithfully. Apart from minor alterations, which I am not going to discuss in this paper, Māgha introduces three major changes into the original story:

- 1) he adds a long prologue in twelve cantos (ŚV 1-12), which depicts Nārada's visit to Kṛṣṇa (ŚV 1) and the hero's counsel with Balarāma and Uddhava (ŚV 2), as well as describes Kṛṣṇa's journey from Dvāravatī to Indraprastha with the army of the Yādavas (ŚV 3-12);
- 2) he precedes the scene of the actual killing of Śiśupāla by Kṛṣṇa, which, following MBh 2.42.21, he recounts in just one stanza (ŚV 20.78 – it would have been difficult, even for a *mahākāvya* poet, to devote more space to the act of cutting off the head of an opponent!), with two *sargas* depicting a fierce battle between their armies (ŚV 18-19) and seventy-seven stanzas describing their intense duel (ŚV 20.1-77);
- 3) he leaves out the last thirty-five stanzas of the *Mahābhārata* passage (MBh 2.42.26-60).

*By doing this, he creates a novel story indeed!*

Its hero, Kṛṣṇa, slays a worthy adversary Śiśupāla during Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* sacrifice. The poem begins with Kṛṣṇa noticing Nārada descending from the sky over Dvāravatī:

Hari, the husband of Śrī, the abode of the world,  
dwelling in the fortunate house of Vasudeva in order to  
control the world, saw the sage born of Brahmā's body  
descending from the sky.<sup>12</sup>

It ends with Kṛṣṇa cutting off the head of the king of the Cedis with his discus and absorbing the opponent's *tejas* (ŚV 20.78-79).

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<sup>12</sup> ŚV 1.1, p. 2:

*śriyaḥ patiḥ śrīmati śāsītum jagajjagannivāso vasudevasadmani /  
vasan dadarśāvatarantamambarādhiranyaagarbhāṅgabhuvaṃ munim hariḥ //*  
Tr. Trynkowska 2000: 482. Cf. Hultsch 1926: 1.

Śiśupāla is here an incarnation of a mighty demon and the hero slays him as a god who descends from heaven to earth to save the world from the suffering caused by villains. Other reasons practically do not play any role. The concern that Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrifice should not be disrupted is nowhere explicitly articulated. The same holds true for the prediction that Kṛṣṇa will be Śiśupāla's killer. Although Balarāma points out that Śiśupāla has perpetrated numerous offences against Kṛṣṇa and the Yādavas (e.g. ŚV 2.39-40), the hero himself declares that they do not bother him (ŚV 2.11). He is also not disturbed, or only slightly disturbed, when the king of the Cedis insults him during Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* (ŚV 15.40-43; ŚV 17.18).

Śiśupāla is presented as a worthy opponent for the hero in Māgha's poem. When Yudhiṣṭhira offers the gift of honour to Kṛṣṇa (ŚV 14.88), Śiśupāla reacts not only verbally, but he actually takes military action against the hero and his troops. Filled with envy and enraged (ŚV 15.1-11), just like in the original story, the king of the Cedis first shouts insults at Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira (ŚV 15.12-39). Next, urged by Bhīṣma (ŚV 15.46), he challenges the hero to a decisive duel; again, just like in the original story, he is sure that he will easily kill his enemy (ŚV 15.63-66). Then, however, Śiśupāla leaves the sacrificial assembly, returns to his encampment and really prepares himself and his troops for battle (ŚV 15.67-82). The battle of Kṛṣṇa and the army of the Yādavas with Śiśupāla and the army of the Cedis, which takes place in cantos 18 and 19 of Māgha's *mahākāvya*, gives the two adversaries an opportunity to prove to the listeners or readers that they are both great warriors. Śiśupāla himself enters the battle in ŚV 19.25 and fiercely fights the troops of his enemy (ŚV 19.26-82). Kṛṣṇa himself enters the battle in ŚV 19.83-90. The hero shoots his bow and arrows at the Cedi troops and decimates the enemy forces (ŚV 19.91-120). The final duel of Kṛṣṇa and Śiśupāla, which follows in *sarga* 20, is long and intense; it acquires a cosmic dimension due to the employment of spells and magical weapons by the two opponents.

#### 4. Conclusions

Summing up, although perhaps I would not go so far as to call the *Śiśupālavadhā* an ‘invented’ poem after Namisādhu, it has to be admitted that the plot of Māgha’s *mahākāvya* differs considerably from the story told in the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*: its main event is a different one, and so is its hero.

Māgha elevated the status of Kṛṣṇa from that of an essential, but secondary character in MBh 2.30-42 to that of the hero in his *Śiśupālavadhā*. Accordingly, he changed his motivation to act and transformed Śiśupāla into a worthy adversary for him.

In Māgha’s poem, Kṛṣṇa does not slay Śiśupāla simply because it has been predicted so, out of a personal grudge or due to a tribal feud. He also does not do it to prevent Yudhiṣṭhira’s sacrifice from being disrupted, but he is motivated by something grander than that: he acts as a god who descends from heaven to earth to destroy villains, and fights the king of the Cedis, this incarnation of an evil demon, to save the world from the suffering he inflicts.

The battle of their armies, and their final duel, are long and intense. Ultimately, Śiśupāla is not quite Kṛṣṇa’s equal, as the hero withstands all his attacks and, just like in the original story, cuts off his head with his discus (ŚV 20.78). However, there is nothing comic here about Śiśupāla’s death. On the contrary, Kṛṣṇa triumph over such a mighty opponent, a demon incarnate and fierce warrior, cannot but inspire awe in the listeners or readers, and fill them with admiration for the divine power of the hero who achieves this truly formidable feat for the good of the world.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of other differences in the presentation of Kṛṣṇa in MBh 2.30-42 and Māgha’s *Śiśupālavadhā*, see Trynkowska 2009, where I concentrate on Kṛṣṇa’s rank (royal or not?) in both texts.

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