

# Charting A Narrative for the Apocalypse

Adapting the Indian Mythological epic, *The Mahabharata*, for a global audience, while exploring the continuing influence of Indian Myths on contemporary popular Hindi cinema and exploiting this connection to craft a new storytelling paradigm.

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## Summary

Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (An adaptation of Joseph Campbell's work on the Hero's Journey), created a storytelling paradigm that works foremost as an individual narrative, structured around a 'Hero'. Storytelling exercises like the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU) and the *Baahubali* franchise immerse the audiences into intricate, sprawling universes that follow different trajectories with multiple foci. Using the *Baahubali* franchise for the scope that it offers, this work points to certain limitations of the storytelling paradigm suggested by Vogler. In addition to re-establishing the intricate relationship between mythical and modern narratives, especially cinema, this work furthermore proposes that the building blocks for a new kind of narrative journey already exist in Indian Mythology, specifically the *Mahabharata*, a megalithic story that unravels without a central heroic figure and comprises multiple intricately connected narratives, extending in different temporal and geographical directions. Section 1 of this work makes an argument for this storytelling paradigm and then establishes its schema in detail. Section 1 ends with a discussion on the possibilities and scope of this unified narrative model that would help storytellers craft these complicated universes, from start to finish, across various mediums. Section 2 (submitted separately) contains the creative work, an adaptation of the *Mahabharata* in two screenplays constructed using this paradigm. It can be viewed in hard copy at the National Library for Wales and the Arts and Social Studies Library at Cardiff University.

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# **SECTION 1**

## Chapter 1: The Mahabharata: A Brief Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is an Indian mythological epic, which, as Wendy Doniger points out, is made up of seventy-five thousand verses and three million words, making it fifteen times as long as the Hebrew Bible and New Testament put together.<sup>1</sup> The story unfolds in North India, ending in Kurukshetra, and Doniger places the events ‘around 950 BCE’, making this epic a clear example of the conflation of religion, mythology, and even history.<sup>2</sup> It is the tale of the five Pandavas, their hundred cousins, the Kauravas and other members of the Kuru family, who are torn apart by ego and ambition. This conflict escalates into an apocalyptic war, not just for the throne of Hastinapura but to end all evil and bring an end to the *Dwapar Yuga* (the third of the four ages in the Hindu cycle of time) and usher in the *Kali Yuga*, the age we live in now.<sup>3</sup> As Joseph Selbie and David Steinmetz expound, ‘The Yugas describe a cycle of human development that not only predicts highly advanced ages in the future but indicates that they have occurred in the past as well’.<sup>4</sup> He emphasises the word ‘cycle’, adding that every time the human race reaches the pinnacle of its growth, there is a fall, and when it witnesses its ‘darkest’ moment, there is a rise.<sup>5</sup>

The *Mahabharata*, as Doniger expounds, often refers to itself as the ‘Fifth *Veda*’ and has been part of the Indian cultural fabric for centuries now.<sup>6</sup> This text is history or ‘*ithihas*’ that crosses over into the realm of ‘*puranas*’, which refers to ‘tales of gods and goddesses’.<sup>7</sup> Like the *Ramayana*, it was written/compiled by people who are part of the plot themselves.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (Routledge, 2009), p. 16; Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Penguin Press, 2010), p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison* (Rupa Publications, 2018), p. 3; Wendy Doniger, ‘The Mahabharata: A Text for All Seasons’, in *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling*, by Carole Satyamurti (W.W. Norton & Co., 2016), pp. 22–31. Apple Books; Dwyer, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, pp. 261–62.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Delbie and David Steinmetz, *The Yugas: Keys to Understanding Our Hidden Past, Emerging Energy Age and Enlightened Future* (Nevada City, California: Crystal Clarity Publishers), p. 27. Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> Delbie and Steinmetz, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Doniger, ‘The Mahabharata: A Text for All Seasons’, p. 22; Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 3.

Pattanaik charts an entire history of how these texts, namely the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, evolved as narratives that went from being a collection of orally recounted tales to ‘*Dharma-Shastras*’.<sup>9</sup> This means that they became texts to help people ‘appreciate the complexities of *Dharma* which refers to social behaviour and spiritual belief’.<sup>10</sup> He adds that the Brahmins used these ‘*Dharma-Shastra*’ to counter the ‘*Dhamma-Padas*’, a collection of Buddha’s ideas on *Dharma*.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, with the rise of the ‘*Bhakti* movement’ all across the country, these ‘*Dharma-shastras*’ further evolved into core religious texts meant to propagate ideas of ‘*Bhakti* (salvation) and *Moksha* (divine reverence)’, which became part of *Dharma*, which has now evolved into the Hindu religion.<sup>12</sup>

Multiple versions, including Buddhist and Jain, along with retellings in various languages across India, came into being, focusing on the character of Krishna and Rama from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, respectively (they were avatars of Lord Vishnu, thus making these two texts part of a larger narrative known as the *Vishnu Purana*).<sup>13</sup> Doniger cites Hildebeitel, who refers to the *Mahabharata* as a ‘work in progress’, referring to the fact that there is no one definitive version of a story that has been ‘retold and rewritten’ in various languages.<sup>14</sup> It was only after the British made their way to India that a structure of this sprawling story emerged where it was told through specific characters, complete with necessary conflict, and perhaps this is where they evolved into as they are known today.<sup>15</sup> The ‘critical edition’ of the *Mahabharata* was put together by scholars in Poona (now Pune)

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<sup>9</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 7–11.

<sup>10</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 7–9.

<sup>11</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 7–9.

<sup>12</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 9–16.

<sup>13</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 10–16.

<sup>14</sup> A. Hildebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, SUNY Series in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture (State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 14–15

<<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=vwWGX08JAx8C>> [accessed 8 January 2022] cited in Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, p. 263.

<sup>15</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 15.

between 1933-1972 by assembling and assimilating various Sanskrit manuscripts, which have been further translated and studied by scholars worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

Doniger mentions poet A.K. Ramanujan who, ‘used to say that no Indian ever hears the *Mahabharata* for the first time’.<sup>17</sup> She expounds that this text has been broken into episodes and anecdotes by storytellers and common folk alike, which have been told and retold through various mediums, oral narrations, plays, novel adaptations, TV shows, comic books, and contemporary film adaptations targeting a variety of demographics.<sup>18</sup> Several characters who exist inside this universe have had entire narratives carved out focusing on them. *Krishna*, a TV show made in India, chronicles the life of Lord Krishna, who is considered an avatar of Lord Vishnu (the ‘nurturer’ in the holy trinity of Hindu Gods), from a young age as he goes on to become a pivotal character in the *Mahabharata* narrative itself.<sup>19</sup> Another text born out of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita*, a philosophical discourse between Lord Krishna and the Pandava archer Arjuna, at the outset of the war. This text is a treatise answering big questions plaguing man regarding his place in society and, by extension, humankind’s place and fate in the universe. The *Mahabharata* can also be considered to be an ‘intertext’ to the religious epic *Ramayana*, which occurs in a different era (*The Sat Yuga*), with references to *Ramayana* being made in the *Mahabharata* and characters like Hanuman and Parsuram appearing in both texts, re-enforcing the idea that they are part of one sprawling mega-narrative.<sup>20</sup>

As Wendy Doniger points out, ‘The *Mahabharata* was told very differently by all of its many authors in the long line of literary descent’, and this will perhaps never change.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wendy Doniger, ‘LRB · Wendy Doniger · How to Escape the Curse: The Mahabharata.’, *London Review of Books*, 2009 <[www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n19/wendy-doniger/how-to-escape-the-curse](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n19/wendy-doniger/how-to-escape-the-curse)> [accessed 10 June 2019].

<sup>17</sup> Doniger, ‘The Mahabharata: A Text for All Seasons’, pp. 24–25.

<sup>18</sup> Doniger, ‘The Mahabharata: A Text for All Seasons’, pp. 24–25.

<sup>19</sup> *Krishna* (India: Doordarshan, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik, *Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik 2* (Penguin Books, 2017), pp. 155–60. Kindle; Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 10, 25–26; Robert Stam, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 2–46.

<sup>21</sup> Doniger, ‘The Mahabharata: A Text for All Seasons’, pp. 22–23.

While some, like Ramesh Menon and Carol Satyamurti, chose to capture the expanse of this narrative, presenting the characters and the events as chronologically as possible, others like Aditya Iyengar chose to focus specifically on the events of the war.<sup>22</sup> However, every narrative version of this story, every strand, the story of any and every character, builds up towards a climax, the apocalyptic war that is dramatic, gripping, breath-taking in scale and yet heart-breaking. The creative work submitted as a part of this thesis would be born out of the *Mahabharata*. It would attempt to become what Gerard Genette calls a ‘metatext’ (where there is a ‘critical relationship between one text and the other, where the commented text is cited explicitly or silently evoked’) as well as a ‘hypertext’ (a text which ‘transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends’ another text, which Genette calls the ‘hypotext’) to the narrative of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>23</sup>

My creative work would be an adaptation of the *Mahabharata*’s expansive narrative into a duology of films focussing on certain *focal characters*, who could then be used to expand this universe in new directions. These scripts would attempt to create a new myth, extending and trying to find ways to comment on the widely accepted narrative beats (plot points) and characters from the *Mahabharata*. As Doniger adds, ‘the loose construction of the text gives it a quasi-novelistic quality, open to new forms as well as new ideas, inviting different ideas to contest one another, to come to blows, in the pages of the text’.<sup>24</sup> This narrative would be intercut with a more contemporary story of characters attempting to adapt this mythical narrative in a fictional version of the Hindi film industry.

I believe a basic understanding of *Mahabharata*’s narrative would embellish the experience of reading the creative work, giving new meaning to every creative choice I make

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<sup>22</sup> Aditya Iyengar, *The Thirteenth Day: A Story of The Kurukshetra War* (Rupa, 2015); Carole Satyamurti, *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2016); Ramesh Menon, *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering* (Rupa & Co., 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Stam, pp. 26–31.

<sup>24</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, p. 264.

to adhere to or deviate from the ‘accepted’ narrative. It would help create a base for my critical work highlighting the narrative and structural parallels that I identify between the *Mahabharata* (that Rachel Dwyer calls the ‘foundational text of the Indian nation’), and modern-day narrative universes like the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU) and the *Baahubali* franchise (Rajamouli, 2015-2017) that unravel in different geographic and temporal directions without a central heroic figure.<sup>25</sup> This discussion would help emphasise certain limitations of Christopher Vogler’s *Writer’s Journey* which was itself adapted from Joseph Campbell’s work on the mythical ‘Hero’s Journey’ or ‘The Adventure of the Hero’ and set up the need for a new paradigm for storytellers looking to create such narrative universes across mediums.<sup>26</sup> The architecture, application and scope of this new paradigm would be established by using it to construct and write my screenplays and testing it against the MCU and *Baahubali*. In essence, an understanding of the *Mahabharata*’s narrative would help contextualise upcoming chapters, starting with Chapter 2, where I examine how mythical narratives have shaped modern narratives globally and in India and discuss how texts like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* continue to influence the evolution of Indian storytelling, across formats, be it novels, comic books or cinema, both explicitly and implicitly.

Hence, before we delve deeper into other aspects of this thesis, I present a brief retelling of the popularly narrated and recounted story of the *Mahabharata*, one that has been created using multiple versions floating in the cultural zeitgeist on various mediums like films, TV shows, the texts mentioned above and more, as well as oral anecdotes narrated by my father, grandfather and grandmother.

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<sup>25</sup> Dwyer, p.57; *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2008); S. S. Rajamouli, *Baahubali* (Aarka Media Works, 2015-2017).

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers. 25th Anniversary Edition*. (Michael Wiese Productions, 2020); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971)

## **The Mahabharata**

Shantanu, the king of Hastinapura, falls in love with the human incarnation of Ganga, the holy river. He marries her, and she only has one condition that he should never question her actions. Besotted by her ethereal beauty and driven by love and lust in equal parts, he agrees. Soon she is with child, but as soon as the first son is born, she leaves the palace and kills the infant by drowning him. Shantanu, though broken, swallows his pain and anger, stands by and watches as his firstborn is murdered mercilessly, all because of his promise never to question his wife. She repeats this act of sheer brutality six more times, and with the death of every child, Shantanu loses a part of himself and, with it, the will to keep his promise. The eighth time, he breaks down and finally asks his wife why she has been killing their children one after the other, denying him an heir and the joy of parenthood. Ganga, at this juncture, narrates a story which concludes with her telling him that all their previous children had been cursed in an earlier life and now their eighth child, who is a reincarnation of Vasu Prabhava, whose curse was modified, is going to live a long and glorious life on the earth but will die a painful death. She then reminds him that now that he has broken his promise, she will have to leave him and take their newborn with her, but once he is ready to take over the kingdom, he will return to him. Shantanu pleads with his wife, falls to her feet and begs, but Ganga disappears right in front of his eyes.

Shantanu returns to the affairs of his kingdom and its people. And then one day, on the banks of the river Ganga, he comes across a young man who effortlessly fights through the current of the river and constructs a bridge with arrows. He is stunned at the boy's prowess. At this moment, Ganga, his wife, the river goddess, appears and introduces him to Devrata, his son. She asks Shantanu to take their son back to Hastinapura and disappears.

While Shantanu is ridden with sorrow for losing his wife again, he is delighted to get his son back. Very soon, Devrata wins over the people of his father's kingdom with his

knowledge, political acumen and his skills as a warrior. Knowing that his kingdom is in good hands, Shantanu gives in to leisure activities like hunting. On one such trip, Shantanu sees Satyawati, a fisherwoman who has her own magical past. He instinctively proposes marriage to her. Her father, a fisherman, is obviously in awe of the king. He expresses his honour at being able to give his daughter to the king as his wife but cuts in with one condition that it is the children that his daughter will bear him who will ascend the throne of Hastinapura. Shantanu is stunned as he never in his wildest dreams expected his love and longing for companionship to bring him dangerously close to denying Devrata his right to be king. He leaves the fisherman's home without a word, returns to the palace and locks himself in his room. Devrata attempts to speak to his father but in vain. He then tracks down his father's charioteer, who takes him to the fisherman. The fisherman tells him that he wants his daughter's son to be the future king, to which he agrees. But then comes the challenging part. The fisherman reminds Devrata that his kids may stake a claim for the throne in the future. This is when Devrata makes his vow, where he promises that he will never get married or father a child. Having made this unthinkable vow, he comes to be known in all the realms as 'Bheeshma'. He comes back to the palace and presents Satyawati to his father. When his father asks him how he convinced the fisherman to change his mind, he simply tells him that he persuaded him to do so, but the charioteer interrupts and tells Shantanu the truth.

Shantanu is broken, overwhelmed, all at the same time at this sacrifice, and in that moment of unadulterated emotion gives him a boon that death will only come to him when he wants it and the way he wants it. Devrata, now Bheeshma, knows that he will choose the circumstances and moment of his death.

Shantanu marries Satyawati and once again loses himself to her, and it is Bheeshma who takes charge of the kingdom, but only as guardian, not as king. Soon Satyawati becomes pregnant and gives birth to his half-brothers Chitrangda and Vichitraveerya. Shantanu,

having greyed considerably, dies, and being the older one, Bheeshma grooms Chitrangda to be king. A few days before the coronation, Bheeshma leaves the kingdom, and when he is gone, Chitrangda, a powerful *Gandharva* from the heavens, appears and challenges the future king, his namesake, to battle if he is not willing to give up his name. The *Gandharva* insists that a mortal does not deserve his name. While the human Chitrangda is a skilled fighter, he is no match for Chitrangda, the *Gandharva*, who eventually decapitates him and vanishes. With a heavy heart, Bheeshma and Satyawati decide to name her younger son Vichitraveerya king. Vichitraveerya is considered gentle, with rumours flying around of his absolute lack of qualities one would associate with a great king. But no one would dare say this out in the open as they fear and respect Bheeshma. Soon, it is time for Vichitraveerya to get married and father children, something Satyawati wants more than anything. She recommends any one of the three daughters, Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika, of the king of Kashi. She also informs Bheeshma that the king has organised a *Swayamvara* where all the eligible kings and princes except Vichitraveerya have been invited to prove themselves worthy of the princesses. This angers Bheeshma, who sees this as an insult, storms the *swayamvara* event, abducts all three princesses, and fights off all the suitors alone. Even with all the warriors around, Bheeshma seems unstoppable and incapacitates all with his skill but does not kill anyone. King Selva, whom Amba had already chosen to be her husband, makes a valiant attempt to save her but falls short compared to an enraged Bheeshma, who defeats Selva in a way that is insulting to him as a king and a warrior, as he is badly defeated in the presence of an assemblage of royals.

As they reach Hastinapura, they get a rousing welcome, something Ambika and Ambalika instantly warm up to and accept to be queens to king Vichitraveerya. On the other hand, Amba finally gathers the courage and tells Satyawati that she had chosen King Selva to be her husband when Bheeshma abducted her. When Bheeshma hears of this, he is torn with

guilt and escorts Amba back to King Selva. While Amba is ecstatic, Selva instantly rejects Amba, questioning her character now that she has spent time with Bheeshma, who is now his mortal enemy. While Bheeshma apologises, Selva stands firm. Amba is heartbroken. On the way back, she pleads with Bheeshma that if Selva does not accept her, Bheeshma will have to, as going back home is no longer an option. Bheeshma tells her of his unbreakable vow. Amba, out of options, finds her way to Parsuram's ashram. Parsuram was Bheeshma's guru, a man he reveres more than his father. She tells him her story, hearing which he sends word out to Bheeshma, claiming that it is time for the guru to collect his reward. Bheeshma rushes to his guru, only to find out that his reward would be to accept Amba as his wife. Bheeshma implores his guru to understand his predicament and offers him his life instead. Parsuram, a short-tempered man, takes this as an insult and challenges him to a battle. Bheeshma is in a quandary. He cannot go against his guru's word, and yet he cannot break his vow. Everyone around attempts to reason with Parsuram that this battle could mean the end of the universe because both these warriors possess the skill and weapons to do this. But Parsuram is adamant and wants a fight.

Master and disciple fight for several days, and no one is willing to back down. Their love and reverence for each other seem to have been forgotten as the two men use every weapon in their arsenal to defeat the other but fail. Finally, in a fit of rage, Bheeshma chooses to unleash the *Brahmastra*, a weapon more powerful than any other, capable of destroying the planet. However, just as he is about to, Shiva, the destroyer, one of the holy trinity, intervenes and tells Bheeshma that someday in the future, he would be part of a war that would end an eon, but today is not that day.

Bheeshma, shaken by this warning, apologises to his guru and begs for forgiveness but Parsuram is too hurt to reciprocate. Amba, disappointed, makes herself known to Lord Shiva and tells him of her story. Shiva informs her that he is aware of the injustice that she

has had to live with, and while he cannot push Bheeshma to break his vow, he gives her a boon. While Bheeshma would choose the moment of his death, she, in another incarnation, would be responsible for bringing an end to his life

Unfortunately, Vichitraveerya dies soon as well. Left heirless, the kingdom of Hastinapura faces an uncertain future. This is when Satyawati tells Bheeshma about her first son with sage Parasara. His name is Vyasa (the original chronicler of the events we collectively narrate as the *Mahabharata*). Together they decide that Vyasa could help them out of their predicament. Vyasa readily agrees with his mother's request to impregnate her daughters-in-law.

However, this does not go as planned. As the legend goes, Ambika, taken aback by Vyasa's extremely rugged appearance on the first night, asks one of her maids to take her place, something which is discovered later. Satyawati implores Ambika to overcome her fear and abhorrence of Vyasa's appearance and rough demeanour for the sake of her kingdom and its people. Ambika complies, but as it turns out, she seals her eyes closed all through the night as Vyasa makes love to her. On the other hand, scared by the very sight of Vyasa, who has spent most of his life living in the wilderness, Ambalika's skin loses all colour and goes white. And as it turns out, Ambika gives birth to Dhritrashtra, born blind, and Ambalika gives birth to a pale-looking Pandu. The maid Vyasa had sex with gives birth to Vidura, who cannot inherit the throne, having been born to a maid. Dhritrashtra being the older one, is first in line for the throne but being born with a 'disability' cannot be king, so Pandu is announced as the king-to-be. With Bheeshma by their side, both brothers become noble leaders and capable warriors. While Dhritrashtra marries Princess Gandhari, Pandu takes two wives. The first is Madri, the princess of Madra, while the other is King Kunti Bhoj's adopted daughter Princess Kunti. But Kunti has a past which King Kunti Bhoj has gone to extreme lengths to bury.

*Accomplished sage Durvasa visited Kunti Bhoj's court and was so taken by Kunti's devotion to him that before leaving, he gave her a gift, a mantra, a chant which she could use to call upon any of the gods. Kunti used the chant to call upon Surya, the Sun god. Enamoured by his human form, she gave herself to him. Having had sex with her, Surya left, and months later, Kunti gave birth to a boy born with a golden armour and golden earrings. He was as radiant as his father, but Kunti had no choice but to give up the boy as he was born out of wedlock. She wrapped him in a blanket and put him in a basket, which was then let go with the currents of river Ganga. This basket and with it the boy found its way to the wife of a charioteer in the kingdom of Hastinapura. Being childless, they adopted the boy and named him Karna, who was to become a significant figure in the narrative that was to unfold.*

Pandu, being married to two beautiful women, loses himself in them while Bheeshma runs the kingdom. Like his grandfather, he too indulges in the sport of hunting, and on one such expedition, he encounters a pair of magnificent deers and instinctively shoots two arrows that kill them. The dying deers turn out to be a sage and his wife. They had transformed themselves into animals to have intercourse. The dying sage curses Pandu that if he is ever overtaken by lust, death will take him away, forcing him into a life of celibacy. The sage and his wife die, leaving Pandu broken beyond repair. Aware that he would never produce an heir, Pandu steps down as king and retreats to an *ashram* in the forest.

While they are content, even without the pleasures of royal life, Pandu still yearns to be a father. Seeing her husband in so much pain, Kunti tells him about Durvasa's boon. Pandu is elated at the prospect of having sons who have descended from the gods. One after the other, Kunti summons the gods, Dharma, the righteous one, Vayu, the wind god, and Indra, the ruler of gods, and after having intercourse with them, gives birth to Yudhishthira, Bheema, and Arjuna. Kunti refuses to summon any more gods after this. At the same time,

Madri grows jealous that Kunti is the one who is fulfilling the duty of a wife to bear her husband's children. She conveys the same to Pandu, who requests Kunti to teach Madri the mantra. Though reluctant, Kunti understands Madri's pain of being left childless and teaches her how to summon the gods. She chooses to summon the Ashwin twins and gives birth to twins Nakul and Sehdeva. Together, Pandu's sons are known as the Pandavas. Back in Hastinapura, Dhritrashtra's wife Gandhari gives birth to a hundred sons and one daughter. Together, Dhritrashtra's sons are known as the Kauravas.

Pandu succumbs to his lust one day when he sees his wife Madri naked, taking a bath in the river, and attempts to make love to her. Being guilty of giving in to her husband's desire knowing what it could lead to, Madri decides to commit *Sati*, the appalling act of sitting on the husband's funeral pyre. Kunti is now the mother of five young boys who have grown up in an *ashram* in the wilderness but are no less prepared to be kings. She brings them back to Hastinapura, much to the delight of every single soul there, everyone except the eldest Kaurava, Duryodhana.

To Vyasa, this clan's fate is crystal clear, something he brings to the attention of Satyawati and her daughters-in-law. Leaving Bheeshma in charge of the madness to come, the three women leave Hastinapura forever. From this point on, Bheeshma is in-charge of all the princes of Hastinapura, raising and nurturing the cousins. He ropes in Dronacharya to train these princes to be great, noble warriors. But out of all the cousins, Arjuna emerges as an archer par-excellence. But all through these formative years, the rivalry between the cousins grows from being malicious bickering to pure evil as the Kaurava's attempts to get rid of the Pandavas go from fights in the wrestling arena to trying to kill Bheema by drugging and drowning him to setting fire to an entire palace (which was made out of lac to ensure the ease of emollition). The Pandavas are forced to live in exile for years where they go through a series of trials and tribulations, including Bheema's fight to the finish with the

demon Bakasura, Bheema's marriage to Hidimbi, who later gives birth to Ghatotkacha, Arjuna's marriage to King Drupada's daughter at a *swayamvara* and her getting married to the rest of the Pandavas due to a misunderstanding between Arjuna and Kunti.

The Pandavas eventually find their way back to the kingdom. On Bheeshma's insistence and intervention from other elders in the clan, including Krishna (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the nurturer from the trinity of Hindu gods, but in his mortal form, he is a cousin to Pandavas from Kunti's side) but much to the disgust of Duryodhana and his maternal uncle Shakuni (who plays a significant role in deepening the wedge between the two factions of the family for his revenge) Dhritrashtra gives the Pandavas a piece of land equivalent in size to Hastinapura, which turns out to be an uninhabited forest. Eventually, after a series of challenges, the Pandavas clear out the forest and convert this netherworld of sorts into a prosperous capital known as Indraprastha, complete with an ornate palace.

But one fateful day, Draupadi insults Duryodhana, something that snowballs into a fight that is resolved by a game of dice, which Shakuni has rigged. The Pandavas lose everything, and Draupadi is publicly humiliated. The elders cannot help but watch as the Pandavas are 'sentenced' to a thirteen-year exile with the added condition that they would have to live the final year in disguise. When the Pandavas complete their exile, Duryodhana refuses to return their kingdom to them. Once again, the elders, including Krishna, intervene, but no matter what proposal they put in front of him, Duryodhana, whose ego has been inflated by Shakuni, flatly refuses. Finally, the lines are drawn, many players choose sides, and war is declared. While Krishna sides with the Pandavas, Kunti's son Karna fights against his step-brothers, the Pandavas, having emerged as a rival to Arjuna. It is a war fought for 18 days on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, a war which the Pandavas win but which completely eviscerates one side of the family, including Bheeshma, who is killed by a reincarnated Amba, leaving the survivors to live with the guilt of having unleashed such

bloodshed, albeit in the name of *Dharma*. This war sets the tone for *Kali Yuga*, the dark age of ignorance and chaos.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Delbie and Steinmetz, p. 27.

## Chapter 2: Myths and Cinema: The role of mythological narratives in the evolution of Hindi Cinema

Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, says that myth is a ‘cultural construct’ that has the potential to stitch together a singular consciousness with that of the entire society to create what he calls ‘a common understanding’.<sup>28</sup> Myths can be either ‘religious or secular’, with more significant ideas like heaven, hell, sin, and rebirth coming under the former and that of nation, freedom, women’s rights, human rights, etc., coming under the latter.<sup>29</sup> Hence, myth establishes this ‘common understanding’, an idea, while ‘mythology is the vehicle of that idea’.<sup>30</sup> According to Pattanaik, ‘mythology tends to be hyperbolic and fantastic to drive home a myth’.<sup>31</sup> Mythological narratives like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are expansive, ‘hyperbolic’ and ‘fantastical’, but it is the ‘sacredness of the obviously irrational plots’ that has ‘transmitted’ both ‘religious and secular myths’ they carry across generations.<sup>32</sup> Pattanaik equates myth to ‘*mithya*’, which is the opposite of ‘*sat*’ or truth but goes on to add that ‘*mithya* was truth seen through a frame of reference’.<sup>33</sup> As Richard Slotkin defines it, mythology is ‘a complex of narratives’ which streamlines the global experience of being human into what Slotkin calls a ‘constellation of compelling metaphors’ and provides what could be called a paradigm, a structure for human action and reaction, cause and effect.<sup>34</sup> Nigel Kaw expands this definition by calling mythology, a ‘symbolic and

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<sup>28</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (Penguin, 2008), pp. xvi–xvii.

<sup>29</sup> Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, pp. xvi–xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, pp. xvi–xvii.

<sup>31</sup> Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, p. xvii.

<sup>32</sup> Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, pp. xv–xviii.

<sup>33</sup> Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, p. xv.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 6–7 cited in Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble, ‘Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 22.3 (1988), pp. 157–58; Nigel Kaw, ‘The Comicbook Superhero: Myth For Our Times’, 8 (2005) <[http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/30981/20051115-0000/www.refractory.unimelb.edu.au/\\_journalissues/vol8/kaw.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/30981/20051115-0000/www.refractory.unimelb.edu.au/_journalissues/vol8/kaw.html)> [accessed 6 April 2019].

metaphorical' story with supernatural elements, often with gods/goddesses as characters, and can be 'both individual and social in scope'.<sup>35</sup>

Jung identified myth as a manifestation of something he called the 'collective unconscious', a 'second psychic system of collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals'.<sup>36</sup> Jung goes on to say that such a system is not 'developed individually but is inherited'.<sup>37</sup> Kaw describes it as 'a theoretical collective pool of knowledge that everyone shares' and expresses that all stories encompassed 'archetypal imagery and universal symbols'.<sup>38</sup> As Kaw notes, his work influenced many, including Northrop Frye, who in his book *Northrop Frye on Religion: Excluding the Great Code and Words With Power*, noted that a majority of European and even North American literature has been influenced by 'images and narrative patterns' initially framed in the Bible and Sir James George Frazer, who in his book *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* attempted to compare the mythical archetypes as they emerge from different cultures in the world.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Campbell, in his work, *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, gave a new reach to the term 'monomyth' (a myth which occurs across all multiple cultures) where he, like Jung, Frye, and Frazer, propounds that if one works through their way through the mythical narratives that originate from different cultures, different parts of the world and breaks through the cursory cultural differences, specific universal themes, events and characters emerge.<sup>40</sup> He further defines pivotal moments, turning points in an adventure taken on by a

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<sup>35</sup> Kaw.

<sup>36</sup> C. G. Jung, *Jung on Mythology*, ed. by Robert A. Segal (Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 6 <<https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9780691214016>> [accessed 11 January 2022]; C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. by R.F.C Hull, Bollingen Series XX (N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 43; Kaw.

<sup>37</sup> C.G. Jung, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Kaw.

<sup>39</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough A Study in Magic and Religion*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, UK, 1994) cited in Kaw; Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Religion : Excluding The Great Code and Words with Power*, Collected Works of Northrop Frye ; Volume 4 (Toronto, [Ontario] ; University of Toronto Press, 2000) cited in Kaw.

<sup>40</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 157–58; Kaw.

heroic character. As Campbell points out, culture and mythology are intertwined, and through the artistic recreations of mythological narratives, myths are presented and represented over the ages for mankind to keep a hold on life.<sup>41</sup> Campbell's work has further influenced Christopher Vogler, who adapted it into a screenwriting paradigm that completed 25 years of publication in 2020. Mythical narratives, in some way, shape, or form, have found a way into literature and in other forms of pop culture, giving us larger than life heroic figures who inspire us.<sup>42</sup> As Kaw points out, comic books, which could be classified both as literature and pop culture, are a 'form of mythology of this current age' that builds upon and extends existing narratives from older mythical narratives.<sup>43</sup>

Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble differentiate between the 'Classical Monomyth' mentioned above and the 'American Monomyth'.<sup>44</sup> The former chronicles the tale of a hero who crosses over from his world into a realm of 'supernatural wonder' and encounters 'fabulous forces' returning with the 'power to bestow boons on his fellow men'.<sup>45</sup> The latter combines the 'selfless individual' with a 'zealous crusader who destroys evil' who rises when a 'community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil'.<sup>46</sup> Lang and Trimble add that the 'American Monomyth' and, by extension, the 'American monomythic hero' could be called an 'embellishment on the classical monomyth' while concluding that 'American monomythic hero' is slightly different from heroes of other cultures and reference Daniel Walden as they add that, 'cultures choose heroes as an indication of their national character'.<sup>47</sup> This means that monomythic heroes in America have evolved over the years from being politicians and scientists/inventors to working-class men who rose to prominence

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<sup>41</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1991), p. 72; Kaw.

<sup>42</sup> Kaw.

<sup>43</sup> Kaw.

<sup>44</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 157–59.

<sup>45</sup> Lang and Trimble, p. 158; Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1977), p. xx cited in Lang and Trimble, pp. 157–59.

<sup>47</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 157–59.

in different fields.<sup>48</sup> Their appeal was beyond what they did as they became figures who stood up and solved problems to propel a country ahead, individuals who rose from the masses to achieve success using ‘physical actions and inherent native wit’.<sup>49</sup> In the 1930s, when the ‘real-life heroes became too fragile’ because of disturbing events, like the great depression and the impending war in Europe, the ‘monomythic superhero’ came to life.<sup>50</sup> They cite Superman, who fought for ‘truth, justice, and the American way’, embodying all the qualities that America desired in their hero at the time, however as time progressed, the nation evolved, and so did the superhero/heroine.<sup>51</sup> Lang and Trimble expound that Captain America, created in 1941, came into being to fight the Nazis.<sup>52</sup> In the 1960s, Stan Lee gave superheroes ‘more human personalities’.<sup>53</sup> The hero of this time, an era which Lang and Trimble suggest ‘promoted self-doubt’, now questioned his/her place in society.<sup>54</sup> As Lang and Trimble establish, comic book superheroes posit a new kind of myth, a compromise between Richard Slotkin’s idea of ‘regeneration through violence’ where a ‘hero can originate within the community and may re-enter it after completion of a violent act’ and the ‘American monomyth’, where the ‘hero must remain separate from the community in order to remain pure’.<sup>55</sup> The new myth presents a hero who is ‘alienated from the community but seeks to re-enter it through the completion of some violent act that the rest of society is incapable of performing (as in the American Monomyth), but also finds abhorrent’.<sup>56</sup>

Kaw seconds Lang and Trimble and points out that heroes and heroines from the mythical narratives possessed superhuman qualities which gave men and women what they desired, a peerless, unassailable defender and ‘protector’, adding that the comic superheroes

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<sup>48</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 157–72.

<sup>49</sup> Lang and Trimble, p. 159.

<sup>50</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 159–60.

<sup>51</sup> Lang and Trimble, p. 160.

<sup>52</sup> Lang and Trimble, p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 165–67.

<sup>54</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 166–67.

<sup>55</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 166–67.

<sup>56</sup> Lang and Trimble, pp. 166–67.

carry ‘monomythic themes’ and fill in for the gods and goddesses from the original mythological narratives.<sup>57</sup> There have been superheroes who have been ‘incarnations’ or ‘implicit’ re-imaginings of ‘mythic gods’, while others borrow from them ‘explicitly’.<sup>58</sup> Kaw lists Thor (a reincarnation of the Norse God of the same name, who was updated with superhero shades and now has a completely new mythology in the comics and now film), Hercules (who has been given similar treatment in popular culture), and Captain Marvel (known as Shazam! in the DC Extended Universe which connects all the gods he borrows his powers from through an acronym:- ‘wisdom coming from Solomon, strength being a gift from Hercules, stamina coming from Atlas, power borrowed from Zeus, courage like Achilles and speed like Mercury’) as some examples of comic book heroes taken directly from mythical narratives.<sup>59</sup> As Kaw correctly points out, Aquaman created by DC comics could be considered a mutation of Poseidon or Neptune, and he rules over a different comic book version of Atlantis.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, certain less obvious ‘adaptations’ of mythical characters also stand out. Kaw mentions that The Flash could be seen as a modern-day version of the Greco-Roman god Hermes/Mercury.<sup>61</sup> Superman is a new age version of the archetype of the ‘saviour or messiah’, as Kaw adds that Superman, born as Kal-El, is sent to earth from Krypton in a spaceship, a visual he compares to that of Moses floating in the Nile, where two outsiders grow up away from their real homes, destined to be heroes or messiahs.<sup>62</sup> A similar visual can be seen in the *Mahabharata* where Karna is sent floating down a river by his mother, rescued by a lower caste charioteer, and goes on to be a great warrior, a pivotal heroic character in the narrative. In essence, comic book stories, aided by

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<sup>57</sup> Kaw.

<sup>58</sup> Kaw.

<sup>59</sup> Kaw; Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992), pp. 53–60.

<sup>60</sup> Kaw.

<sup>61</sup> Kaw.

<sup>62</sup> Kaw.

their visual nature, create strong enduring myths where the characters and the plot, while building on mythological tropes, also borrow from contemporary themes and ideas, which has helped them expand and grow in the way that they have.

In India, the relationship between comic books and mythology is even more intertwined. Anant Pai, now considered the ‘father of Indian comics’ became interested in comic books while working with the newspaper *The Times of India* and was concerned that the readership of such comic books, the English speaking middle class, especially the children, were being exposed to ‘imported’ heroes like Superman, Tarzan, and Mandrake while learning about Greek myths in their English medium schools.<sup>63</sup> As McLain expounds, he envisioned using comics as a tool to teach children about Indian Mythology and making them acquainted with Indian heroes and thus, under a new series titled, *The Amar Chitra Katha*, Pai began publishing comic book adaptations of Indian mythological narratives, starting with *Krishna*, which became the first indigenous comic book featuring an Indian god as a hero.<sup>64</sup> As Mclain points out, this title was eventually rewritten as Pai decided to include all the miracles that have been attributed to Krishna in mythological lores, which he had previously excluded as he realised that such miracles had ‘symbolic import’ even though they were scientifically inexplicable.<sup>65</sup> Mclain cites Frances Pritchett, who adds that Amar Chitra Katha then expanded their story-scape to other characters, from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (*Ram*) amongst others, with the intention of acquainting children with ‘the cultural heritage of India’.<sup>66</sup> Mclain lists a mix of historical and mythological characters like *Shakuntala*, *Shivaji*, and *Padmini*, who found their way into the pages of these comic

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<sup>63</sup> Karline Mclain, ‘The Place of Comics in the Modern Hindu Imagination’, *Religion Compass*, 5.10 (2011), 598–608 (pp. 598–99).

<sup>64</sup> Mclain, pp. 598–99.

<sup>65</sup> Mclain, p. 601.

<sup>66</sup> Frances W. Pritchett, ‘The World of Amar Chitra Katha’, in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 76–106 (p. 81); Mclain, p. 599.

books.<sup>67</sup> She further explicates that the tales of mythological figures/ heroes and heroines were followed by figures from the recent history of the country, specifically from India's freedom struggle, who have become nothing less than mythological beings themselves, with *Bhagat Singh*, *Subash Chandra Bose* being the obvious choices, considering the very stories surrounding them, complete with action and adventure, but even *Mahatma Gandhi* became the source of a comic book in the series.<sup>68</sup> McLain cites Pritchett, who expounds that these titles and many more were marketed as a series on the 'Makers of Modern India' or 'Indian revolutionaries' to promote national integration.<sup>69</sup> But even the stories of various freedom fighters and heroes of the national freedom movement focused on 'male, martial Hindu freedom fighters'.<sup>70</sup> While the makers of these comic books have insisted that these comics have been born out of 'history and mythology that is Indian and not Hindu', citing titles like *Kabir* as an example, McLain mentions John Stratton Hawley, who says that it is difficult 'disentangle Hinduness from Indianness' in the *Amar Chitra Katha*.<sup>71</sup> Using Pritchett and Hawley's work amongst others, McLain concludes that these comic books present a 'concept of Indian-ness that is Hindu at its core' with a 'neglect of Muslims and other Indian religious communities'.<sup>72</sup> McLain cites a survey of 436 *Amar Chitra Katha* titles conducted by Aruna Rao, where she expounds that a large number of these titles focused on Hindu characters, with Muslim characters featuring in starring roles in less than 50 titles.<sup>73</sup> McLain mentions that a sort of paradigm, a 'mythological template' emerged through *Amar Chitra Katha*, which was then used to tell stories of non-mythological characters as well, tweaking with

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<sup>67</sup> McLain, p. 599.

<sup>68</sup> McLain, pp. 599–602.

<sup>69</sup> McLain, pp. 599–600; Pritchett, pp. 93–94.

<sup>70</sup> McLain, p. 600; Pritchett, pp. 93–96.

<sup>71</sup> John Stratton Hawley, 'The Saints Subdued: Domestic Virtue and National Integration in *Amar Chitra Katha*', in *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 107–34 (pp. 130–31); McLain, p. 600.

<sup>72</sup> McLain, p. 600.

<sup>73</sup> Aruna Rao, 'From Self-Knowledge to Super Heroes: The Story of Indian Comics', in *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines, and Picture Books* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), pp. 37–63 (p. 44) cited in McLain, p. 600.

their stories to create larger than life heroes out of historical characters like *Rana Pratap*, *Sivaji* where they were pitted as heroes against ‘Muslim villains’, and even when the hero was ‘Mughal Muslim Ruler’, the villain was an ‘iconoclast Muslim’.<sup>74</sup> There was also a definite ‘meddling’ with mythology to create new myths to keep with the doctrines laid down by the ‘Hindu right’.<sup>75</sup> Mclain once again cites Hawley, who uses the example of *Mirabai* to expound on the same, whose tale has her leave her husband in her ‘devotion to Krishna’, but here, she is transformed into an ‘ideal Hindu wife’ who is committed to her husband and Lord Krishna equally.<sup>76</sup> Aruna Rao believes all female characters in the Amar Chitra Katha have been segmented into four categories, namely ‘goddess, demon, warrior, and victim’, with a majority of characters coming from the fourth category.<sup>77</sup> Mclain cites *Shakuntala*, segmented in the ‘victim’ category, where the publishers received considerable criticism for the depiction of women, which led to the inclusion of ‘martial historical queens’ like *Rani Durgavati* and *Rani of Jhansi* into the Amar Chitra Katha collection, even though the mythological trope of women making sacrifices, be it for their husband or the country remained intact.<sup>78</sup>

Amar Chitra Katha, with its universe of ‘Hindu gods’, brought mythology to life, and thus, for many, the comic books became sacred, with the images of these gods being what they used to identify these gods.<sup>79</sup> As Mclain puts it, ‘a handful confessed that during their puja or ritual worship, they sometimes envision the deity as depicted in the comics’.<sup>80</sup> For Hindus, ‘*darshan*, seeing the gods is the focus of ritual activity’.<sup>81</sup> Pai did not want his

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<sup>74</sup> Mclain, pp. 600–602.

<sup>75</sup> Mclain, p. 600.

<sup>76</sup> Hawley, pp. 109–11; Mclain, p. 600.

<sup>77</sup> Aruna Rao, ‘Goddess/Demon, Warrior/Victim: Women in Indian Comics’, in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1999), pp. 165–81 cited in Mclain, pp. 600–601.

<sup>78</sup> Mclain, p. 602.

<sup>79</sup> Mclain, p. 602.

<sup>80</sup> Mclain, p. 602.

<sup>81</sup> Mclain, p. 602.

comics to displease the devout Hindus and wanted to ensure that this did not happen, but McLain insists, ‘within the pages of Amar Chitra Katha numerous panels contain images that allow for a *darshanic* experience...’.<sup>82</sup> So deep is the influence of mythological characters and narratives on the Indian readers that when, as O’Rourke and Rodrigues establish, Marvel decided to ‘transmediate’ Spiderman to India, based on the success of Sam Raimi’s movie adaptation here, they decided to give up on the long-established backstory of the character and swapped it for a mythos engrained in the Indian experience, where he receives his power from a yogi and ends up fighting a green Rakshasa.<sup>83</sup>

But this kind of reverence for the mythic and religious characters has not stopped comic book creators from extending these mythological lores, creating ‘hypertexts’.<sup>84</sup> There have been various attempts to retell these stories, setting them in alternate timelines, with experimentation not just in the visual art (which has been inspired by American comic books) but also in narrative techniques. One of the many examples that stand out is Grant Morrison’s *18 days*, which retells the story of the *Mahabharata*, only focusing on the 18-day war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas while only flashing back to relevant events from the main narrative when necessary.<sup>85</sup> Here, the story, setting, and the narrative structure are altered. The visual art maintains the basic identification with bejewelled heroes and villains as they were presented in the Amar Chitra Katha, but their physical appearance is changed to give them the ‘hyper-masculine’ physicality of American Superheroes, much to the dislike of many Indian mythologists, including Devdutt Pattanaik.<sup>86</sup> Their weapons are futuristic, once again in line with American comic books.

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<sup>82</sup> McLain, p. 602.

<sup>83</sup> Dan O’Rourke and Pravin A. Rodrigues, ‘The “Transcreation” of a Mediated Myth: Spiderman in India’, in *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, ed. by Terrence R Wandtke (McFarland & Co., 2007), pp. 112–28 (pp. 120–28). Google Books.

<sup>84</sup> Stam, pp. 28–31.

<sup>85</sup> Grant Morrison, *18 Days* (Dynamite Entertainment, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik, ‘Hindu Gods like Rama & Shiva Have Six Packs Now to Kill Bad Guys, like American Superheroes’, *Devdutt* <<https://devdutt.com/articles/hindu-gods-like-rama-shiva-have-six-packs-now-to-kill-bad-guys-like-american-superheroes/>> [accessed 5 April 2019].

As discussed above, filmmakers in the west, specifically Hollywood, have been influenced deeply by the monomythic archetypes. In some instances, they have been influenced directly by mythology or have created fictionalised tales with mythological characters or historical events. A few recent examples that stand out here are *Troy* (Peterson, 2004), an adaptation of Illiad, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (Scott, 2014) and the many adaptations of *Hercules*, both live-action and animated.<sup>87</sup> There have been film adaptations of series of books that are ‘inspired’ by mythological stories and characters. An example of the same is the *Percy Jackson* (2005-2009) series of books (later adapted to films) based on Greek mythology, which borrows characters from there and brings them (gods, demigods, and other mythological creatures) into the contemporary world.<sup>88</sup> There has been a meteoric rise in films that have been created out of comic books, popularly from Marvel and DC comic universes, which have been, as mentioned above, born out of the monomythic narrative and character archetypes. *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*, based on the comic books, borrows characters from Norse mythology and mutates them into superheroes and supervillains.<sup>89</sup> And finally, even films that have no overt connection with any established mythological narratives do borrow from them implicitly as the very existence of a popular screenwriting paradigm from Christopher Vogler would suggest.

O’Rourke and Rodrigues cite Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore who expounds on how myth is intertwined with Indian culture when he says, ‘To man the figure of a myth is as real as a figure of history. The point is not which is the more reliable fact, but which is the more enjoyable fiction’.<sup>90</sup> Like with comic books, the influence of the mythological narratives on cinema has been quite straightforward, at least to begin with. The love for

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<sup>87</sup> Ridley Scott, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (Chernin Entertainment, 2014); Wolfgang Petersen, *Troy* (Warner Bros., 2004).

<sup>88</sup> Rick Riordan, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (Miramax Books, 2005).

<sup>89</sup> *Marvel Cinematic Universe*.

<sup>90</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Tell Me a Story’, in *A Treasury of Modern Asian Stories* (New York: Mentor Books, 1961) cited in O’Rourke and Rodrigues, pp. 118–22.

mythological stories has influenced the evolution of cinema in India. The mythological, as Rachel Dwyer defines it, is the ‘founding genre’ of Indian cinema, constructing and churning out a large number of cinematic pieces out of a ‘large repository of Hindu myths’.<sup>91</sup> There have been films that are straight adaptations of epics like the *Mahabharata*, which Dwyer rightly calls the ‘foundational text for the Indian nation’ and the *Ramayana*, working through a variety of versions of the texts that exist in the socio-cultural sphere, as well as those about lesser-known/previously unknown gods and goddesses like *Santoshi Maa* popularised by the release of the film.<sup>92</sup> As discussed above, quite like with the indigenous Indian Comic series, *Amar Chitra Katha*, the act of watching a mythological story about the gods and goddesses on screen has been compared to an act of *darshan* itself.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, these films became part of an experience that was both ‘religious and one of major attraction’, complete with the use of special effects to enhance both these experiences.<sup>94</sup> But, the mythological transcended the boundaries of just being another avenue of experiencing ‘religious pleasure’, finding a space to interact with different genres to create a variety of films such as the social, the action-adventure, and the folktale.<sup>95</sup>

Saayan Chattopadhyay cites Jacob Arlow, who compares myth to a kind of ‘communal experience’ and a ‘shared fantasy’ that can be used to unite people to fulfil certain common goals, which in India was the cause of independence.<sup>96</sup> After independence, there was no reason for filmmakers to bring people together through the mythological genre (which was used as a way to avoid censor cuts) to promote the ‘sacred myth’ of a new, free, unified India; however, audiences are still invested in these mythological tales which have

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<sup>91</sup> Dwyer, pp. 15–16.

<sup>92</sup> Dwyer, pp. 15–16, 45–61.

<sup>93</sup> Dwyer, p. 19; Mclain, p. 602.

<sup>94</sup> Dwyer, p. 29.

<sup>95</sup> Dwyer, pp. 12–62.

<sup>96</sup> Jacob Arlow, ‘Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology’, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 9 (1961), 371–93 cited in Saayan Chattopadhyay, ‘Mythology, Masculinity and Indian Cinema: Representation of “Angry Young Man” in Popular Hindi Films of 1970s’, *Media Watch*, 2013, 30–41 (p. 36); Dwyer, pp. 59–60.

endured in the combined national imagination through various existing incarnations on TV (apart from all the textual adaptations) perhaps because myths help people find meaning and answers to real-world quandaries.<sup>97</sup> For Indians, these myths are not merely fantastical stories, they are part of their ‘cultural heritage’, their religion.<sup>98</sup> The mania around the mythological was experienced on a different scale with the relaxation of the restrictions around the depiction of religion and religious figures on television in the 1980s.<sup>99</sup> The sheer power of mass media had been combined with the unifying power of mythological stories and characters. It was like community *darshan* where a large section of the population (breaking social, economic, and faith barriers) convened in front of their television sets at a particular time.<sup>100</sup> It gave the people a ‘sense of shared historical and mythological past’ at a time when the country was transforming.<sup>101</sup> As Dwyer goes on to point out that while many might argue against the idea that it was the weekly screening of the *Ramayana* which caused an increase in religious fervour, the rise of *Hindutva*, finally leading to the siege and destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists in 1992, an event which scarred the nation forever, it could be said that fundamentalist forces did use this kind of religious unification as a tool to accomplish their agenda.<sup>102</sup> These shows were basically soap operas, in terms of the quality of writing, visual aesthetics, and production values, a trend which has continued ever since with various gods, goddesses, mythological and historical figures having found a home on some show (which are visual and narrative imitations of the original *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* runs) on the many channels and streaming services that now flood the market.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Dwyer, pp. 52–60.

<sup>98</sup> Dwyer, p. 57.

<sup>99</sup> Dwyer, pp. 52–53.

<sup>100</sup> Dwyer, pp. 52–58.

<sup>101</sup> Dwyer, p. 53.

<sup>102</sup> Dwyer, p. 53.

<sup>103</sup> Dwyer, pp. 52–53.

As mentioned before, historically, mythological films provided audiences with the tools to ‘map religious pleasures’ even beyond what comic books might have done, giving them a chance to interact with these stories, with characters now played by flesh and blood actors, presented through a narrative, operating primarily in the ‘melodramatic mode’, where the story unravels in a ‘moral universe’, and all this is combined with the exhilaration and awe of watching miracles come to life through the magic of visual effects and editing.<sup>104</sup> As Dwyer goes on to add, such cinematic pieces allowed the audiences to exist in the same space, ‘sacred realm and divine time’ as their gods, helping them experience what she calls ‘religious nostalgia’, letting them live in a simpler, moral, ‘eternal past’, not the complicated present.<sup>105</sup> This, combined with the use of music, namely songs and dances to enhance this experience, made these films and later the television shows ‘hypertexts’ of the original myths, extending them, defining new identities for characters through the actors, through performance, the way they dressed, walked and talked, thus becoming a paradigm for new narrative-visual interpretations on the screen or even in the minds of the population.<sup>106</sup> This idea is backed by Wendy Doniger, who believes cinema itself creates myth.<sup>107</sup> Saayan Chattopadhyay, while discussing the construction of the ‘Angry Young Man’s Masculinity’ seconds this idea when he says that Hindi cinema is a ‘shared fantasy’ that is born out of the disquiet and unrequited ‘desires’ of a nation that is bound together ‘culturally and psychologically’, where all aspirations and wishes come to fruition, everything is alright at the end, thus ‘making Indian cinema a myth, a social myth’.<sup>108</sup> As mentioned earlier, mythological films provided ‘sacred myths for the new nation’, a new developing nation,

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<sup>104</sup> Dwyer, pp. 57–58.

<sup>105</sup> Dwyer, pp. 58–61.

<sup>106</sup> Dwyer, pp. 57–58; Stam, p. 31.

<sup>107</sup> Dwyer, p. 57.

<sup>108</sup> Saayan Chattopadhyay, p. 36.

something that gave society an anchor into the past, into a heritage that they would not let go of as the country set out on a path of socio-economic development.<sup>109</sup>

As cinema prospered, mythological tales found a way not just to exist but thrive, hidden inside seemingly contemporary stories, thus furthering the mythological narratives and the myths they had been derived from. Dwyer is only one of the scholars and observers of Indian cinema who believe that mythological tales and religious practices have been ‘repackaged’ in the cinema of Yash Raj Films and Dharma Productions, who re-enforced the Indian patriarchal values, extracting drama out of clashes between familial dynamics (which have been established through the *Vedas* and their extensions, i.e. the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) and careful aestheticising of rituals through popular songs and dance.<sup>110</sup> Films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (Johar, 2001) used certain key character traits and plot points from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, such as a younger brother’s devotion to his older brother, the trope of exile and separation from family, all tied together through the thread of the relationship between father and sons and the ultimate duty of every Indian to return home to his family and country.<sup>111</sup> Roddur De quotes Indian superstar Amitabh Bachchan who points out that Indian film heroes are a ‘manifestation of mythical heroes from our two great epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*’.<sup>112</sup> Chattopadhyay takes this idea further while talking about the construction of the Angry Young Man in the 1970s, establishing it as a combination of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s idea of saintly ‘*Sannyasi*’ and the belligerent ‘*Santan (son)*’, akin to ‘Vivekananda’s notion of spiritual masculinity’, a union of the intellectual ‘*Brahman*’ and the militant ‘*Kshatriya*’, which Saayan Chattopadhyay points out is based on the ‘Myth of the *Devi*’, a goddess who possesses great motherly love and

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<sup>109</sup> Dwyer, p. 60.

<sup>110</sup> Dwyer, pp. 145–61.

<sup>111</sup> Karan Johar, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (Dharma Productions, 2001); Dwyer, p. 147.

<sup>112</sup> Roddur De, ‘The Representation of Masculinity in Popular Cinema: A Study of Select Hindi Films’, 2014, pp. 141–42 <[shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16425/8/08\\_chapter%203.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16425/8/08_chapter%203.pdf)> [accessed 10 November 2018].

compassion along with the potential for violence in the face of evil.<sup>113</sup> It has been noted that films have further influenced the practice of religion in everyday life, with certain filmic rituals finding a place in the real world, thus re-iterating the potential of cinema to extend old myths and carve out new ones while opening up, in my view, the possibilities of cinema being a potential disruptor of the former.<sup>114</sup>

Somewhere at the beginning of the new millennium, it could be said that ‘pure mythological adaptations’ on the big screen had fallen out of favour due to various factors (I am not considering animated films in this discussion as the animation genre has not received its due and is still considered children’s entertainment in India). The first could be the ‘decay of *darshan*’ due to socio-economic and demographic changes, which means that a section of the audience was no longer interested in going to a theatre to extract ‘religious pleasure’ by watching gods and goddesses come alive on screen.<sup>115</sup> The segregation of audiences into single screen and multiplex audiences had also given storytellers a wider scope of material to work with. Filmmakers were aware of the expectation that cinema-goers had for a film that promised to be a period adaptation of a mythological or a historical tale as they had now been exposed to several successful Hollywood films mounted at a scale that seemed financially and even creatively daunting to them. New filmmakers, having studied at film schools all over the world, had found support in newly set up studios in an attempt to produce their own interpretation on pre-existing plots and tropes, which were released to varying degrees of success. But somehow, the influence of mythology has lingered and subtly altered the course of the kind of stories that are being told. For example, there have been experiments with the science-fiction and the superhero genres. In the west, comic books are the source material for superhero films, however, in India, mythological tales have been

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<sup>113</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Bankim Rachanabali*, ed. by Jogesh Chandra Bagal, 1–3 vols (Calcutta: Shitya Samsad, 1953) cited in Chattopadhyay, pp. 32–36.

<sup>114</sup> Dwyer, p. 160.

<sup>115</sup> Dwyer, p. 57.

the source material for quite a few comic book heroes and characters endowed with special powers, and the majority of popular indigenous comic books have been adaptations or extensions of mythological stories.<sup>116</sup> Quite expectedly, ‘super heroic’ characters in Indian film have powers that could be seen as ‘borrowed’ from or identifiable with religious and mythological characters as they do not come from a long tradition of ‘original’ comic book narratives like American superhero films do. A character like *Krrish* from the superhero franchise of the same name borrows his name from Lord Krishna and is also a devout follower of the same, even though his powers come from an alien.<sup>117</sup> His super strength and speed perhaps come from Bheema from the *Mahabharata* or even Hanuman from the *Ramayana*, while his morality and devotion to father and family could come from a myriad of characters from the two texts. As Rourke and Rodrigues point out,

The advance of reason led to the development of scientific inquiry that soon relegated myth to the realm of fantasy. No longer could a simple story explain the complexity of the world. Still, myths persisted as stories of identity and purpose.<sup>118</sup>

But in India, mythology and religion are still not fantasy. While they are ‘stories of identity and purpose’, to many, these are real stories of an era when men were gods, and it was through mankind indulging in a cycle of sin over centuries (which is also the basis for the Hindu cycles of time) have we become mortal.<sup>119</sup> They cite Joe Forty, who notes that ‘India blurs the borders between gods and men’ and goes on to add that myth continues to ‘refashion and reshape’ an already layered culture.<sup>120</sup> Films that have tried to step away from

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<sup>116</sup> O’Rourke and Rodrigues, pp. 112–28.

<sup>117</sup> Rakesh Roshan, *Krrish* (FilmKraft Productions, 2006).

<sup>118</sup> O’Rourke and Rodrigues, p. 118.

<sup>119</sup> O’Rourke and Rodrigues, p. 118.

<sup>120</sup> Joe Forty, *Mythology: A Visual Encyclopedia* (New York: Sterling, 2001), pp. 120–36 cited in O’Rourke and Rodrigues, p. 122.

this paradigm of drawing on Indian mythological narratives have been met with poor reception as they are seen as cheap, unrealistic imitations of western stories and films.

Hence, many sci-fi/superhero films like *The Immortal Ashwatthama* and *Brahmastra*, which are currently in the works, borrow heavily from pages of the *Mahabharata*, keeping this relationship between people and mythological narratives intact.<sup>121</sup>

With the triumphant rise of the right-wing *Bhartiya Janta Party* in 2014, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who more than anything else harnessed the frustration and power of the ‘common man’ with the promise of *Acche Din* (Better Days), certain social trends were being clearly reflected in cinema. Stories were no longer set in urban centres like New Delhi and Mumbai or were about characters from affluent families. They were about real common people from smaller towns struggling to find their place in the world. There was a meteoric rise in ‘biopics’ or what I would like to call, Myths for a Shining India, where storytellers revisited and retold often fictionalised accounts of certain key events to create new myths and heroes for the citizens to revere and look up to in an attempt to enhance the feeling of national pride. According to Preeti Kumar, ‘To maintain the illusion of cultural and social continuity, a nation needs narratives – a profusion of memories of a shared past, glorious heritage, and heroic endeavours, which are constructed by narratives that seek to name the land and space that a people inhabit’.<sup>122</sup> Films like *Dangal* (Tiwari, 2016), *M.S. Dhoni* (Pandey, 2016), and *Gold* (Kagti, 2018) proved to be commercial and critical successes, and there are many more such biopics based on the life of historical and contemporary real-life heroes in the works.<sup>123</sup> Creating such narratives from the past in

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<sup>121</sup> Aditya Dhar, *The Immortal Ashwatthama* (RSVP Movies, 2022); Ayan Mukerjee, *Brahmastra* (Dharma Productions, 2022).

<sup>122</sup> Preeti Kumar, ‘Reconfiguring India: Narrating the Nation through Great Men Biopics’, *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film*, 2.1 (2014), 39–58 (p. 42).

<sup>123</sup> Neeraj Pandey, *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story* (Fox Star Studios, 2016); Nitesh Tiwari, *Dangal* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2016); Reema Kagti, *Gold* (Excel Entertainment, 2018).

cinema is a method to carve out and present an ‘idea of the nation to a national public’.<sup>124</sup> As Preeti Kumar expounds, such biopics have been used in cinema to chronicle the life-altering choices and actions by ‘fabricating, rediscovering, or authenticating the myths of celebrated men’.<sup>125</sup> By creating such narratives focused on the lives of exemplary characters, heroes (who may emerge from history or mythology), such films re-enforce the ‘myth of nationhood’ and create a nationalistic fervour.<sup>126</sup> But even here, it is difficult to shrug off the influence of mythology in crafting cinematic narratives based on the lives of real flesh and blood people. Preeti Kumar, in her paper ‘Reconfiguring India: Narrating the Nation through Great Men Biopics’, analyses four popular biopics from India and concludes that the heroes of these biopics could be considered derivations of heroes from mythological narratives and identifies the same.<sup>127</sup> For example, she compares the character of Bhagat Singh from the *Legend of Bhagat Singh* (Santoshi, 2002) (here, we talk about the character and not the real person) from the film to the character of Bheeshma from the *Mahabharata* as both are celibate warriors fighting to protect what is dear to them, with both having taken a vow to not father children.<sup>128</sup> She compares the character of athlete Milkha Singh from *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (Mehra, 2013) to the character of Karna, once again from the *Mahabharata*, identifying Milkha as the ‘underdog’ excluded from national teams due to internal politics and personal envy.<sup>129</sup> She also correctly identifies certain words from the lyrics in a song that plays in a training montage, which is straight out of the *Mahabharata* itself, ‘Open the wheels of your chariot, make it the Sudarshan chakra’.<sup>130</sup> As Kumar elaborates, in the *Mahabharata* narrative, Karna’s death came when he attempted to pull his chariot’s wheel

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<sup>124</sup> Kumar, p. 40.

<sup>125</sup> Kumar, p. 40.

<sup>126</sup> Kumar, pp. 39–41.

<sup>127</sup> Kumar, pp. 45–47.

<sup>128</sup> Kumar, pp. 46–47; Rajkumar Santoshi, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (Tips Industries, 2002).

<sup>129</sup> Kumar, pp. 46–47; Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2013).

<sup>130</sup> Kumar, pp. 46–47.

when it was stuck, and the song demands that Milkha be fearless enough to complete the task.<sup>131</sup>

As an extension of this investment in these Myths for a Shining India, there was a renewed interest in costume dramas, historical novels, graphic novels, and films born out of mythological tales, beyond the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. As Daftuar expounds, there is a surge in the reinterpretation of these religious/mythological epics being retold and reinterpreted from new perspectives as she further exemplifies,

Artist Moyna Chitrakar and author Samhita Arni explore *Ramayana* from Rama's abandoned queen's perspective in their graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana*, while Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya* turns the story of Sage Gautama's wife on its head, weaving in strains of sexuality and feminism. These, and several other instances of creative reinterpretation of Hindu myths, are supplemented by an increase in dialogue and critical analyses by readers, thinkers and academics themselves.<sup>132</sup>

Girija Jhunjhunwala (director of Campfire publishers), speaking to Daftuar, says that people are now interested in stories about gods, reinterpreted as real, flesh and blood people.<sup>133</sup> Books like *Karna's wife*, *The Outcast Queen*, and *The Thirteenth Day: A Story of the Kurukshetra* stand as prime examples of the same, reimagining the *Mahabharata* from alternative perspectives.<sup>134</sup> As Daftuar explicates, 'we find ourselves questioning storylines,

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<sup>131</sup> Kumar, pp. 46–47.

<sup>132</sup> Swati Daftuar, 'Ancient Mythology in Modern Avatars', *The Hindu*, 2017 <[www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/swati-daftuar-on-ancient-mythology-in-modern-avatars/article7540669.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/swati-daftuar-on-ancient-mythology-in-modern-avatars/article7540669.ece)> [accessed 20 January 2019].

<sup>133</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>134</sup> Iyengar; Kavita Karne, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* (Rupa Publications, 2013).

picking holes and critiquing characters, connecting them with contemporary ideas and issues'.<sup>135</sup>

Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO of a company that publishes mythological novels, speaking to Daftuar, insists that somewhere, renewal in interest is because of a 'renewed sense of national pride'.<sup>136</sup> But, Daftuar goes on to conclude that this continuous 'reinforcement of Hindu iconography across mediums has led to a reinterpretation and revival of Hindu nationalism and identity'.<sup>137</sup> While the wave of national pride has definitely emboldened storytellers and filmmakers to revisit some of these narratives through various mediums including, the big screen (cinema), it has also resulted in a general feeling of 'suspicion' towards the production of 'pure mythological adaptations', specifically in cinema, a medium with a reach beyond any other.<sup>138</sup> This has meant that films that claim to adapt the stories from the mythological narratives without relocating them to present-day (like in *Rajneeti* (Jha, 2010) or *Raavan* (Ratnam, 2010)) have also had to bear the brunt of this new wave of nationalism that has hit the nation.<sup>139</sup> A prime example here would be *Padmaavat*, which was an adaptation of Malik Muhammad Jayasi's poem *Padmavat*, which chronicles the fictional narrative of the mythical Rajput queen Rani Padmavati.<sup>140</sup> It came under tremendous fire from certain fringe political groups for tarnishing the image of a revered historical (arguably a mythological) figure but stands as being one of the highest-grossing Hindi films of all time.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>136</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>137</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>138</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>139</sup> Mani Ratnam, *Raavan* (Madras Talkies, 2010); Prakash Jha, *Rajneeti* (Prakash Jha Productions, 2010).

<sup>140</sup> Malik Muhammad Jayasi, *Padmavat*; Ruchika Sharma, 'The Epic Poem Padmavat Is Fiction. To Claim It as History Would Be the Real Tampering of History', *Scroll.In* <<https://scroll.in/article/828538/the-epic-poem-padmavat-is-fiction-to-claim-it-as-history-would-be-the-real-tampering-of-history>> [accessed 2 January 2021]; Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Padmaavat* (Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2018).

<sup>141</sup> Bollywood Hungama Hindi, 'All Time Top Grossers', *Bollywood Hungama* <[www.bollywoodhungama.com/all-time-top-grossers/](http://www.bollywoodhungama.com/all-time-top-grossers/)> [accessed 25 January 2019]; Sudha G. Tilak, 'Padmaavat: Why a Bollywood Epic Has Sparked Fierce Protests', *BBC News*, *BBC*, 2018 <[www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42048512](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42048512)> [accessed 26 January 2019].

But, around the same time, a film phenomenon called *Baahubali* (*The Beginning and The Conclusion*) hit the entire country, even though it was primarily a Telugu film dubbed into various languages.<sup>142</sup> The film borrowed and amalgamated plot points and ideas from mythological narratives, primarily the *Mahabharata* and was deeply inspired by narratives from the Amar Chitra Katha (as has been accepted by the filmmaker S.S. Rajamouli himself) and created a ‘modern mythology’ in the fictional kingdom of Mahishmati.<sup>143</sup> The narrative was written as one big epic divided into two parts, with the first one ending on a cliff-hanger. The mystery left at the end sparked the imagination of an entire country as they created their own myths that could explain the questionable actions of a certain beloved character. The *Baahubali* franchise is the highest-grossing film franchise in the history of Indian Cinema, with the Hindi version of *The Conclusion* now the highest-grossing ‘Hindi’ film of all time in India.<sup>144</sup> The *Baahubali* franchise created a mythology of its own, which is now being extended as a narrative universe with books, an animated streaming show, and a new Netflix show in the works.<sup>145</sup> While a film like *Padmaavat* was forced to fight to get a release, a fictional, fantastical tale that borrowed heavily from mythological narratives, without claiming to be a direct adaptation, was celebrated for changing the industry forever, setting the benchmark for visual effects-driven as well period costume dramas. This indicates that while audiences are interested in watching stories from the vast universe of mytho-historical/religious narratives, there is some reluctance from certain sections of society to accept these films.

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<sup>142</sup> Rajamouli, *Baahubali*.

<sup>143</sup> Damien Walter, ‘Tolkien’s Myths Are a Political Fantasy’, *The Guardian*, 2017 <[www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/dec/12/tolkiens-myths-are-a-political-fantasy](http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/dec/12/tolkiens-myths-are-a-political-fantasy)> [accessed 1 February 2019]; ‘“Baahubali” Is Tribute to Indian Epic Mahabharat: Filmmaker S’, *Indian Express*, 2015 <[indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/regional/baahubali-is-tribute-to-indian-epic-mahabharat-filmmaker-s-rajamouli/](http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/regional/baahubali-is-tribute-to-indian-epic-mahabharat-filmmaker-s-rajamouli/)> [accessed 2 February 2019].

<sup>144</sup> Bollywood Hungama Hindi.

<sup>145</sup> ‘Baahubali: Before The Beginning’, *Netflix Media Centre*, 2018 <[media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/baahubali-the-rise-of-sivagami](http://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/baahubali-the-rise-of-sivagami)> [accessed 12 February 2019].

The next chapter will attempt to take the discourse surrounding myth and cinema further and give storytellers a new paradigm they can use to cater to their needs in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

## Chapter 3: The Need for a New Screenwriting Paradigm

### The Need For A New Paradigm

The previous chapter explicated the influence of mythology on cinematic narratives and specifically the influence of Indian mythology on Indian cinema including in the *Baahubali* franchise, a blockbuster Indian film duology that shares deep-rooted narrative similarities with the *Mahabharata*.<sup>146</sup> In the first part of this chapter, I begin by briefly re-establishing the deep rooted connection between global cinematic narratives and mythology, which became the basis for Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (2007). In this book, he constructs a popular screenwriting paradigm studied and utilised all across the world to create narratives with a heroic figure whose journey is charted over the course of a narrative.<sup>147</sup>

As Varghese and Balasubramanian point out, the narratives that have come alive in cinema, TV, and now on web-streaming have shaped what they call 'shared human experience'.<sup>148</sup> They go on to add that such narratives point to the ability of all human beings to connect through 'shared metaphors and analogies'.<sup>149</sup>

In the previous chapters, this thesis attempted to establish CG Jung's concept of the 'collective unconscious', where he identified 'patterns of personality which are the shared heritage of the human race'.<sup>150</sup> Jung compared mythological narratives to 'dreams of an entire culture' which 'spring from the collective unconscious' and suggested that personalities that appear in these are common to personal narratives, arising from dreams as well as narratives across temporalities and geographies.<sup>151</sup> These 'motifs, preconceptions and

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<sup>146</sup> Rajamouli, *Baahubali*.

<sup>147</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

<sup>148</sup> Sona Varghese and Arumugam Balasubramanian, 'Carl Jung's Archetypes in Malayalam Film: A Case Study on The Film "Urumi"', *SHS WEB OF CONFERENCES*, 33.18 (2017), p. 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20173300018>> [accessed 17 September 2019].

<sup>149</sup> Varghese and Arumugam Balasubramanian, pp. 1–2.

<sup>150</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 23.

<sup>151</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 23.

behavioural patterns’, which Jung went on to define as ‘archetypes’, recur in ‘all cultural forms, arts and in dreams’.<sup>152</sup> Cinema, which many like Lehrer and Faraci compare to a shared dreaming experience undertaken by an entire community, and with it, all other mediums of visual storytelling, has become a canvas where all these patterns, these archetypes, which have been woven into the psyche of human beings, are brought to life.<sup>153</sup>

Jung’s work is indispensable for establishing the link between mythology and cinematic narratives. The major archetypes he suggested were ‘self, anima (the inherent female inside the psyche of a male), animus (the inherent male in the psyche of a female) and shadow’.<sup>154</sup> Other sources on Jung’s archetypes include twelve more familiar archetypes like ‘Hero, Magician, Outlaw, Explorer, Sage, Innocent, Creator, Ruler, Caregiver, Everyman, Jester and Lover’ which ‘recur because they represent deep, universal needs and desires that people seek to fulfil’.<sup>155</sup> Jung’s idea of a ‘collective unconscious’ laid down the basis of Joseph Campbell’s idea of the ‘monomyth’, specifically, ‘The Adventure of the Hero’ which, as mentioned above, was further adapted by Christopher Vogler, who re-interpreted it into a ‘Writer’s Journey’, a combination of a narrative paradigm and character archetypes meant for screenwriters.<sup>156</sup> These archetypes have since become nearly indispensable for writers to understand and assign roles to characters in narratives, thus becoming part of what Vogler calls the ‘universal language of storytelling’.<sup>157</sup> While establishing these archetypes as mere ‘functions’ that the character can move in and out of,

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<sup>152</sup> Varghese and Arumugam Balasubramanian, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> Devin Faraci, ‘Never Wake Up: The Meaning and Secret of Inception’, *CHUD.COM: Cinematic Happenings Under Development*, 2010 <<https://chud.com/24477/never-wake-up-the-meaning-and-secret-of-inception/>> [accessed 20 January 2022]; Jonah Lehrer, ‘The Neuroscience of Inception’, *Wired* <<https://www.wired.com/2010/07/the-neuroscience-of-inception/>> [accessed 20 September 2019]; Varghese and Arumugam Balasubramanian, p. 2.

<sup>154</sup> Varghese and Arumugam Balasubramanian, pp. 1–9.

<sup>155</sup> Stéphane Ganassali and Justyna Matysiewicz, ‘Echoing the Golden Legends: Storytelling Archetypes and Their Impact on Brand Perceived Value’, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37.5–6 (2021), 437–63 (pp. 445–46).

<sup>156</sup> Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, p. 43; Kaw; Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>157</sup> Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 24.

Vogler, combining Campbell's and Jung's work, lays out the following archetypes; **'Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, Herald, Shapeshifter, Shadow, Ally, Trickster'**.<sup>158</sup>

The second part of this chapter tests the workings and limitations of Vogler's paradigm against the *Baahubali* franchise, which owes an immense debt to Indian mythological narratives and is a strong specimen for a new global development in storytelling where we are moving away from telling a story about one character and chart their journey, towards creating a universe of characters engaged in a sprawling narrative that could be explored in multiple films/properties set in the same or different timelines.<sup>159</sup> This test would help me set up my argument for developing a new framework, constructed by exploiting structures of narratives from Indian mythology, which I believe has the building blocks for such a narrative schema. The aim here is to give writers/storytellers a new, alternative way of conceiving and constructing their sprawling stories from the outset, told over the course of various properties, with multiple strands and characters, often unfolding in complex timelines, giving birth to what Jenkins calls 'transmedia' franchises and cinematic universes, which is a development that screenwriters and storytellers are now adapting to.<sup>160</sup> This new framework provides storytellers with a new tool in their arsenal in addition to Vogler's paradigm and strengthens the argument that mythological narratives, irrespective of their geographical origin, continue to influence the evolution of cinematic narratives globally.

As mentioned above, the narrative structure of Vogler's journey has been adapted from the steps of 'The Adventure of the Hero' by Joseph Campbell.<sup>161</sup> Campbell divided his

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<sup>158</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 24–26.

<sup>159</sup> Geoffrey A. Long, 'Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dept. of Comparative Media Studies, 2007), pp. 45–46.

<sup>160</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101', *Confessions of an ACA-Fan*, 2007 <[henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html)> [accessed 10 November 2019].

<sup>161</sup> Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, pp. 1–3, 43.

journey/adventure into three parts, namely, ‘departure, initiation and return’.<sup>162</sup> Here, a hero after answering a ‘call to adventure’, ‘crosses the threshold’ into a new world and goes on a journey where he/she faces a ‘succession of trials’, undergoes cycles of metaphorical death and rebirth and encounters different archetypes of characters like a ‘supernatural aid’/ ‘mentor’, antagonistic father figures, benevolent female figures/ ‘goddesses’ and ‘temptresses’.<sup>163</sup> All of these guide the hero to an ‘enlightenment’ of sorts, a stage termed ‘apotheosis’ that leads to him getting the ‘ultimate boon’.<sup>164</sup> Finally, the new and improved hero ‘returns’ from this adventure to his own world, although reluctantly at first, as they realise the need to take their gift back for the greater good, crossing between worlds once again, bringing the elixir back with them.<sup>165</sup>

Vogler doesn’t deviate from Campbell’s original structure. He merely re-interprets and simplifies it for screenwriters and lays down the following stages, ‘**ordinary world, call to adventure, refusal of the call, meeting with the mentor, crossing the threshold, Tests, allies and enemies, approach to the inmost cave, ordeal, reward, the road back, resurrection (climax) and return with the elixir**’.<sup>166</sup> Vogler discusses how his paradigm applies to popular Hollywood releases over the years like *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff, 1994) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) and is still applicable to a large number of contemporary releases, specifically those that attempt to fit the protagonist's journey into three acts.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, pp. 45–226; Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 6.

<sup>163</sup> Aaron Lowry, ‘The Hero with a Thousand Faces – The Critique: Occam, Might I Borrow Your Razor for a Moment?’, *By Aaron Lowry* < <https://byaaronlowry.com/2018/07/01/the-hero-with-a-thousand-faces-the-critique/> [accessed 30 November 2019]; Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, pp. 45–178; Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, pp. 135–59; Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 6.

<sup>165</sup> Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, pp. 227–28.

<sup>166</sup> Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 6–9.

<sup>167</sup> George Lucas, *Star Wars* (20th Century Fox, 1977); Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, *The Lion King* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994); Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 258–90.

Michael Tierno cites Aristotle, who expounds that a dramatic story moves through ‘complication’ and ‘denouement’.<sup>168</sup> This means that the ‘complication’ comprises of the ‘beginning’ (the beginning of the action and before), which includes a setup of the characters, the world and then leads into the ‘first cause of action’, the incident that ‘sets the plot in motion’ unravelling a chain of events, which follow a ‘cause and effect pattern’ leading us into the ‘middle’, bringing the ‘complication’ to the fore.<sup>169</sup> The conflict generated in the ‘middle’ then builds towards the ‘second cause of action’, referred to as the ‘change in fortunes’, which leads the plot towards the denouement or the ‘end’.<sup>170</sup> The ‘beginning, middle and end’ thus complete the plot of a dramatic story, or in this case forming the three acts of a screenplay.<sup>171</sup> Vogler constructs his journey to fit the three-act structure. While **Act 1** starts with the establishment of the ‘ordinary world’ and ends with the hero ‘crossing the threshold’, **Act 2** commences with ‘tests, allies and enemies’ and ends with the ‘road back’ and finally, **Act 3** covers the ‘resurrection and return with elixir’ stages of Vogler’s journey.<sup>172</sup>

The twelve stages of Vogler’s journey help storytellers develop their plot and character simultaneously as every stage gives a specific set of possible actions, events, interactions (with different character archetypes) which the heroic figure commits, lives through and reacts to, forming the plot while giving the storyteller the opportunity to chart and present character growth. But Vogler’s paradigm, while fitting into Aristotle’s original structure for a dramatic story, creates a narrative pattern where the entire narrative is woven around a heroic figure and, as I would attempt to illustrate, could possibly limit the scope and

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<sup>168</sup> Michael Tierno, *Aristotle’s Poetics for Screenwriters* (Hyperion, 2002), p. 7. Kindle.

<sup>169</sup> Tierno, pp. 7–12.

<sup>170</sup> Tierno, pp. 7–12.

<sup>171</sup> Tierno, p. 7.

<sup>172</sup> Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 6.

nature of narratives which could be constructed using the two movements as suggested by Aristotle, namely ‘complication’ and ‘denouement’.<sup>173</sup>

### **Testing Vogler’s Paradigm Against The *Baahubali* Franchise**

As established in the previous chapter, *Baahubali: The Beginning* and *Baahubali: The Conclusion* is heavily inspired by Indian mythological narratives and their visual parameters (the sets, the costumes, the props etc. are in line with the popular depiction of historical, mythological and religious figures across various mediums and eras) creating a new, modern fantasy set in the fictional kingdom of Mahishmati. The franchise was originally created in Telugu (a South Indian language), which was later dubbed into other languages, getting a wide release in Hindi and found tremendous success all over India.

While Vogler’s mythical structure would work for most global films, as I illustrate below, a film series like *Baahubali*, which comprises two films so intricately bound to each other as a story, presents an interesting challenge and highlights certain narrative limitations of the same. The franchise consists of two films (*The Beginning and the Conclusion*) that tell the story of the two Baahubalis, the father and son, Amrendra and Mahendra, and a myriad of other characters thrown into a revenge saga encompassing two generations. The story begins when a strong, lovable village boy Shiva follows his instinct and voluntarily goes on an adventure looking for the woman of his dreams. His journey takes him to Mahishmati and brings him face to face with his long-lost mother, the imprisoned former ‘Queen-to be’ Devasena, his mentor-to be Katappa, his family’s past, and the truth about his father, Amrendra. The story (developed in *The Conclusion*) then takes us into a new timeline, where Amrendra, originally destined to be king, is wronged, banished from the throne, and the kingdom by his cousin Bhallaldeva and finally killed. Shiva, now identified as Mahendra,

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<sup>173</sup> Tierno, p. 7.

goes back to Mahishmati to exact revenge. The story of an intergenerational rift in a royal clan, the fight for the throne, misguided ambitions, the trope of exile, and a great war fought to restore balance presented through a sprawling non-linear structure reiterates the parallels between the narrative of the *Mahabharata* and the modern fantasy *Baahubali*.

The storytellers first present Mahendra, here identified as Shiva, as a heroic character and invest us into his journey, through different events and his encounters with a myriad of characters, like the mentor figure Katappa. He goes through different stages reminiscent of Vogler's Journey, right up to the 'approach to the inmost cave' where Shiva travels to Mahishmati (currently ruled by evil Bhallaldeva) in an attempt to save Devasena, which leads into the 'ordeal' where Shiva is wounded and 'appears to die' which is one of the tenets of this stage.<sup>174</sup> This 'ordeal' brings Shiva face to face with Katappa, a slave to the ultimate antagonist King Bhallaldeva, who does his bidding due to an undying sense of duty towards the king and the kingdom. While the sequence has them fighting, it ends with Katappa identifying Shiva as the crown prince of Mahishmati. Shiva/Mahendra comes to know about his past, his father Amrendra's journey, through an extended flashback which runs and takes the majority of the franchise's runtime, cutting into Mahendra's journey as the heroic figure and establishing Amrendra as a new one, even though it happens in a flashback. The flashback then runs through all the narrative beats as laid down by Vogler, over the course of the two films. It builds up to the 'approach to the inmost cave' as Amrendra falls in love with Devasena, moving towards the extended 'ordeal' which continues as he marries her against the wishes of Queen Mother Sivagami (his adoptive mother).<sup>175</sup> Consequentially, the relationship between Amrendra and Sivagami deteriorates. These events lead to Amrendra's exile and eventually pushes Sivagami to order Katappa to kill Amrendra due to Bhallaldeva's

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<sup>174</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>175</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 14–16. 144-155.

deception, thus abruptly ending Amrendra's journey. Even if Amrendra's death is considered his tragic 'road back', the big climactic battle with the evil Bhallaldeva, the ultimate antagonist of the franchise, never happens.<sup>176</sup> Vogler's paradigm allows for tragic conclusions, where the hero dies at the end and the 'elixir of tragedy' provides the audience with a certain learning in the errors of the hero, which is not the case here.<sup>177</sup> It should be noted that Amrendra's journey is abruptly cut short and is devoid of 'catharsis', something Vogler posits the climax ('resurrection') should provide the audience.<sup>178</sup> Amrendra's death doesn't end in the release of tension but, instead, creates the circumstances and then the anticipation for its final rise. Hence, it doesn't fall into the classification of the 'resurrection' stage, obviously ruling out the 'return with the elixir' stage in Amrendra's narrative.<sup>179</sup>

We come back to Shiva/Mahendra's present-day timeline. What is left now is revenge. In a way, Shiva's/Mahendra's 'ordeal' stage from the first film could be said to have given way to the 'reward' of information and the return to fight his uncle in Mahishmati becomes his 'road back'.<sup>180</sup> The war between Shiva/Mahendra and Bhallaldeva is full of ups and downs, highs and lows for Shiva. The 'resurrection' stage of his journey comes in the form of this long-drawn battle leading to Bhallaldeva's death and Mahendra becoming the king of Mahishmati is akin to the 'return with the elixir' stage as it is a boon for the oppressed people of Mahishmati.<sup>181</sup> Hence, it is clear here that while Mahendra's character follows and completes Vogler's Journey, Amrendra's journey could be considered incomplete.

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<sup>176</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 187–97.

<sup>177</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 203–23.

<sup>178</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 203–4.

<sup>179</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 197–226.

<sup>180</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 10–18.

<sup>181</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 197–226.

### ***Baahubali* and Murray Smith's 'The Structure of Sympathy'**

Another way to look at the narrative of the franchise would be to look at it under the lens of Murray Smith's concept of 'structure of sympathy' or the levels of audience engagement with characters as established in his paper.<sup>182</sup> In 'Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema', Smith expounds that audience can merely 'recognise' the characters, or be 'aligned' with them, which essentially means that the audience sees/hears what the character sees or hears and has access to their feelings.<sup>183</sup> As outlined by Smith, the highest level of engagement is 'allegiance', where the audience identify with a character's moral and ideological constructs, akin to the 'ideological facet' added to Genette's established concept of 'internal focalization' by Rimmon-Kenan, where the audience understands/is exposed to a narrative through a character's 'system of values' even with or without their 'optical viewpoint'.<sup>184</sup> The film franchise goes in and out of 'alignment' with Shiva/Mahendra and Amrendra and manages to create 'allegiance', first with Shiva/Mahendra and then later with Amrendra, which could be considered to run deeper than with Shiva/Mahendra. It could be said that Shiva/Mahendra, though an active character in the linear narrative, eventually becomes the instrument to take Amrendra's revenge.<sup>185</sup> While the audiences can be 'engaged' with different characters on different levels (be it mere 'recognition, alignment or above all allegiance'), over the course of the filmic narrative, something that Smith calls 'plural identification', 'allegiance' is created through 'moral structures', something that Indian films and above all this narrative, in particular, is not at all

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<sup>182</sup> Murray Smith, 'Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema', *Cinema Journal*, 33.4 (1994), 34–56 (pp. 39–42).

<sup>183</sup> Smith, pp. 40–41.

<sup>184</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (Routledge, 1983), pp. 81–83 cited in Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 89–90; Smith, pp. 41–42.

<sup>185</sup> Smith, pp. 41–42.

ambiguous about.<sup>186</sup> Then it would perhaps not be wrong to conclude that, in such narratives, it is the hero and those behind him (characters like Katappa, Devasena, and Sivagami) that the audience has to have their deepest ‘allegiance’ with.<sup>187</sup> Here, it is clear that the audience develops ‘allegiance’ with Shiva/Mahendra, and then it shifts towards Amrendra (even though his story is told through an extended flashback) and then back towards Shiva/Mahendra very briefly, and I would argue, the ‘allegiance’ they share with Amrendra is more profound than the one they share with Shiva/Mahendra, perhaps because of the way the first film ends, locking their ‘allegiance’ with him for the rest of the narrative.<sup>188</sup> Amrendra defeats the evil Kalkiya, a victory that comes against all odds, which sets him up to be king. Mahendra/ Shiva is an instrument to avenge Amrendra’s death and fits into Amrendra’s ‘moral structure’.<sup>189</sup>

This illustrates that considering the entire narrative of *Baahubali* just to be Shiva/Mahendra’s story, which is the only way the narrative (over the course of the two films) could fit into Vogler’s structure, cannot be justified. The complete overarching narrative of the two films invests a lot of its time and emotional weight in Amrendra’s Journey. Amrendra’s and Shiva/Mahendra’s journeys need to be seen as one intricate narrative, with multiple characters in two separate timelines culminating in one enthralling climax, told over two films released over a period of two years. This would push such a narrative away from the scope of a straightforward ‘Hero’s Journey’.<sup>190</sup>

Vogler is explicitly clear that the structure that he lays down should only be considered a starting point for structuring a story. He adds that elements for this journey may be out of order or at a mismatch with the narrative.<sup>191</sup> But perhaps, serving the storytelling

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<sup>186</sup> Smith, pp. 39–48.

<sup>187</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

<sup>188</sup> Smith, pp. 41–42.

<sup>189</sup> Smith, pp. 41–42.

<sup>190</sup> Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 7.

<sup>191</sup> Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 234.

requirements of the era he conceived his paradigm in, Vogler limits the possibilities of what a narrative structure created out of mythical narratives could be used for, as he presents the workings of his paradigm through a blockbuster like *Titanic* (Cameron, 97).<sup>192</sup>

Like its epic predecessors, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Arthurian romances, or the Ring Cycle of Wagner, *Titanic* tells part of a vast story, the bridging of the two worlds, the Old World and the New. Within these enormous supertales are hundreds of substories and epic cycles, each with its own dramatic structure and completeness. No single work can tell all the threads, but the individual story can communicate the sense, the dramatic facts, of the entire situation.<sup>193</sup>

In the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Vogler attempts to expand the scope of his model by adding (in a brief paragraph) that while it 'was conceived primarily to describe the course of a feature film of ninety minutes to two hours', the model could work for a 'Story Universe' by crafting 'substories that trace all the stages of a single Hero's Journey' which come together to create a bigger 'Hero's Journey'.<sup>194</sup>

In this small addition in the introduction to the new edition, Vogler perhaps underestimates the complexity that such an exercise could often entail. I would argue that reduction of such expansive narratives to a collection of smaller narratives that come together to form a larger whole, may apply to some but not all such universes. The *Baahubali* franchise shows certain limitations of Vogler's paradigm, specifically when we attempt to sieve out their journeys individually. These stories, these mega-narratives, with different characters and stories converging in and diverging out, all in different temporal spaces in the

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<sup>192</sup> James Cameron, *Titanic* (Paramount Pictures, 1997).

<sup>193</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 249.

<sup>194</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers. 25th Anniversary Edition*.

universe, coming together at critical points, are so intricately bound that often at specific points within the universe, separating them into different journeys may be thematically and narratively diminishing. For example, *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo, 2019), set within the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, is one such critical moment that presents multiple tracks with different characters established over 22 films, all equally important and indispensable to the plot.<sup>195</sup> Any attempt to separate their journeys, even within this film, would perhaps not allow the audience to grasp the true thematic and narrative scope of such universes, for which they need to be perceived as one whole, rather than just a ‘sum of its parts’ (which may or may not work individually depending on how the universe is planned and constructed), and storytellers are now building narratives that the audiences are ready to immerse themselves in as a whole.<sup>196</sup> This kind of storytelling may often require storytellers to think beyond individual narratives from the outset, and this evolved framework that I propose in the final section of this chapter would aim to aid them on this journey.

### **From Hero’s Journey to Gomez’s ‘Collective Journey’**

This need for a new narrative paradigm is backed by writer and transmedia producer Jeff Gomez, who in a series of essays questions the relevance of Campbell’s journey today, calling for a new ‘narrative engine that lends itself to our nonlinear, networked, omni-perspective digital age’, calling for it to be replaced with a ‘Collective Journey’.<sup>197</sup>

So, while the Hero’s Journey functions as an engine driving the survival of the fittest (both physically and ideologically), in the modern, crowded and hyper-accelerated

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<sup>195</sup> Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, *Avengers: Endgame* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2019); *Marvel Cinematic Universe*.

<sup>196</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2016), p. 104; Long, pp. 45–46.

<sup>197</sup> Jeff Gomez, ‘The Hero’s Journey Is No Longer Serving Us’, 2017 <<https://blog.collectivejourney.com/the-heros-journey-is-no-longer-serving-us-85c6f8152a50>> [accessed 2 February 2020].

world of pervasive communication this process is becoming antiquated, and in some cases divisive, polarising, and enormously dangerous.<sup>198</sup>

Gomez insists that following a journey or creating the narrative using a singular heroic protagonist, works on setting up a simple structure of right and wrong, the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, making it potentially polarising in today’s times.<sup>199</sup> Gomez explicates that we as individuals are no longer passive consumers of content and are capable of contributing to ‘every story being told or every story ever told’ through our access to social media platforms and thus insists that it is time to move on to a model which is inclusive and creates a space for multiple voices from diverse backgrounds to co-exist and thrive.<sup>200</sup> As Zuckerman suggests, Campbell’s work needs to evolve/ be reworked where different archetypes come together for a journey towards ‘cohesion and convergence’ going from being individuals to a ‘collective’.<sup>201</sup> Zuckerman’s approach is philosophical, and it is perhaps a tool to work towards a unified, inclusive world, but the stories that could represent this kind of a journey on different narrative mediums require, as discussed above, a reworked path to narrative structuring.

Building blocks for such a paradigm already exist in mythological narratives across the world, and as I would establish in this next section, in Indian Mythology as well. This paradigm has been constructed using narratives from Indian mythology, specifically the *Mahabharata*, which itself unfolds as a sprawling universe with multiple characters and their

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<sup>198</sup> Gomez, ‘The Hero’s Journey Is No Longer Serving Us’.

<sup>199</sup> Gomez, ‘The Hero’s Journey Is No Longer Serving Us’.

<sup>200</sup> Gomez, ‘The Hero’s Journey Is No Longer Serving Us’; Maya Zuckerman, ‘The Collective Journey - Part 1’, *The Huffington Post*, 2017 <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-collective-journey-pa\\_b\\_9073346](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-collective-journey-pa_b_9073346)> [accessed 6 February 2020]; Maya Zuckerman, ‘The Collective Journey — Part 2’, *The Huffington Post*, 2017

<[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-collective-journey-pa\\_1\\_b\\_9095040?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAI6RojqPP3mzkVxbX0dDpCkQtaApmdkclYkSRRINaFIDeTIGJEz0dOE3imDJkez70MkxUfXfPK\\_BYg8zWPhjFekk9831WkfO2M9ZfnJaeV6-QU8917yIY\\_7w2oz-6d2tArwPYCtw80FHxzoazuu\\_gHQ6YLoi2vMtJMxxtLYFlhly](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-collective-journey-pa_1_b_9095040?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAI6RojqPP3mzkVxbX0dDpCkQtaApmdkclYkSRRINaFIDeTIGJEz0dOE3imDJkez70MkxUfXfPK_BYg8zWPhjFekk9831WkfO2M9ZfnJaeV6-QU8917yIY_7w2oz-6d2tArwPYCtw80FHxzoazuu_gHQ6YLoi2vMtJMxxtLYFlhly)> [accessed 6 February 2020].

<sup>201</sup> Zuckerman, ‘The Collective Journey — Part 2’.

often inseparable and intertwined stories with the aim of helping storytellers across the globe envision, create, develop and expand new realities.

### **A New Alternative Paradigm**

Devdutt Pattanaik says that ‘to appreciate Hindu mythology, we have to agree to Hindu assumptions’ while establishing that the idea of ‘rebirth’ is at the centre of the Hindu mythology, which makes it problematic to divide characters under categories such as ‘heroes and villains’.<sup>202</sup> He insists that ‘Hindu stories follow a very different non-linear cyclical structure’.<sup>203</sup> Hence, a new narrative framework based on Indian Mythology, offered to storytellers to envision their sprawling ‘collective journey’, would perhaps resound with Gomez, who calls for a new ‘narrative engine that lends itself to our nonlinear, networked, omni-perspective digital age’.<sup>204</sup> Considering the point that Pattanaik makes about the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* being part of the same narrative, the *Vishnu Purana*, I would argue that this finds its parallels in this new development in cinematic storytelling, i.e. creation of cinematic universes, like the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*.<sup>205</sup> After having proposed the new paradigm in this chapter, I would attempt to test it against the over-arching narrative of the MCU to establish its global commercial application and viability.

While *Ramayana* is divided into seven sections/chapters or ‘*Kandas*’, the *Mahabharata* has eighteen sections/chapters or ‘*Parvas*’, and Pattanaik does a side by side comparison of the two, dividing the eighteen *parvas* into seven major story events, which we would use for the construction of the new paradigm.<sup>206</sup> The first story event is the first ‘*Parva*’, setting up the history of the characters, their lineage, the relationship and the

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<sup>202</sup> Devdutt Pattanaik, ‘How We Read Mythology’, *Devdutt* <<https://devdutt.com/articles/how-we-read-mythology/>> [accessed 6 April 2019].

<sup>203</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>204</sup> Gomez, ‘The Hero’s Journey Is No Longer Serving Us’.

<sup>205</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 10–17.

<sup>206</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 17.

dynamic of the various characters in the story, while the second event is the second ‘*Parva*’ which sets up the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, with the former gambling their kingdom away in a game of dice.<sup>207</sup> The third and the fourth story event of the *Mahabharata* are the third and the fourth ‘*Parvas*’ of the *Mahabharata*, which explore the Pandavas’ exile and eventual return.<sup>208</sup> The fifth story event is the fifth ‘*Parva*’ which enumerates the attempt to broker peace between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but in vain, and the sixth story event covers ‘*Parvas*’ six to eleven, which enumerate the apocalyptic war and the final story event, covers twelve to eighteen, which delves into the aftermath of the war.<sup>209</sup> Quite clearly, Pattanaik chooses to lay out the structure in broad strokes, through events in the world of the story and not according to the journey of one character, which is in line with his idea of moving away from the black and white division of singular heroes and villains. On the other hand, Aristotle divided every dramatic story into ‘complication and denouement’, which I believe could be re-interpreted into *established reality* and *disruption*, which finally leads to the creation of a new *established reality*, which may be a new version of the old reality or a drastically new one, depending on the kind of story being told.<sup>210</sup> A new structural framework comes to the fore by expanding this idea further and combining it with Pattanaik’s break-up of the *Mahabharata*.

Based on the narrative analysis of *Mahabharata*, I would propose that a screenwriter/storyteller can conceive a story in six chapters/sections, and these chapters could be covered over a series of screenplays or narrative properties. While moving away from the idea of a single heroic figure and villains, it is also essential to understand that no narrative can be constructed without central characters whose actions and reactions drive the story forward. Every narrative conceived and constructed using this paradigm could focus on certain *focal*

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<sup>207</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 17.

<sup>208</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 17.

<sup>209</sup> Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, p. 17.

<sup>210</sup> Tierno, p. 7.

*characters* who would drive the narrative forward, and during the same, their ‘moral structures’ come to the fore, which could be used to bring them in conflict with other *focal characters*.<sup>211</sup> In the case of *Ramayana*, characters like Rama, Sita, Lakshman, Hanuman and Raavan are some of the *focal characters*. The Pandavas and Kauravas from the *Mahabharata* are the *focal characters* in its overarching narrative, while the focus shifts to other characters like *Krishna, Draupadi, Drona, Bheeshma* and *Karna*, who graduate to being *focal* in different *Parvas* where the final climactic battle ties every thread together. It could be said that all these characters from the two texts become *focal* at different stages of the *Vishnu Purana*. At the same time, each chapter and, by extension, every narrative would also push the world a little bit further, creating the opportunity to populate it with other possible *focal characters*. Without dismissing established models, this paradigm aims to give storytellers a new, flexible alternative framework to imagine the sheer expanse of their narrative from the outset, where the story unfolds in movements, with concurrent stories often unfolding at a different pace and not being bound by specific turns and plot points or immediate cause and effect due to the actions and reactions of the ‘protagonist’ and ‘antagonist’. This paradigm aims to focus the attention of storytellers on the creation and extension of the world in different directions, temporally and geographically, through different *focal characters*. The actions of any of the *focal characters* could push the world into the next chapter of the narrative, with all the threads building towards the final *battle* chapter, where some of the threads could be resolved, and others could be used to expand the world further. While the paradigm has been laid out by deconstructing the narrative progression of the *Mahabharata*, specific plot details can be developed using the outline as a base to suit specific requirements of each fictional world.

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<sup>211</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

*Introduction to the Established Reality:* This chapter is quite like the idea of the ‘ordinary world’/ ‘world of common day’ of the ‘Hero’s Journey’.<sup>212</sup> This is where ‘alignment’ with different *focal characters* is established, and we understand that this part of the story is going to be filtered through these particular characters.<sup>213</sup> Considering the narrative expanse of certain stories, writers can choose to shift ‘alignment’ between different *focal characters* during any upcoming chapter, allowing the audience to attach themselves to different character(s) at different stages of the overarching narrative.<sup>214</sup> The *introduction to established reality* could also help set out the interpersonal dynamics between the characters, along with some of the rules and elements of this new world (which can be developed further in later chapters) through the first wave of conflict, established through troughs and crests of confrontations and momentary victories.

Depending on the expanse of the narrative, storytellers can introduce only particular characters in detail, namely the *focal characters*, while only providing hints about others or introduce seemingly minor characters who could become *focal characters* in another narrative that branches out of this *established reality*. They could also graduate to being *focal characters* in the overarching narrative in any of the upcoming chapters. In terms of the structure of the *Mahabharata*, this chapter would be the first story event. As mentioned above, the histories of the characters, the *Kuru* clan, the Pandavas and Kauravas, and their interpersonal dynamics are explored here. Everything in this reality is hit hard by a *disruption*.

*Disruption:* This could come from inside the world as it is introduced or from outside it, expanding and in a certain way transforming the *established reality*. The disruption pushes the *focal characters* introduced to react and act, which alters the reality

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<sup>212</sup> Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, p. 6.

<sup>213</sup> Smith, p. 41.

<sup>214</sup> Smith, p. 41.

further. The *disruption* would therefore create the circumstances necessary to set up or begin the process of modification of the ‘moral structures’ of various characters, *focal* or otherwise, creating another wave of conflict (once again established through troughs and crests of confrontations and momentary victories), which gradually intensifies over the course of the narrative.<sup>215</sup> The seeds of the *disruption* and the conflict could be set in the *established reality* itself, which are brought to the fore by the disruptive event and then further intensified. In the *Mahabharata*, this comes as the second story event, which creates the complication and conflict as the Pandavas gamble away their kingdom, throwing their lives into turmoil which also sets the events of the story in motion.

For new characters introduced in the *disruption* chapter, *focal* or otherwise (who had not been introduced in the *established reality*), this disrupted reality could become another *established reality* in a new potential narrative. This new narrative would create the possibility of the world expanding in a new direction, temporally and geographically, setting up for a new *disruption*, which sets the story in motion for them, restarting the structural cycle while pushing the overarching narrative forward.

*Exploration of the Disruption:* The *focal characters* of the narrative would then be forced to deal with the consequences of the disruption and come to terms with the rules of the disrupted reality. Here, while some would attempt to maintain the status quo, others would attempt to reverse the damage caused by the disruption and find a way back to the *established reality*. The ‘moral structures’ or ‘system of values’ of various characters, *focal* or otherwise, introduced in the *established reality* would be further solidified, cementing audience ‘allegiance’, further setting up and intensifying the conflict through troughs and crests of confrontation and momentary victories, which would invariably lead them further

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<sup>215</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

away from any semblance of the same.<sup>216</sup> Also, the ‘moral structures’ of characters who are introduced in later chapters can be solidified in the *exploration of the disruption* chapter in their own narratives, which could come at different stages in the over-arching narrative.<sup>217</sup> As with the *Mahabharata*, this could come in the form of the third and fourth story events, which would mean the exile, where the Pandavas are thrown out of Hastinapura by the Kauravas (who take complete control of the kingdom) and explore various kingdoms, sometimes together, sometimes apart, taking their narratives in various tangents, coming in contact with various potentially *focal characters* with narratives of their own and explore the boundaries of this world as they become disruptors of other characters’ *established realities*.

*Build-up to Battle:* In the *Mahabharata*, the build-up to battle comes after the Pandavas return to Hastinapura and the negotiations with the Kauravas to avoid the final battle begin. Simultaneously, tensions rise further, sides are chosen, and eventually, battle lines are drawn. Hence, once again, this chapter would throw the *focal characters* further towards the upcoming climactic confrontation. *Focal characters* set out to find allies and, depending on their moral standing, make one final attempt to reverse, keep intact or further accentuate the changes, transformation, or damage caused by the *disruption*. This would instead result in further escalation of the conflict, forcing the *focal characters* to consolidate their resources and allies and declare their intention to go into an all-out confrontation to resolve this conflict. As with the previous chapters, this build-up would also be made up of troughs and crests of confrontation and momentary victories, all of which only further deepen conflict, setting up the stage for the climactic battle. As before, this build-up increases the scope of the character’s interactions, which creates the opportunity to introduce new, potentially *focal characters* (for example, allies on either side) into the universe,

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<sup>216</sup> Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, pp. 89-90; Smith, pp. 41–48.

<sup>217</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

expanding it, making this chapter of the narrative the *established reality* for these new characters.

*The Battle (The First Ending)*: As with the *Mahabharata*'s sixth story event, which covers the apocalyptic battle and as the name suggests, this chapter of the narrative would cover the climactic battle/confrontation between different *focal characters* with opposing moral standings. The *battle* would either resolve the crisis at hand, diffuse the conflict or, depending on the nature of the story, create a new one, which would lead us into the final chapter. Once again, the battle could be constructed with troughs and crests of intense confrontation and momentary victories, all of which only further deepen the already boiling conflict, which finally crescendos with the *ultimate crusade* (akin to the Vogler's stage of 'resurrection' ) where the tension finally boils over resulting in the ultimate confrontation.<sup>218</sup> As with all the previous chapters, this one also presents the opportunity to widen the scope of the universe through characters who are introduced into the universe, making this the *established reality* for these newly introduced characters.

*The New Established Reality*: No matter what the outcome of the battle or the climactic confrontation is, it is important to acknowledge that the events starting with the *disruption* would have fundamentally altered the fabric of the *established reality*, which would mean that the new *established reality*, whatever it may be, would be a new, different (to varying degrees) version of the older one. The *focal characters* would also be altered in some way by the preceding events, which would also contribute to the difference between the new and old realities. The degree of difference between the two would also be determined by the outcome of the climactic confrontation or the battle. Like every other chapter before, this *new established reality* would give the opportunity to bring in characters who could become *focal characters* in the overarching story through future narratives or

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<sup>218</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, pp. 197–99.

create the circumstances for characters introduced previously, albeit briefly, to come to the centre of the action in future narratives. At the same time, this also presents the opportunity to extend and expand the narrative further with *focal characters* in question, who may have shifted on the moral spectrum, starting from this new *established reality*.

If we were to create an over-arching narrative with one set of *focal characters*, this paradigm could be re-interpreted where any chapter can be a good starting or ending point for a particular screenplay/narrative property in the overarching story, as long as the complete structure is followed to tell the complete story. This would also mean that each chapter or a combination of the same could help construct certain sections of the overarching story over multiple screenplays/narrative properties, with each being dramatic stories in their own right. Hence, if the first script ends with what could be considered a *build-up to battle* in the overarching narrative, the paradigm would still allow storytellers to create a complete dramatic story, as each chapter allows for crests and troughs in the drama, which would create moments of confrontations and momentary victories. One such confrontation where the tension boils over could be considered the *ultimate crusade* in this part of the story but would only be a beat in the build-up to a bigger conflict. Hence, it would become the *established reality* for the next screenplay, restarting the cycle while taking the *build-up to battle* in the over-arching narrative forward towards the *battle* chapter. On the other hand, even if a screenplay ends at the *exploration of the disruption*, it could encompass *build-up to battle*, a *battle* (complete with an *ultimate crusade*) and the *establishment of a new reality*, which could be carried on in the next chapter in the build-up to a bigger battle/ climactic event. And as mentioned above, every chapter in the narrative could become an *established reality* to spawn off new narratives with characters who are introduced and then graduate to being *focal characters* in their own narratives and the overarching one (in that chapter or future chapters), depending on the nature of the story being told.

The next critical chapter intends to place this paradigm firmly in the larger discourse around storytelling universes and cross-platform storytelling. I use the paradigm to breakdown the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, the *Baahubali* franchise and construct a completely new universe, a two-part adaptation of the *Mahabharata*, namely *The Vow* and *Warriors*. Evaluating the paradigm through these ‘tests’, I offer it as a viable tool which can give a possible solution to some of the challenges that storytellers face as they attempt to craft their expansive narratives across a single or multiple mediums.

## Chapter 4: Applying the Paradigm

### The New Paradigm And Transmedia Universes

Cinematic or narrative universes are complex entities created through the intersection of different stories that interact through different characters, who can exist in the same or different temporalities. These stories could be told over the same or different mediums.

When the story is divided and dispensed through different mediums, such a universe is called a 'Transmedia Franchise', where each entity, while 'ideally being accessible on its own terms', makes 'its own unique contribution' to the overarching narrative as well.<sup>219</sup>

Henry Jenkins defines it as the 'art of world making' where the consumers of content 'assume the role of hunters and gatherers', and at times even creators/contributors, where they piece together the story from different mediums, sometimes adding to it, to create a holistic, immersive experience where consuming all the 'media forms improves the experience as a whole'.<sup>220</sup> In line with how this paradigm has been constructed, Jenkins adds that transmedia narratives are not about 'individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds'.<sup>221</sup>

In his book, *The Art of Immersion*, Frank Rose discusses the rise of 'media mix' culture 'where one story can be told through different media at the same time' first attempted in Japan in the 1970s, which he correctly identifies as a precursor to the rise of western cross-platform 'synergistic storytelling'.<sup>222</sup> Rose suggests that this 'media mix' strategy was a result of the prevalent 'Okatu' youth culture where young men and women disconnected from reality to take a deep dive into the world of manga or anime; in other words, they were individuals who invested deeply into 'alternate realities'.<sup>223</sup> In a way, manga publishers and

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<sup>219</sup> Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101'; Long, pp. 14–16.

<sup>220</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 21; Long, pp. 14–16, 28.

<sup>221</sup> Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101'.

<sup>222</sup> Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories*, 2011, p. 41.

<sup>223</sup> Rose, pp. 39–45.

anime producers have given a certain ownership of the worlds and the characters inside them to the 'okatu', allowing them to extend the universe, which leads to indirect promotion and increased revenue for the original properties and creators.<sup>224</sup> In the west, the 'Okatu' community, often referred to as 'fanboys' not only exists but thrives (a network which has been made even more robust through the internet and rise of named and anonymous social media platforms) but control, ownership of media properties is something that big studios, music labels have been desperate to maintain.<sup>225</sup> As Rose points out, owners of such properties have historically been averse to let the narrative fall into the hands of the common people, fans, who wanted to engage and in their own way be a part of the narrative, citing several litigations which entertainment behemoths like Warner Bros. have undertaken against young fans who attempted to engage with the expansive and potentially immersive world of *Harry Potter*.<sup>226</sup> The realisation that this kind of interaction could help create a new fan base and bring in new revenue streams for the studios was a slow one. Warner Bros. has since created a universe known as the *Wizarding World*, an immersive multi-platform enterprise that seeks to engage fans using quizzes, fan club interaction and engagement forums, new original writing by J.K. Rowling, promotional content, as well as a lineup of films, theatre productions and theme parks.<sup>227</sup> Rose also cites the example of Lucasfilm, which has encouraged fans to take over and create their own narratives in the *Star Wars* universe, with the pre-condition that all the fan-created content they host on *Starwars.com* would be owned by them.<sup>228</sup>

I would argue that the rise in cross-platform storytelling in the west is still an attempt to maintain control over the narrative across platforms, be it novels, comic books, content

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<sup>224</sup> Rose, p. 43.

<sup>225</sup> Rose, pp. 77–102.

<sup>226</sup> Rose, p. 95.

<sup>227</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Wizarding World: The Official Home of Harry Potter* <<https://www.wizardingworld.com>> [accessed 2 October 2020].

<sup>228</sup> Rose, pp. 93–97.

created for the web, games and even physical audience interaction (theme parks, installations etc.) all of which directly and indirectly helps them control the way the fans interact with the narrative as well, all this while they are adding possible revenue streams for themselves.<sup>229</sup>

The streaming wars (creation of new streaming platforms) that all the big studios have entered into is arguably a way for them to further assert their control. They are giving audiences the content and the platform to interact with it. The way Marvel has decided to expand the MCU now using the Disney+ platform, owned by parent company Disney, making the purchase of a subscription by any MCU fan nearly indispensable, is an example of the same.

While extensive exercises in transmedia or cross-platform storytelling already exist, they often have been afterthoughts to cash in on the popularity of the original film or TV show or have not been planned in a way that carries the vision of the original creator forward. In the essay, ‘Taxonomy of Transmedia Storytelling’, Colin B. Harvey discusses various categories of transmedia storytelling, including Christy Dena’s categories of ‘transmedia writing’.<sup>230</sup> As Harvey points out, Dena’s first category is where ‘distinct but related mono-medium stories’ all exist in ‘one wider storyworld’.<sup>231</sup> The second category is a ‘collection of media that tells one story’, but the audience or the consumer of the story needs to engage with each part of the story on different mediums or ‘transfiction’.<sup>232</sup> The third category is historically one of the most common, where a ‘mono-medium’ story is expanded using what Dena calls ‘expansion analysis’, a process that helps storytellers compile a ‘Transmedia

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<sup>229</sup> Long, pp. 45–46.

<sup>230</sup> Christy Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, in *Hand Made High Tech*, ed. by S. Groth (Australia: if:book Australia, 2011), pp. 1–5 <<https://eprints.qut.edu.au/77679/>> [accessed 5 January 2022]; Colin B. Harvey, ‘Taxonomy of Transmedia Storytelling’, in *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Nöel Thon (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), pp. 278–94.

<sup>231</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, pp. 1–4; Harvey, pp. 280–82.

<sup>232</sup> Christy Dena, ‘Current State of Cross Media Storytelling: Preliminary Observations for Future Design’, in *Crossmedia Communication in Dynamic Knowledge Society* (presented at the European Information Systems Technologies Event, The Hague, 2004), p. 3; Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, pp. 1–4; Harvey, pp. 280–82; Long, p. 18.

Bible' which lays down the rules and the laws for this expanded universe.<sup>233</sup> It could be said that an 'expansion analysis' could be post-dated or 'retroactive' where the extensions are mapped to create multiple revenue streams/ 'intellectual properties' after the success of the original property or pre-dated 'expansion analysis', which is the same as Dena's fourth and the final category, 'pro-active transmedia', which constitutes of stories that are constructed to be transmedia from the beginning and once again, a 'Transmedia Bible' is created to aid with the same.<sup>234</sup> Here the creator would lay out the plans for the universe during or before the plotting of the property, which first introduces the universe.

As Jason Mittel expounds in 'Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television', each category of transmedia storytelling has its own challenges, but one that is common to all being how to give consumers a comprehensive, immersive and synchronised experience of one narrative over multiple media.<sup>235</sup> A lot of transmedia storytelling has been created using a post-dated 'expansion analysis' and has been shuttling between 'directed' (where the original creators or owners of the intellectual property exerts control over the story being told in the extensions) and 'devolved' (there is a lot more 'flexibility', which means that the original creators or owners of the intellectual property exert less control over the extensions).<sup>236</sup> In the latter, the idea of canon is often diluted. But even with 'directed transmedia storytelling', creators struggle to generate properties that create a 'transmedia resonance' where the expanded story over different mediums, be it a tie-in novel or game, provides a 'significant narrative payoff', perhaps because they use a post-dated 'expansion analysis' for commercial reasons which are often beyond storytelling.<sup>237</sup> Another key

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<sup>233</sup> Dena, 'Do You Have a Big Stick?', pp. 1–4; Harvey, pp. 280–82.

<sup>234</sup> Dena, 'Do You Have a Big Stick?', pp. 1–4; Harvey, pp. 280–82.

<sup>235</sup> Jason Mittel, 'Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television', in *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Nöel Thon (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), pp. 253–77 (p. 256).

<sup>236</sup> Dena, 'Do You Have a Big Stick?', p. 3; Harvey, pp. 280–83.

<sup>237</sup> Dena, 'Do You Have a Big Stick?', pp. 3–4; Harvey, pp. 280–82; Mittel, p. 262.

challenge or concern for storytellers/creators of transmedia stories is to create a franchise that rewards those who follow all the cues across various media while not taking anything away from those who do not.<sup>238</sup> Mittel cites the example of *Lost* and its ‘expansionist’ approach (expanding the mythology of the show) to transmedia development where the producers and show’s creators Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse outlined transmedia extensions (even though the execution was outsourced, which eventually started diluting the canon) giving the fans who were invested in it, ‘revelations’ which could not be explored on the show while creating buzz for the show during the season break, with the clear intention of creating new interest in the same, driving audience traffic towards it.<sup>239</sup> As Mittel points out, the ‘revelations’ made in the extensions often did not fit in well with the narrative of the show.<sup>240</sup> Certain questions were given different answers/explanations in the show and in the transmedia extensions, and at the same time, some of the questions answered in the extensions were seen as significant unfilled narrative holes in the story by those who were only watching the show.<sup>241</sup> Mittel points out that the use of transmedia raised the expectation of the audiences that different threads created across mediums would eventually come together to give a satisfying answer/conclusion to all the questions, doubts raised, which did not happen, increasing their disappointment manifold.<sup>242</sup>

As Dena points out, this raises another set of challenges facing transmedia storytellers, which involve deciding how characters and events are distributed using media that is best suited to them while establishing how the narrative would move from one medium to another, taking the consumer of the story with it.<sup>243</sup> As Mittel suggests, perhaps one of the shortcomings of the transmedia expansion of *Lost* was that it was ‘centrifugal’,

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<sup>238</sup> Mittel, p. 262.

<sup>239</sup> *Lost* (ABC, 2004); Mittel, pp. 263–69.

<sup>240</sup> Mittel, pp. 266–67.

<sup>241</sup> Mittel, p. 267.

<sup>242</sup> Mittel, pp. 268–69.

<sup>243</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, p. 4; Harvey, p. 281.

guided heavily by the intention of protecting and promoting the original show, ‘the mothership’, creating ‘paratexts’ mostly focusing on ‘storyworld and mythological expansion’ and thus it sacrificed building upon the narrative itself through storytelling which could have delved into ‘emotional arcs and character relationships’.<sup>244</sup> This meant that by not giving its extensions enough narrative power and not letting them be powerful individual storytelling entities, the entire exercise in transmedia development weakened its own rich mythology.<sup>245</sup> These challenges point towards the need for a cohesive structure that allows different stories to stand on their own dramatically, even if they are only a piece of the puzzle that is completed using these stories, a need this new paradigm intends to fill.

This new paradigm of storytelling, proposed in the previous chapter, allows the storyteller to create ‘gaps in storytelling’, something Long identifies as the use of ‘negative capability’ (a concept he adapted from a letter by John Keats (1817)), which helps the ‘narrative evoke a delicious sense of ‘uncertainty, mystery or doubt’ in the audience’.<sup>246</sup> Long adapts the idea of ‘gaps’ proposed by media scholar Mary Beth Haralovich and mathematician Michael V. Trosset (first cited by Jenkins), who add that audiences derive ‘narrative pleasure’ when these ‘gaps’ are ‘opened and closed’ repeatedly ‘until the resolution of the story’.<sup>247</sup> These ‘gaps’ create what Marc Ruppel calls possible ‘migratory cues’ that could help audiences transition and follow the complete narrative over the course of different media.<sup>248</sup> Every chapter in the proposed paradigm, bringing in new characters, interactions, geographies, could also provide ‘hermeneutic codes’ which could be created out of ‘characters, chronology, geography’ or could be ‘environmental and ontological’ where passing references are made to ‘characters or aspects of characters, events in the past

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<sup>244</sup> Mittel, pp. 255–69.

<sup>245</sup> Mittel, p. 268.

<sup>246</sup> Long, p. 53.

<sup>247</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 28; Long, p. 54.

<sup>248</sup> Marc Ruppel, ‘Learning to Speak Braille: Convergence, Divergence and Cross-Sited Narratives’, *PhD Qualifying Exam Presentation*, 2005 cited in Long, pp. 53–60.

or the future, places, environments’ who/which may or may not appear on screen but which could be used to create said ‘gaps’.<sup>249</sup> Every such ‘gap’ would provide the opportunity to create a new *established reality*, with a new set of *focal character(s)*, which would restart the narrative cycle, which could be full of their own ‘gaps’.<sup>250</sup> Going back to one of the older scenarios from the previous chapter to illustrate, if the movie script ends with what could be considered a *build-up to battle* in the over-arching narrative, the strategically placed ‘gaps’ (the end could itself become a ‘gap’) over previous chapters which would have created possible ‘migratory cues’ could be solidified to form the new *established reality* for the story that branches out, restarting the narrative cycle, while at the same time taking the *build-up to battle* in the overarching narrative forward.<sup>251</sup>

The paradigm answers some of the questions/challenges raised above that storytellers/screenwriters/creators face and gives some of the control back to them, providing a concrete structure which they can use to create the above discussed ‘transmedia bible’, chart complete narratives, plan and spread it across a single or different medium, giving enough space for different diverse voices to coexist (through collaborative creators (Jenkins terms this ‘Collaborative Authorship’), along with space to insert fan fiction/interaction/engagement activities if needed) in the same narrative universe while pushing a singular vision forward.<sup>252</sup>

Geoffrey Long establishes that a ‘true transmedia franchise’ is often not a story about a character but about a universe, where each component that builds this franchise has to be ‘canonical’ from the beginning, quite like Dena’s fourth category of transmedia storytelling.<sup>253</sup> This means that in such a franchise, the whole narrative is planned and

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<sup>249</sup> Long, pp. 53–68.

<sup>250</sup> Long, p. 53.

<sup>251</sup> Long, pp. 53–68.

<sup>252</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, p. 3; Harvey, p. 281; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, pp. 110–15.

<sup>253</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, pp. 3–4; Harvey, p. 281; Long, pp. 40–48.

charted as being one coherent whole from the start and then meticulously created with above mentioned ‘gaps’ filled through new narratives built for different mediums.<sup>254</sup> While this paradigm could easily be used for a post-dated ‘expansion analysis’ approach to transmedia storytelling, as a transmedia creator, it would be ideal to use this paradigm to chart a new ‘true transmedia franchise’.<sup>255</sup>

The next section of this chapter breaks down three phases of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* in an attempt to establish the working and the universal application of the new paradigm even though it has been constructed using Indian mythological narratives.<sup>256</sup> Following this, I will evaluate the proposed paradigm against the narrative of the *Baahubali* franchise to establish the possibility of its application in the creation of individual screenplays as well as crafting a complete narrative that is crafted over multiple films or properties. Finally, the paradigm’s complete scope would be illustrated by using it to construct a new narrative universe out of the *Mahabharata* created as part of this thesis. The break down presented below does include some intricate plot details, but they are essential to test the new paradigm and illustrate how the MCU, *Baahubali* and the new narrative universe fit with the tenets illustrated in Chapter 3.

### **Testing The Paradigm Against *The Marvel Cinematic Universe***

Marvel Studios had been struggling through the 1990s as a majority of their movies, created with characters from their comic books, were being produced by other movie studios, with Marvel only seeing a small portion of the profits.<sup>257</sup> It was only in 2005 when the idea to produce their own films under their own banner came to the fore, an idea which was

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<sup>254</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

<sup>255</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, pp. 3–4; Harvey, p. 281; Long, pp. 40–48.

<sup>256</sup> Dave Trumbore, ‘MCU Timeline Explained: From Infinity Stones to Infinity War, Endgame, and Beyond’, *Collider*, 2020 <<https://collider.com/mcu-timeline-explained/>> [accessed 10 March 2020].

<sup>257</sup> Ryan Lambie, ‘How Marvel Went From Bankruptcy to Billions’, *Den of Geek*, 2018 <<https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/how-marvel-went-from-bankruptcy-to-billions/>> [accessed 1 March 2020].

bolstered by their financial deal with Merrill Lynch, in which Marvel pledged their characters like ‘Thor and Captain America as collateral’.<sup>258</sup> With this money, Marvel Studios bought back comic book characters they had sold in the past.<sup>259</sup> They promoted Kevin Feige to the post of president of the studio and with him began a new era in blockbuster filmmaking and, I argue, in storytelling.<sup>260</sup> Drawing on the traditions of the shared universe of Marvel Comics, they created the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. The word ‘cinematic’ may give the impression that the unfolding narrative is restricted to the big screen, but several properties from the MCU have been created specifically for television and a variety of streaming platforms. The MCU is taking a new turn with its shows on Disney’s very own streaming service, focusing on integral characters from the films. Thinking in terms of Dena’s categories, MCU falls into the second and fourth category, a gigantic narrative that was always meant to be a transmedia franchise while occasionally, the audience needs to have engaged with all the different parts to get a complete understanding of the overarching narrative.<sup>261</sup>

Jeff Gomez, cited by Liam Burke, establishes that one of the key factors to robust transmedia storytelling is that ‘content is originated by one or a very few visionaries’.<sup>262</sup> Kevin Feige leads the way for certain collaborators to fall into line with his vision, and he divided the MCU into phases, (with phase 3 of ‘The Infinity Saga’ ending recently with *Spiderman Far From Home* (Watts, 2019) ), using ‘negative capability’, using ‘gaps’ to create ‘migratory cues’ throughout different films with post and mid-credit scenes, and within the body of the individual narrative itself, that could help audiences transition between

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<sup>258</sup> Lambie.

<sup>259</sup> Lambie.

<sup>260</sup> Lambie.

<sup>261</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, pp. 3–4; Harvey, p. 281.

<sup>262</sup> Jeff Gomez, ‘Transmedia Storytelling Masterclass’ (Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Australia, 2014) cited in Liam Burke, ‘A Bigger Universe: Marvel Studios and Transmedia Storytelling’, in *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Essays on the Social, Cultural and Geopolitical Domains*, ed. by Julian C. Chambliss, William L. Svitavsky, and Daniel Fandino (McFarland and Co, 2018), pp. 38–41.

properties in the expansive universe.<sup>263</sup> While these individual films could be tested to fit into the new paradigm, the overarching narrative covered over 22 films could fit well into the chapters as laid out in the same.

I would propose that the entire first phase of the MCU, comprising of films like *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier, 2008), *Iron Man 2* (Favreau, 2010), *Thor* (Branagh, 2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011) until *Marvel's The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) are the *established reality*.<sup>264</sup> *Focal characters* like Ironman, Hulk, Captain America, Thor, Nick Fury, Maria Hill, Black Widow, Hawkeye, Phil Coulson, Loki, Agent Peggy Carter and even Thanos are introduced here. The initial temporal and geographical limits to the world are set as well. A character like Thor expands the universe to another realm known as Asgard while giving us a peek into the ancient history of this universe. *Captain America: The First Avenger* takes the narrative back to the days of the second world war, bringing the first *infinity stone* into it. Agent Carter's narrative spins off from here as a TV show narrative that deals with the repercussions of Captain America's supposed death.<sup>265</sup>

The first *Avengers* film in which Loki, doing Thanos' bidding, leads a Chitauri army to invade Earth, brings all the introduced *focal characters* together and functions as the *disruption*. The disruptive event causes the *focal characters* to choose sides. Ironman, Hulk, Captain America, Thor, Nick Fury, Maria Hill, Black Widow, Hawkeye band together while Loki, who is Thor's brother, sides with Thanos. The concept or the underlying threat of the infinity stones is also solidified here. The character of Phil Coulson, established in the

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<sup>263</sup> Charlie Ridgely, 'Kevin Feige Confirms Spider-Man: Far From Home Is the Conclusion to Marvel's Infinity Saga', *Comicbook.Com*, 2019 <<https://comicbook.com/marvel/2019/06/24/spider-man-far-from-home-infinity-saga-ending-marvel-kevin-feige/>> [accessed 2 March 2020]; Jon Watts, *Spiderman: Far From Home* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019); Long, pp. 53–54.

<sup>264</sup> Joe Johnston, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Paramount Pictures, 2011); Jon Favreau, *Ironman* (Paramount Pictures, 2008); Jon Favreau, *Ironman 2* (Paramount Pictures, 2010); Joss Whedon, *The Avengers* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2012); Kenneth Branagh, *Thor* (Paramount Pictures, 2011); Louis Leterrier, *The Incredible Hulk* (Universal Pictures, 2008); Trumbore.

<sup>265</sup> *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015).

*established reality*, is used to expand the narrative in a new direction from here with his own TV show, starting his narrative cycle.<sup>266</sup> This threat or *disruption* is explored in the next chapter, *exploration of the disruption* where Ironman, Thor and Captain America now deal with the repercussions of the disruption, the invasion. For example, in *Ironman 3*, Tony Stark suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after the attack on New York, and Thor struggles to trust his brother Loki. Films from phase 2, *Iron Man 3* (Black, 2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor, 2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo Brothers, 2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn, 2014), *Ant-Man* (Reed, 2015) and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015), are part of this chapter.<sup>267</sup> Apart from carrying narratives of previously established characters forward, this chapter also introduces new characters like Starlord, Gamora, Rocket, Winter Soldier, Ant-Man, Hank Pym, Vision and Scarlet Witch, amongst others. As established, all the new characters are *focal characters* in their own films, and this chapter could be seen as their *established reality* as Marvel continues to create properties with them at the centre, but they also graduate to being *focal characters* in the overarching narrative as they become part of the Avengers at different stages, i.e. the four Avengers films. Films like *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* take the stories of characters who have already graduated to being *focal characters* in the first Avengers film further while expanding the boundaries of the universe, introducing new elements like a new infinity stone (the *aether*) into it. These individual narratives of individual characters could also be charted (over single and or multiple films) using the new paradigm.

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<sup>266</sup> *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (ABC, 2013).

<sup>267</sup> Alan Taylor, *Thor: The Dark World* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2013); James Gunn, *Guardians of The Galaxy* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2014); Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2014); Joss Whedon, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2015); Peyton Reed, *Ant-Man* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2015); Shane Black, *Ironman 3* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2013); Trumbore.

As established earlier (Chapter 3), the ‘moral structures’ of characters from the *established reality* above like Ironman, Thor, Captain America, The Hulk, Hawkeye and Black Widow are solidified, specifically in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, as they attempt to keep the new team of the Avengers together and fight to keep Earth safe of any impending threats and in the course of doing so push the Avengers further towards the impending battle with Thanos.<sup>268</sup> For example, Tony Stark (Ironman), in an attempt to create an artificial intelligence that can protect the world, something he has been struggling with since the attack on New York (which was orchestrated by Thanos), creates a threat named Ultron. ‘Moral structures’ of characters like Gamora, Ant-Man, Winter Soldier are also established in this chapter but are further solidified gradually in the upcoming chapters.<sup>269</sup> Also, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this paradigm allows for troughs and crests of intense confrontation and momentary victories in every chapter. For individual characters, these come in the form of each individual film complete with a *disruption*, an *exploration*, a *battle* and *ultimate crusade* and for the Avengers as a whole can come when they face Ultron as a team in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. All these films, with *Age of Ultron* in particular, furthers the threat of Thanos and the infinity stones, through various plot points in the film (like the mind stone being a part of the *Age of Ultron* narrative) as well as certain post and mid-credit scenes. The *exploration of disruption* chapter ends with *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo Brothers, 2016), which came out at the beginning of phase 3.<sup>270</sup> Here, the events from *Age of Ultron*, though they end in Avengers defeating Ultron, directly create the circumstances that lead to the fight between Ironman and Captain America and the eventual breakup of the Avengers, leaving them and the planet exposed to the threat of Thanos. As established in the paradigm, every action to reverse the disruption leads the narrative deeper towards the *battle* and

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<sup>268</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

<sup>269</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

<sup>270</sup> Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, *Captain America: Civil War* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2016); Trumbore.

*ultimate crusade*. This film also introduced Spiderman/Peter Parker and T'Challa (Black Panther) as new characters into the overarching narrative who become *focal characters* in their own narratives in the *build-up to battle* chapter with *Spiderman: Homecoming* (Watts, 2017) and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) respectively.<sup>271</sup> The *build-up to battle* chapter begins with the introduction of Dr Stephan Strange in *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson, 2016) and continues through the events of phase 3 films, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.2* (Gunn, 2017), *Spiderman Homecoming*, *Thor: Ragnarok* (Watiti, 2017), *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (Reed, 2018), *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck, 2019) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo Brothers, 2018).<sup>272</sup> Films like *Spiderman: Homecoming*, *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.2*, *Black Panther* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* uses previously established characters to expand the universe geographically, establishing new planets in deep space, places like Wakanda and the quantum realm which are indispensable to the overarching narrative. As it happens in this chapter, the newly introduced characters gradually find their way towards those introduced previously, form alliances to fight the impending threat and become *focal characters* in the overarching narrative. *Avengers: Infinity War* brings all the characters introduced into the narrative until now together as Thanos finally makes it to Earth. This threat has been set up over the course of multiple films. As established in Chapter 3, the Avengers make one last attempt to resolve the conflict and defeat Thanos, and the film ends with the Avengers (even though they have allies like Black Panther, all the Guardians of the Galaxy and Spiderman) losing and Thanos wiping fifty percent of all life in the universe with a snap. This sets up the *battle* chapter as the penultimate film of this current overarching

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<sup>271</sup> Jon Watts, *Spiderman: Homecoming* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2017); Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2017).

<sup>272</sup> Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, *Captain Marvel* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2019); James Gunn, *Guardians of The Galaxy Vol.2* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2017); Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, *Avengers: Infinity War* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018); Peyton Reed, *Ant-Man and The Wasp* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2018); Scott Derrickson, *Doctor Strange* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2016); Taika Watiti, *Thor: Ragnarok* (Walt Disney Motion Pictures, 2017); Trumbore.

narrative (Phase 1-3), *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Brothers, 2019).<sup>273</sup> A film like *Captain Marvel* in the *build-up to battle* chapter introduces a new pivotal character soon to become a *focal character* while expanding the overarching narrative temporally, taking the action back to the 1990s, introducing new planets, races and conflicts to this universe (which will probably come into play later) but ends with a mid-credits scene where she appears in the present timeline, ready to assist the remaining Avengers who are reeling from the events of *Avengers: Infinity War*. The final film of phase 3, *Spiderman: Far From Home*, which focuses on Spiderman/Peter Parker dealing with the death of his mentor Ironman sets up the *new established reality*.<sup>274</sup> The MCU does well to develop the narrative of individual characters, which can be enjoyed by casual viewers while repeatedly contextualising each individual entity in the universe within the larger narrative, using them to gradually build the universe, rewarding the serious fans.

While films about individual characters/heroes can be easily plotted using Vogler's paradigm (more so if they are seen out of the larger narrative context, which in turn threatens to undermine the narrative significance of the MCU as a whole), the four Avengers films, in particular, provide an interesting test case where all these narratives merge periodically creating one single, inseparable narrative with intricately bound multiple parallel tracks, all equally important and demand a long term investment from the fans to achieve complete comprehension. These films once again highlight the need for a new framework for building such intricate stories. *Avengers: Endgame*, like its predecessor *Avengers: Infinity War*, presents multiple tracks with different characters established over 22 films, all equally important and indispensable to the plot. Hence, it could be broken down using the new paradigm as follows.

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<sup>273</sup> Russo and Russo, *Avengers: Endgame*; Trumbore.

<sup>274</sup> Trumbore.

*Established Reality:* The world is presented in a new light after Thanos' snap from the previous film, which has wiped fifty percent of all life in the universe. All the Avengers, new and old, struggle to reverse the damage. Ironman, who was stuck on Titan after the previous film, is brought back to Earth by Captain Marvel. Finally, the surviving Avengers make one more attempt to capture Thanos and reverse the snap, which fails as well.

*The Disruption:* Ant-Man, stuck in the quantum realm after the events of *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, finally finds his way back to the real world after five years have passed. He contacts Captain America and Black Widow, who currently maintain peace in all the realms with the help of Captain Marvel, Rocket amongst others. He tells them about the possibility of time travel using the quantum realm.

*Exploration of the Disruption:* Captain America, Black Widow and Ant-Man approach Ironman who is now living on a farm with his daughter and now wife, Pepper Potts. They attempt to convince him to build a time machine. He reluctantly agrees. This chapter also brings Thor and Hulk back, reuniting the original Avengers team as they attempt to perfect time travel and design a journey in time that can get them the infinity stones before Thanos.

*Build-up to Battle:* The surviving Avengers then break up into different groups and take separate, equally essential journeys in time to get hold of the infinity stones before Thanos so as to reverse the damage made by Thanos' snap. After quite a few complications and deviations from their original plan, which also result in the death of Black Widow, they seemingly succeed, but their actions allow Thanos from the past to come back. In other words, the allies on both sides are picked, and the final attempt to reverse the damage fails, forcing the final battle.

*Battle:* All of Thanos' forces fight against all the different characters, the original and new Avengers (including those who have now been resurrected). This final battle has its own

crests and troughs of momentary victories and defeat, building up to the moment where Thanos once again takes control of the infinity stones. This is the *ultimate crusade* for this narrative. Finally, Ironman somehow manages to take control of stones and snaps Thanos out of existence, sacrificing himself.

*The New Established Reality*: This is a new world, and its fate is in the hands of newer, younger heroes, some who are already *focal* and others to come. Some of the original Avengers like Hawkeye, Thor and Hulk are still alive as well, and their stories will be expanded in future narratives.

As established above, the overarching narrative of the MCU can be charted using the new narrative paradigm, which was itself constructed using the *Mahabharata*, re-establishing the parallels drawn between the overarching narrative of the *Mahabharata* (inside the universe of the *Vishnu Purana*, complete with the crossover of characters from *Ramayana* to *Mahabharata*) and the MCU in the previous chapters.<sup>275</sup> Like the *parvas* in the *Mahabharata*, the overarching narrative of the MCU is divided into phases, with multiple *focal characters*, pushing one single narrative forward.<sup>276</sup> At times, their individual stories may unfold in the same or different geographies and temporalities, intricately bound and connected together by the rules, the politics, the events of the universe, but they come together at critical moments where their stories become inseparable. The MCU, in its own way, attempts to replicate the experience of human existence, albeit in a science fiction, fantasy narrative, with some threats or at least their repercussions being, as Zuckerman calls it, ‘collectively experienced’, quite like how *Mahabharata* is the story of human existence,

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<sup>275</sup> Pattanaik, *Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik* 2, pp. 155–60; Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 10, 25–26.

<sup>276</sup> Trumbore.

the history of mankind told in a sprawling story, historical, religious and mythological, all at once, a story that is still being told, a story that we are all a part of.<sup>277</sup>

As it has been noted that while many have attempted to craft expansive universes, Marvel Studios has succeeded in using ‘flexible continuity’ in the MCU, allowing character and story events which were created in one property to become important in another, helping ‘expand a story across media’ and then using strengths of specific mediums to develop them further while creating content ‘malleable enough that it can extend into any form’.<sup>278</sup> Liam Burke cites the example of characters like Phil Coulson and Agent Carter who were introduced in different films in the cinematic universe and then developed further in their own TV shows, while still using scenes and shots from the films as flashbacks, making the content ‘platform neutral’ while playing to the strengths of each medium.<sup>279</sup> As mentioned above, multiple important characters from MCU films are now being used to chart the new phase of the MCU through new original streaming series on the new streaming service Disney+.

The new paradigm suggested above supports and encourages the creation of content using ‘flexible continuity’, allowing characters and story events introduced in any of the chapters to then be developed into their own narratives, with their own *established reality*, starting the narrative cycle in any medium.<sup>280</sup>

Jeff Gomez, in his ‘defining principles of transmedia storytelling’, cited the need for a ‘deep rich story with a past, present and future’ as something essential to the same.<sup>281</sup> As Burke goes on to add,

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<sup>277</sup> Gomez, ‘The Hero’s Journey Is No Longer Serving Us’; Pattanaik, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, pp. 3–18; Zuckerman, ‘The Collective Journey - Part 1’; Zuckerman, ‘The Collective Journey — Part 2’.

<sup>278</sup> Burke, pp. 34–38.

<sup>279</sup> Burke, pp. 35–37.

<sup>280</sup> Burke, pp. 34–38.

<sup>281</sup> Gomez, ‘Transmedia Storytelling Masterclass’ cited in Burke, p. 43.

Much of this story world will go unexplored, at least in early instalments, but casual references, such as allusions to the Time and Clone Wars in Doctor Who and Star Wars respectively, hint at a larger universe that can be explored years, even decades later.<sup>282</sup>

As mentioned above, story events and character histories introduced in any of the chapters could then be used to create new narratives in any medium, starting from this as their *established reality*. This provision in the paradigm also allows the creators/storytellers to expand the universe geographically and temporally, helping fulfil Gomez's requirement. In other words, references to events from the past or the present, new worlds, landscapes ('hermeneutic codes') could be made in any of the six chapters, which would then help create a new *established reality*, pushing the universe into new directions, further layering and solidifying the nature of the new reality.<sup>283</sup>

### **Testing The Paradigm Against The *Baahubali* Franchise**

The original two films from the franchise could be divided into certain key narratives, the first being the overarching narrative, starting where the first film starts, where Shiva is first introduced to us. The second narrative is an overarching narrative from the extended flashback, which could be further divided into the flashback narrative from the first film *Baahubali: The Beginning* and the flashback narrative from the second film *Baahubali: The Conclusion*. This section breaks down the entire franchise as it unfolds on screen into different chapters according to the paradigm.

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<sup>282</sup> Burke, p. 43.

<sup>283</sup> Long, p. 61.

*Established Reality:* We are introduced to *focal characters* like Shiva, Sivagami (very briefly), a tortured Devasena, Shiva's future love interest, Avantika (who is fighting alongside a rebel army trying to save Mahishmati and rescue Devasena from the main antagonist Bhallaldeva), and last but not least, Katappa is introduced here as well. Director Rajamouli's fantasy world, the kingdom of Mahishmati, the neighbouring villages, the different terrains are all established here in some detail.

All the events that unfold here, starting from Shiva meeting and falling in love with Avantika or him taking Avantika's place to go to Mahishmati to save Devasena, only furthers the scope of the world in this *established reality* and do not really change the status quo for anyone yet. When Katappa and Mahishmati soldiers come after Shiva as he escapes with Devasena, a chase ensues, ending with an intense fight sequence where Katappa and Shiva come face to face. Throughout this extended chapter, as this *established reality* is explored further, the 'moral structures' and motivations for all the characters begin to form for the audiences.<sup>284</sup> The *disruption* to this *established reality* comes when Shiva comes face to face with Katappa, who identifies him as the son of Amrendra Baahubali, the true King of Mahishmati. This is where the film shifts into a flashback, which should be considered a new timeline.

*Exploration of the Disruption:* In the context of the overarching narrative of the *Baahubali* franchise, the extended flashback could be seen as an *exploration of the disruption* chapter, as Shiva, along with some of the other younger *focal characters*, understands the past and the motivations of some of the characters around them become clearer. It will become more evident that as we go deeper into this exploration, the more the 'moral structure' of the different *focal characters* is solidified.<sup>285</sup> This chapter expands the universe,

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<sup>284</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

<sup>285</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

temporally and geographically, with each such moment pushing the narrative deeper towards the *build-up to the battle* and, eventually, the climactic *battle* itself, making it pivotal to the overarching narrative, without the complication of deciphering who the heroic figure in the narrative is.

### **Applying The Paradigm To The Overarching Flashback Narrative**

As the story goes into flashback, a new timeline is established, one where Amrendra is introduced as a new *focal character*. A new, more just, democratic and happier Mahishmati is established, expanding the universe temporally. Younger versions of Katappa and Sivagami are established. The hatred that a young Bhallaldeva has for Amrendra is also established here. The ‘moral structures’ of different characters like Sivagami, Katappa, and Bijjaldeva are established, and in the context of the larger narrative, they are further solidified while laying down a moral reason for Shiva’s upcoming revenge.<sup>286</sup> The setup where Amrendra, young Bhallaldeva, young Katappa, young Sivagami are introduced along with the old, just, prosperous Mahishmati could be seen as the *established reality* for this narrative. The *disruption* comes in the form of Amrendra defeating the Kalkiya king and being made king of Mahishmati, which suddenly pushes the animosity that Bhallaldeva has for Amrendra to another level. Mahishmati is never going to be the same anymore. As we move into the flashback narrative from *Baahubali: The Conclusion*, we enter the *exploration of the disruption* chapter, where Amrendra goes out into the kingdom, meets and falls in love with young Devasena. Meanwhile, Bhallaldeva creates the circumstances that lead to the rift between Amrendra and Sivagami. Eventually Amrendra’s marriage to Devasena leads to him being stripped off the throne. This pushes the story into the *build-up to battle* chapter. Amrendra now lives as a commoner and works for the betterment of the people of Mahishmati, who rally behind him. Feeling insecure, Bhalladeva, now the King, conspires

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<sup>286</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

with his ally, his father Bijjaldeva and manipulates Sivagami into ordering Kattappa to kill Amrendra. The *battle* chapter starts where Katappa unwillingly orchestrates a scenario where his own life is in danger and kills Amrendra. The sequence where Katappa unwillingly stabs Amrendra in the back, struggling with it at every step, could be considered the *ultimate crusade*. When Katappa and Sivagami finally become aware of Bhalladeva's treachery they are overcome with crushing guilt. A *new established reality* begins as Bhallaldeva orchestrates a coup of sorts. While Devasena is captured, Sivagami saves Amrendra's newborn son Mahendra (introduced as Shiva) and escapes with Katappa's help. She eventually sacrifices herself to get Mahendra to safety. Bhallaldeva becomes the undisputed king of Mahishmati, connecting this *new established reality* to the *established reality* set up at the beginning of the first film.

This finally concludes the *exploration of the disruption* in the overarching narrative, pushing it into the next chapter. As evident here, each chapter carries within itself the possibilities of the troughs and crests of intense confrontations and momentary victories, with everything building towards the next chapter.

*Build-up to battle*: Shiva, who now identifies as Mahendra, understands everything about his past, which becomes his motivation to go to war with Bhallaldeva and the Mahishmati forces. His motivation comes from the flashback narrative and what his father, mother and grandmother Sivagami had to endure. He thus fits into Amrendra's 'moral structure'.<sup>287</sup> Shiva, Katappa, Avantika, the group of rebels, the villagers, all band together to go into an all-out confrontation to resolve the conflict.

*Battle*: This battle, like all the other chapters from the narrative, is full of crests and troughs, but it finally ends with Mahendra along with Kattappa, Avantika and Devasena avenging Amrendra's death, setting up the next chapter.

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<sup>287</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

*New Established Reality*: Mahendra Baahubali/Shiva is king, changing the fate of Mahishmati for the better.

The *Baahubali* franchise consists of two narratives, both complete with all the six chapters from the paradigm, where the flashback narrative, while a complete narrative in itself (the paradigm can also be tested separately for the flashback narrative in each of the two films), fits as an indispensable chapter of the overarching narrative, pushing the story forward, while creating opportunities to expand the universe, helping the audience delve deeper into characters' backstories, creating the scope for new media properties in the future. Unlike the MCU, the *Baahubali* franchise could be seen as a 'mono-medium story', crafted meticulously over two films, which was later expanded into a franchise to cash in on the popularity of the original films, thus fitting into Dena's third category of transmedia storytelling.<sup>288</sup>

It would be wrong to say that such a narrative is a novel concept. Rajamouli drawing from the tradition of many such cinematic narratives, had attempted a simplistic flashback narrative in his 2009 blockbuster, *Magadheera* (2009), a tale about revenge and reincarnation set in the present and the fictional kingdom of Udaigarh.<sup>289</sup> In many ways, *Magadheera* could be seen as a precursor to the *Baahubali* franchise. The simplistic flashback narrative has been a staple structure used in Indian cinema, used to great effect in cinema that originates in southern India. In *Mersal* (2017), director Atlee employs a similar simplistic flashback narrative where one character presented first as our protagonist learns about his past and his long lost brother all through an extended flashback that explores the life and adventures of their father, which eventually becomes the guiding force for the brothers.<sup>290</sup> Like *Baahubali*, all three characters are played by the same actor, making them all equally identifiable and

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<sup>288</sup> Dena, 'Do You Have a Big Stick?', pp. 1–3; Harvey, pp. 280–82.

<sup>289</sup> S. S. Rajamouli, *Magadheera* (Geetha Arts, 2009).

<sup>290</sup> Atlee, *Mersal* (Shri Thenandal Films, 2017).

important in the narrative of the film. Director and Writer Atlee just condenses everything into one single film. With *Baahubali*, Rajamouli took his narrative craft forward, using the flashback narrative to expand the very world introduced at the beginning.

### **Testing The Paradigm: *The Vow and Warriors***

(To be read in Conjunction with Section 2)

To explore all the possibilities that this new paradigm presents, it would be important to use it to create a new mytho-fictional universe, one which blends a fictional narrative with the narrative that has been used to construct this new paradigm, the *Mahabharata*.

The two screenplays, which form part of the thesis, are structured as a *mise-en-abyme* and, like *Baahubali* chart two separate but intertwined narratives. But unlike Rajamouli's duology, one narrative from my creative work is an adaptation of the *Mahabharata* itself and the other focusses on the drama inside a family that undertakes the task of adapting the *Mahabharata*. On one level, through the events in these 'metatextual' screenplays, I attempt to deal with the practical repercussions of the 'roots of prejudice' against filmic adaptations of any book (and in this case, of mythological narratives) that Robert Stam talks about in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*.<sup>291</sup> Numerous retellings of mythological narratives as novels, graphic novels etc. are not looked down upon as films are, for many reasons, but the one most applicable to our case would be 'iconophobia' where 'film and other visual medium seem to threaten the collapse of symbolic order, the erosion of the powers of the literary fathers, patriarchal narrators, and the consecrated arts'.<sup>292</sup>

Here, Stam establishes that films give shape and form to people (gods, in this case) and places who/which only existed in a text, a replication which is often considered

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<sup>291</sup> Stam, pp. 3, 28.

<sup>292</sup> Stam, p. 5.

derogatory or ‘obscene’.<sup>293</sup> He goes on to say that cinematic adaptations often spark greater outrage than their source material and believes this could also be due to our ‘deep cultural’ need to ‘affirm one’s faith’ in something, and cites Bruno Latour to add that the violent backlash could be seen as proof of ‘validity of one’s faith, of one’s science, of one’s critical acumen, of one’s artistic creativity’.<sup>294</sup> This could be compared to the belligerent reaction of ‘fanboys’ (primarily via social media) when the myth of their hero, the mythology of the world, created in the source material is challenged in any way by future cinematic adaptations. When adapting mytho-historical/religious narratives into cinema, the intensity of the reaction is definitely higher as these adaptations deal with symbols and ideas of the audience’s faith. As Pattanaik says, ‘any attempt to question the validity or edit’ mythology, which carries with it ‘religious and secular myths’, is ‘met with outrage’.<sup>295</sup> At some socio-cultural level, we believe that cinema and its capacity to create new myths, compounded by its ever-expanding reach, across different mediums, tapping into previously untapped demographics, could break/transform the very myths it once helped establish.<sup>296</sup> It is also perhaps considered derogatory that these stories play out on the same medium which caters to different genres, with films often containing a mix of violence and sex, with the characters being played by actors known for their very human lives. It is because of these reasons that acts of giving a filmic form to the mythological narratives can now often be seen/portrayed as an act of hurting ‘religious sentiments’, as it now has the power to tear down the established order, which is used by fringe political groups to create social upheaval.

The characters in the contemporary storyline are pushed to the edge by one such fringe group called the *Bharat Sena*, which is a stand-in for many such groups that have

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<sup>293</sup> Stam, pp. 5–6.

<sup>294</sup> Bruno Latour, ‘Introduction’, in *Iconoclasm: Beyond The Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) cited in Stam, pp. 5–6.

<sup>295</sup> Pattanaik, *Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, pp. xvi–xvii.

<sup>296</sup> Dwyer, pp. 52–58.

gained notoriety for their violent backlash against certain popular releases in India. The anticipation of such a violent backlash and eventually the backlash itself creates enough tension inside the Shridhar family to tear it apart from the inside, and this is where their lives start mirroring the life and drama at the core of the mythical tale they are adapting. The central question which plagues the family and creates the factions like the ones in the *Mahabharata* is whether to meddle with a text that is so engrained in the Indian social existence that it has, as pointed out in Chapter 2, found its way into our cinematic stories, even if the inspiration is implicit. While one faction understands the potential of the text to be transformed, extended, expanded in different temporal and geographical directions to create a coherent universe in which the audiences can immerse themselves, the other wants to keep the adaptation of the *Mahabharata* limited to the widely accepted finite narrative. The script employs a consistent parallel narrative, intercutting between the two timelines, with one often spilling into the other. This kind of intercutting allows me to create narrative openings which can be exploited to expand the narrative further in the future using ‘negative capability’.<sup>297</sup> I constantly attempt to draw parallels between the past and the present, the mythical tale and the contemporary reality (in the script), where characters attempt to alter the narrative of the former as their lives change, subverting the myth, becoming mythical in their own way, both for the audience inside (in the reality of the script) and outside (the reality that we exist in). There are multiple versions of iconic sequences (like Bheeshma taking the vow of celibacy) that play out back-to-back as contemporary characters debate about them (altering the mythical narrative), and in the second script, two scripts written by two warring cousins give two different versions of events from the *Mahabharata*, different versions of the same characters, like characters existing in parallel universes, before both versions eventually merge towards the end of this narrative. Apart from giving an idea of the scope of narrative

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<sup>297</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

complexity that can be achieved using the new paradigm, this allows me as the writer to engage the reader/audience with the intellectual debate that the characters in the contemporary storyline engage in (about multiple interpretations that each mythological text can offer, as all adaptations do) while indicating the immense narrative possibilities of finding or creating new crevices in these malleable mythical stories, giving storytellers new narrative openings to adapt and extend them, creating new versions of these mythical tales for future generations, opening these texts up for a completely new audience.

Considering how intertwined these two narratives are, the next section attempts to break them down using the new paradigm as one story that unfolds in two timelines simultaneously, with a number of *focal characters* whose life is influenced by each other. During this break down, I would also begin to build up a pre-dated ‘expansion analysis’, making some suggestions about possible ‘gaps in storytelling’ that could be exploited to expand the universe in different directions using different properties best suited to tell that part of the story.<sup>298</sup>

The *established reality* of this story and this universe begins where we are first introduced to Parth as he is forced to travel back to India because of his mother’s death. *Focal characters* like Shantanu, Ganga, Brindavan are introduced in the mythological timeline, while characters like Dharam, Dheeraj and Dhritman are introduced in the contemporary timeline. Here in the contemporary timeline, Dharam, Dheeraj, and Dhritman are attempting to adapt the *Mahabharata*, while in the mythological timeline, an heirless Shantanu struggles to keep the peace in Hastinapura. The story traverses through a significant amount of time in the mythological timeline aided by the parallel narrative, which intercuts between the two timelines, allowing significant temporal jumps.

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<sup>298</sup> Dena, ‘Do You Have a Big Stick?’, p. 3; Harvey, p. 281; Long, pp. 53–60.

The *disruption* comes in the form of Dharam convincing Parth to take over as writer of the project as he starts making big changes to the mythical storyline. This is also the time when Devrata comes ‘back’ into the story. The clash between two different ideologies to the adaptation, with Dheeraj and Dhritman on one side and Dharam and Parth on the other, is set up here. The storytelling structure creates an opening to explore all of Shantanu’s attempts to protect Hastinapura from external threats, which potentially could be dealt with in another property (set in the *disruption* chapter in the overarching narrative), perhaps a miniseries that would eventually bring the story back to their clash with Chitrangda here in the script.

The *exploration of the disruption* chapter commences with Devrata here in Hastinapura, which changes the dynamic of the city forever. He struggles with his place as the prince and is torn between his past and his future. While there are fleeting allusions to his past after he bursts onto the scene, his arrival and continued presence in Hastinapura pushes Brindavan to reveal his true colours and kicks his plan to take over the kingdom with Chitrangda and Akasi’s help into overdrive. On the other hand, Parth’s arrival emboldens Dharam to take control of the film being produced, which rubs Dheeraj the wrong way and makes him decide to go to war with his own family, forming an alliance with a new *focal character*, Suryavanshi, thus bringing violence and turmoil into their lives. Parth becomes increasingly involved with the film and, through it (and also inspired by Rima, another *focal character* introduced here), becomes interested in protecting his family’s legacy.

During the course of this chapter, another important *focal character* who has a profound impact on this universe, Parsuram, arrives to save Devrata when Akasi corners him. Parsuram’s character and backstory are also kept from the audiences, and it is only later in the story that he becomes a trusted friend to Devrata and guru to future generations of warriors who are born in Hastinapura. His life before and after the events of *The Vow* could be explored as a separate property. It could be a game that charts his adventures or a limited

TV series that opens up the universe into new geographical and temporal directions, while deepening a sense of character, setting up his actions during *The Vow* and later. During the course of this chapter, Devrata, now deeply invested in securing the future of Hastinapura, wages wars against all their enemies pre-emptively. While he is successful here, his actions come back to haunt him and the kingdom later in the story. His saga of multiple wars could be explored as a separate limited comic book series or a graphic novel that explores Devrata 'coming of age' as he goes down a warpath. Not only are these wars important to the overall story, but they also prove to be a turning point in Devrata's character arc.

The *exploration of disruption* chapter ends with Devrata taking the vow of giving up his throne for the sake of his father, opening the door for him to get married while changing the fate and face of Hastinapura forever, throwing it into chaos for generations to come. His impending marriage to Urvi is cancelled, making King Nara another enemy he has to deal with now. In the contemporary storyline, this is followed by Rima leaking the script of *The Vow* that she steals from Parth after rekindling an old relationship with him. All this pushes the stakes to a different level in both timelines. As mentioned in the tenets of the paradigm, the moral standing of various *focal characters* introduced in the *established reality* chapter and even in the *disruption* chapter like Parth, Dheeraj, Dharam, Devrata, Chitrangda and Brindavan emerges quite clearly here. Rima's standing on the moral spectrum is alluded to here but solidified later. Suryavanshi's moral standing is unambiguous from the start, but the level of his antagonism intensifies as the narrative unfolds.

The *build-up to battle* chapter begins here and ends with the end of the first script. The build-up to battle begins with an actual battle in the mythical storyline where Bheeshma faces Nara's army, while in the contemporary story, Parth and the rest of the Shridhar family face protest from the *Bharat Sena* (Suryavanshi's fringe political party). This war against Nara ends with the death of Shantanu, making Bheeshma even more jaded but at the same

time more determined to protect Hastinapura until his newborn brother Vichy (Vichitraveerya) grows up. He wants to restore a sense of normalcy to the kingdom that has been missing ever since he came to Hastinapura and changed it forever. Parth, on the other hand, hurt and disillusioned by Rima's actions and the ensuing violent protests, returns to Los Angeles. This does not change Dharam's mind about the script and perhaps makes him even more determined to finish what he started. Once again, the structure that intercuts between the two parallel storylines allows the story to jump ahead, and we see Vichy all grown up where Satyavati informs Bheeshma that it is time for them to get him married. The time that has passed between Vichy's birth and him being old enough to get married could be charted as a separate story, a limited TV series with an ageing and maturing Bheeshma as he, along with other allies like Satyavati, Vichy and even Parsuram, tries to keep the kingdom afloat after the death of King Shantanu. The main drama of this chapter comes from Bheeshma, now determined to secure the reputation he believes that Hastinapura deserves, kidnapping the three daughters of the King of Kashi, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika from their *Swayamvara* (event organised for them to choose suitable husbands for themselves). In the process, he manages to insult King Selva, whom Amba had just chosen as her husband. While Ambika and Ambalika embrace their new lives as they marry Vichy, Amba expresses that she had already chosen Selva as her future husband. Bheeshma relents when he realises that he has wronged her. He takes Amba to Selva, who rejects her in retaliation for how he was insulted during the *Swayamvara* event. Bheeshma is torn between his duty and his growing affection towards Amba. Selva's anger and ego give Chitrangda the final ally to wage a battle on Bheeshma and Hastinapura. Bheeshma finally realises that Chitrangda has pretended to be his friend ever since their first clash and has been subtly manipulating everyone around him to destroy Hastinapura. Pushed to the brink, his brother Vichy dead, Bheeshma decides to wage a battle like none other, one that he believes will end all of

Hastinapura's problems once and for all. He leaves Amba with Satyawati and her sisters with the promise that they will get married when he comes back. But this does not sit well with Ambika and Ambalika, who believe that Amba and Bheeshma's marriage and future children threaten their standing in the future of Hastinapura. This pushes them to kill their own sister, altering Bheeshma's and with him Hastinapura's future forever.

Parth leaves for LA in the contemporary storyline, but Dharam decides to continue shooting the film, irking Dheeraj further. Hence, in his rage, he decides to take the alliance with Suryavanshi to a new level, where they decide to storm the sets of the film up in the mountains.

Simultaneously, Rima implores Parth to come back to protect his father, something he reluctantly agrees to. As the two stories, the two worlds collide, Bheeshma gets ready to leave Hastinapura to fight the combined forces of Chitrangda and Selva and the 'siege' of Hastinapura on the sets of the film *The Vow* begins. The attack ends with the death of Dharam, who loses his life trying to save Dheeraj. The attack unfolds in front of Parth, who is left devastated and angry, setting up the stakes for the final battle in the next script.

Hence, as pointed out in the tenets of the paradigm, in both storylines, *focal characters* from both ends of the moral spectrum of this universe make an all-out attempt to reverse the turmoil caused by the *disruption*. For example, Bheeshma attempts to get Vichy married to return Hastinapura to some semblance of normalcy, creating more enemies for Hastinapura, which finally leads to the war with Chitrangda. Parth decides to leave India, disillusioned by what he has seen and experienced here. This is expected to diffuse the tension between the families, but it pushes Dharam to double down on shooting Parth's version of the script, escalating the conflict further. Essentially, this forces the *focal characters* to go out looking for allies and prepare for an all-out battle. Chitrangda, having found a strong ally in Selva, prepares for the final battle against Bheeshma, who in turn

implores Parsuram to come back and fight by his side in the battle to end all battles. Dharam, being left alone after Parth leaves for LA, decides to keep shooting *The Vow* even with all the protests that surround the film, pushing Dheeraj and Suryavanshi to plan and mount an all-out attack on the sets of the film. Hence, as with every chapter, this build-up is also made up of various ups and downs, confrontations and momentary victories, all of which escalate the conflict towards the final climactic battle.

The second script written as part of the thesis is *Warriors*, which comprises the final two chapters of the narrative, *battle* and the *new established reality*. The script expands the universe created in *The Vow* and brings in new characters and landscapes. It has *focal characters* who have been introduced in *The Vow* but pushes the narrative forward by shifting focus amongst them from one script to another. A character like Dharam, who is at the core of the action in *The Vow*, dies at the end, coming back only in flashbacks or visions, while Bheeshma, who is indispensable to driving the narrative forward in *The Vow*, grows old in *Warriors*. Though he is still very much a *focal character*, making decisions critical to the overarching narrative, like leaving the royal court of Hastinapura or using that as an opportunity to spy on Shakuni (whom he suspects of conspiring against Hastinapura), actions of characters like Arjuna and Karna have equal or perhaps more dramatic weight and are used to drive the narrative forward. In other words, the audience's 'alignment and allegiance' shifts to these new characters and the nature of the paradigm allows the structuring of such a transition smoother.<sup>299</sup> Even a character like Parsuram, who is introduced as a *focal character* into the narrative at the *exploration of the disruption* chapter as mentioned above, gains more prominence as a mentor to Karna and Arjuna as well as someone who shapes the decisions they make as the narrative progresses. The new paradigm obviously allows for the introduction of new *focal characters* in any chapter (Duryodhana,

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<sup>299</sup> Smith, pp. 41–48.

Shakuni, Behram, Suryavanshi's son Shubham, Kunti and obviously Karna and Arjuna are introduced here) and also allows for characters to evolve between chapters giving them a chance to shift on the moral spectrum. Parth and Dheeraj are established on different ends of the moral spectrum in the first script but here in *Warriors*, Dheeraj shifts closer to Parth on the spectrum until both of them find their way back to each other, gradually solidifying the audience's 'allegiance' with him.<sup>300</sup> Moving away from a single hero structure towards telling a story in movements or chapters also allows the writers to experiment with the narrative, exploring new timelines and parallel universes within the same story, like here in *Warriors*, where Parth and Dheeraj write two different versions of the same narrative with similar characters, but both versions progress differently, driven by their state of mind and experiences, only for the stories to merge gradually as the brothers find common ground against Suryavanshi and his son Shubham.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the narrative of *Warriors*, though part of the bigger narrative, also stands on its own dramatically and could be charted using the paradigm, starting from the *established reality* where we meet all the characters dealing with the repercussions of war and violence in both timelines from the previous script, creating the circumstances for the final battle. It could be said that the *ultimate crusade* moment for the overarching narrative (over the two scripts) will coincide with the *battle* chapter inside the *Warriors* narrative. Considering the sheer expanse of the narrative, the *battle* chapter is an extended one (it goes on for most of this script) where it goes through its share of crests and troughs of mini battles, defeats and victories, for all the *focal characters*, like the initial support that Parth gets from Gurubhai which is snatched away by Shubham's actions, forcing Parth to accept defeat and leave, only to come back, ready to fight to get his father's legacy back on track. Dheeraj struggles to come to terms with his guilt which manifests in

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<sup>300</sup> Smith, p. 41.

the form of his drug addiction. He fights through it over the course of this narrative and comes back ready to set things right. This finally throws the estranged brothers Parth and Dheeraj together again to fight against Shubham.

In Parth's version of events from the mythological timeline, the threat of an impending battle always looms. Bheeshma is seen warning Arjuna and preparing for it through his own small but efficient network of spies. Arjuna clashes with his illegitimate brother Karna, gets defeated and exiled at the hands of the latter and then embarks on a final crusade to regain control of Hastinapura. In Dheeraj's version, which is a new parallel myth he unwittingly sets in Parth's *Mahabharata* universe, Karna is a warrior desperately looking for a 'place' in Hastinapura, which from his eyes is 'owned' by Bheeshma and his clan. His anger and frustration, a reflection of Dheeraj's, knows no bounds when his future as a warrior and his love is taken away from him by a jealous Arjuna. And in his frustration, he brings war to Hastinapura, the biggest it has ever seen. As the two stories merge, great battles are fought in both timelines and peace is restored. Parth and Dheeraj start working together to rebuild the legacy of their fathers and family. In the mythical timeline, with an entire generation including Bheeshma, Parsuram, Pandu etc., gone, Arjuna and Karna begin working together to rebuild Hastinapura, ushering in the *new established reality* in both the timelines. Once again, the structure that intercuts between two timelines allows for the creation of 'gaps' in the audience's knowledge which could be expanded further as individual properties with newly introduced characters like Behram and Shakuni, which would help deepen their characters and the mythology of this universe.<sup>301</sup> A large portion of Karna's journey from Parth's script is only hinted upon in *Warriors*, creating a possibility for it to be expanded as a separate film that ends with him coming face to face with Arjuna here in *Warriors*. A character like Krishna, who is introduced in the final pages of the script,

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<sup>301</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

deserves a richer, more expanded back story which could be explored using a separate film that establishes him as the warrior he is seen to be here. His character, along with Karna and Arjuna, could also help chart the future of this universe beyond the events of *Warriors*. All these new properties could help bring in new *focal characters* into the universe, further layering an already dense reality of this overarching narrative.

### **The Paradigm and The Conundrum of Narrative Expansion**

David Bordwell laid out the framework for classical film narratives in Hollywood crafted around a protagonist, with events/information organised and presented in a cause and effect manner, to engage and immerse audiences into the fictional construct of the film by instigating a varying but continuous emotional response through ‘change’.<sup>302</sup> Kirsten Thompson does try to push the discourse further discussing ‘New Hollywood Storytelling’ and adds that the plot can unravel by the actions of ‘one or multiple goal-oriented protagonists’ but the notions of ‘narrative logic, cinematic time and space’ are ‘guaranteed’.<sup>303</sup> But the idea of ‘dispersing the narrative’ as suggested by Kirsten Thompson in respect to serialised television, co-opted by ‘New Hollywood’ could be expanded further, bridging the gap between different mediums, breaking up the narrative into different pieces, breaking linear time, creating parallel realities in different narratives within the overarching one, events which often occur concurrently with others and may or may not have any bearing on each other, pushing the boundaries, complicating the idea of a ‘coherent unity of time, space and character’, especially over the course of a map of different entities.<sup>304</sup> While

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<sup>302</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) cited in Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film* (Routledge, 2011), pp. 8–61; Tom Slootweg, ‘Modern Classicism in Contemporary Serialized Television: Lost in Vast Dispersed Narration’ (University of Groningen), pp. 9–16.

<sup>303</sup> Kristen Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 11–45 cited in Slootweg, pp. 16–19.

<sup>304</sup> Kristen Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 74–105; Slootweg, pp. 34–75.

individual films inside that overarching narrative might seem to adhere to ‘classical Hollywood’ film narrative structures, if the narrative of the entire franchise is to be looked at as a whole, which it should be, the notions of maintaining ‘narrative economy’ to ensure audience ‘comprehension’ are challenged.<sup>305</sup> Tom Sloopweg argues that the use of ‘flash-forwards and flash-sideways’ in the TV show *Lost* complicates the rules of ‘classical Hollywood’ narratives, ‘perverting the narrative economy’.<sup>306</sup> Considering the parallels between serialised television and expanded narrative universes drawn by both Sloopweg and Thompson, it could be said that the ‘flashbacks, the flash-forwards, the flash-sideways’ here are not small scenes or sections of scenes but entire movies, TV shows, hybrid streaming shows which have their own very own, often complicated plots.<sup>307</sup>

Bordwell and Thompson also raise questions around ‘coherence’ of transmedia franchises from the perspective of the audience, who have the option of entering the narrative from any of the openings, not getting all the narrative information in the order that is intended by the creator/storytellers and not being able to follow the narrative, creating a barrier between them and catharsis.<sup>308</sup> But if such a franchise/narrative universe is constructed carefully, perhaps using the paradigm suggested above, it can balance the expectations of casual and serious fans.<sup>309</sup> A fan would have the option of sticking with one particular storyline within the overarching one, over different properties, following the crests and troughs, setups and payoffs, within each chapter of the paradigm until it is complete or can follow the different ‘migratory cues’ provided throughout to explore and follow the rest of the narrative.<sup>310</sup> Jenkins points out that as compared to the classical Hollywood storytelling,

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<sup>305</sup> Sloopweg, pp. 74–75.

<sup>306</sup> Sloopweg, pp. 64–75.

<sup>307</sup> Sloopweg, pp. 34–75; Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television*, pp. 74–105.

<sup>308</sup> Henry Blumenthal, ‘Storyscape, A New Medium of Media’ (unpublished PhD Thesis, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2016), pp. 97–101.

<sup>309</sup> Mittel, p. 262.

<sup>310</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

these narratives demand a lot more from us, and it is also evident that fans are ready to immerse themselves in an expansive narrative that they find engaging enough, often going back and exploring everything that has come before, immersing themselves in this new universe, to develop a complete understanding of the canon.<sup>311</sup> Henry Blumenthal expounds,

The beauty of the storyscape model is that users can join in only by sampling the parts that speak to their way of knowing the world and the pleasures that appeal to them. Gardner (1999) speaks of eight forms of intelligence and knowing the world; a storyscape can engage on all or a portion that maps best to a participant's innate ways of understanding. Murray and Jenkins were both quoted previously reinforcing the model of storyscape participation of a diverse audience, made of collectors, detectives, observers, games players, and passive participants in a story ecosystem that enfolds them all.<sup>312</sup>

Bordwell and Thompson are perhaps underestimating what Jenkins calls the 'collective intelligence of the fan community'.<sup>313</sup> As Jenkins puts it, such narratives are perfect for this 'era of collective intelligence' where people get more out of a narrative working through it together.<sup>314</sup> With the growing popularity of narrative universes, it is becoming clearer that audiences are now ready to consume extremely fragmented narratives, in different temporalities, over the course of different mediums. The very idea of cross-platform narratives creates the possibilities of multiple stories unfolding concurrently in the universe, with some having an impact on the story immediately, some used as setups for future events, and others used to expand the universe in a new direction. It could mean

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<sup>311</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, pp. 105–6.

<sup>312</sup> Blumenthal, p. 101.

<sup>313</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, pp. 97–132.

<sup>314</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p. 97.

extending or perhaps delaying the moment of achieving catharsis or extending the emotional response that a single narrative entity would instigate. In line with what Jenkins establishes, it could be said that when fans come together, navigating the universe, piecing the narrative together with every property, getting sewn into it through every exercise in ‘additive comprehension’, the release of emotion (both individually and as a group) when it all comes together, could be stronger than that at the end of a single self-contained narrative property.<sup>315</sup> This re-enforces the need for this paradigm which presents a new way to imagine and meticulously construct a sprawling complex narrative with properties that can thrive dramatically, giving the audience a dramatic and emotional reason to continue following this narrative.

This chapter has attempted to place this new paradigm as a tool that could help craft a new, immersive universe. It intends to change the way a storyteller would approach their story, thinking of the expanse of the world where stories take place, beyond the mere mechanics, plot and singular characters in individual stories. As discussed above, these universes can be constructed using a single or multiple mediums, creating the need and the opportunity for a unified narrative paradigm that would work across them.

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<sup>315</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, pp. 97–132.

## Chapter 5: The Way Forward: One Story, One Structure

As we have established the workings of the paradigm and then discussed its viability through commercially successful franchises and a new original universe, the final chapter of this thesis intends to discuss the possible future application of this paradigm as a **unified narrative structure** that goes beyond cinematic narratives to meet the growing needs of the modern storyteller.

The chapter-based structure, powered by the use of ‘negative capability’, makes this new paradigm a potential solution that could allow writers to imagine and chart expansive stories with multiple voices on different mediums and not just in film.<sup>316</sup> This means that all the properties within that universe would be conceived using one narrative structure, which can also help them navigate their way through their universe on different mediums to chart a story that may seem dramatically finite but has been pre-configured to be infinite.

Serialised television, which creates a ‘sustained narrative setting, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events with all three factors combining to forge a coherent storyworld’ has always been a medium that is designed to be expansive and has been successful in creating story universes even before the days of the MCU.<sup>317</sup> American sitcoms and one-hour dramas have always covered multiple storylines, focussing on different *focal characters* within each episode, often taught in film schools as A, B, C stories, with some of these storylines being resolved within the episode, while others developed throughout the season.<sup>318</sup> While storytellers have been looking to create layered nuanced serialised realities in different television genres like the procedural, legal dramas, mysteries, and science fiction, for years, there was a pushback from the networks for whom

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<sup>316</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

<sup>317</sup> Mittel, p. 256.

<sup>318</sup> ‘What Are A, B, and C Stories in Screenwriting? (TV Writing 101)’, *TV-CALLING: A TV Writing Journey* <<https://www.tv-calling.com/what-are-a-b-and-c-stories-in-screenwriting-tv-writing-101/>> [accessed 6 July 2020].

‘serialisation was a bad word, with creators encouraged to avoid ‘premise pilots’ (square one, expositional) and serialised arcs.’.<sup>319</sup> These shows had historically struggled to retain viewers because of their inability to catch up on episodes that they had missed.<sup>320</sup> Landau correctly points out that it was also difficult for writers to sustain serialised plots over 22 episodes.<sup>321</sup>

Often uncertain about their future, such ‘universes’ on network TV had to be planned and developed gradually, cautiously, with all properties and elements usually not being mapped out when the original series was planned, and the pilot episode was written, with the narrative constructed one season or a show at a time. A science-fiction show like *Fringe* (2008) ran for five seasons and gave way to novels, comic books and games that expanded the story.<sup>322</sup> *Fringe* started with a case of the week format to gradually build the show’s mythology, creating a universe of characters, phenomena, monsters, organisations and a robust viewership and then tried to pay off the audience’s attention with a more serialised narrative.<sup>323</sup> Still, the nature of network television with one commercial break laden episode coming every week, 22-24 episodes every season, along with season breaks, did make it harder for the audience to follow their way through a more intricate universe and as a result, the ratings suffered.<sup>324</sup> This was followed by the cancellation of the show.

The onset of ‘digital television revolution’ has brought about a significant change in this approach to storytelling.<sup>325</sup> As Landau expounds, shows in this era, especially on streaming platforms, with shorter seasons, favour serialisation to create ‘authentic’ and immersive narratives that can be planned meticulously.<sup>326</sup> This has also emboldened writers and

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<sup>319</sup> Neil Landau, *TV Writing On Demand: Creating Great Content in the Digital Era* (Routledge, 2018), p. 38.

<sup>320</sup> Landau, p. 37.

<sup>321</sup> Landau, p. 37.

<sup>322</sup> *Fringe* (Fox, 2008).

<sup>323</sup> Mike Veltman, ‘Fringe: Why the Fox Series Ended With Season 5’, *CBR.Com*, 2021 <<https://www.cbr.com/why-fringe-ended-canceled/>> [accessed 30 December 2021].

<sup>324</sup> Veltman.

<sup>325</sup> Landau, p. 35.

<sup>326</sup> Landau, pp. 35–36.

networks to put more serialised content on their channels, and audiences have multiple options to catch up, binge-watch their favourite shows through DVR and streaming platforms.<sup>327</sup> Many networks now have their streaming platforms, where the episodes are aired simultaneously or on the next day. This has also empowered creators to expand their narrative universes, creating an overarching continuity of narrative over multiple shows.

*Breaking Bad*, Vince Gilligan's iconic 2008 crime drama, enjoyed critical acclaim but moderate viewership on the AMC network for years but became a big hit when it found its way to Netflix.<sup>328</sup> As noted by Molla and Kafka, the viewership had grown from less than 2 million to 10 million, between the 4<sup>th</sup> season finale and 5<sup>th</sup> season series finale, all thanks to new, previously untapped audiences binge watching it and old fans catching up on it on Netflix.<sup>329</sup> This rise in popularity eventually led to the expansion of the universe with a spin-off movie and another spin-off TV show.

As mentioned above, streaming shows generally allow storytellers the freedom to complete their stories or, at least, chapters from them over one or a set number of seasons. Here, an entire season of a particular original show (10-13 episodes) is generally made available on the same day, giving the audiences an intricately designed expansive story with multiple characters, plotlines and sometimes even multiple timelines, which they can follow at their own pace, leaving enough narrative openings for the universe to be expanded even if it happens in the next season. Netflix has used this strategy to great effect to craft its little universe of Marvel characters within the bigger MCU, with characters like Daredevil, Luke Cage, Jessica Jones, Frank Castle, Danny Rand, Wilson Fisk all being introduced in different shows and then being used to push the universe forward as they cross over into each other's

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<sup>327</sup> Landau, p. 35.

<sup>328</sup> *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008); Rani Molla and Peter Kafka, 'How Netflix Made Breaking Bad a Hit — and Why That Won't Happen Again', *Recode*, 2020 <<https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/7/14/21312595/netflix-breaking-bad-podcast-streaming-land-of-the-giants>> [accessed 15 February 2021].

<sup>329</sup> Molla and Kafka.

stories. Plotlines are introduced in one show, developed further in another, with everything concluding in the final *The Defenders* miniseries, which essentially concludes the narrative.<sup>330</sup> Another encouraging example of expansive universes being built on streaming platforms is *The Umbrella Academy*, an adaptation of a much liked graphic novel series.<sup>331</sup> It follows the life and adventures of 5 adoptive brothers and sisters gifted with powers as they take on various supernatural forces to stop the impending apocalypse. Apart from these, several characters are absolutely essential to the universe and could be considered *focal*, like the owner of the Umbrella Academy, Reginald Hargreeves. This show unfolds without a central heroic figure. Several parallel stories are delved into simultaneously, building towards a season finale, which concludes some of the setups but creates new narrative openings to push the universe ahead in the upcoming season. The series uses well-placed flashbacks within each episode to give an insight into events that have taken place in the past, often setting up little details which give the story scope for further expansion. For example, there is a hint given near the end of season 1 (through a prologue-flashback) that one of these characters is an alien from an unknown planet. This hint is built upon and solidified in the second season, setting up the possibility of expanding the series to new geographies. The show also uses time travel as a tool to create ‘gaps’ in the audience’s understanding of the world.<sup>332</sup> For example, one of the characters travels back in time in season 1, and it is suggested that he has gone through a painful ordeal, as he comes back broken and disturbed. This is used to create his plotline in season 2 as he attempts to save the life of the man he fell in love with within that particular time period by establishing contact with him in his present. Also, the very act of time travel creates the potential of fracturing the

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<sup>330</sup> *The Defenders* (Netflix, 2017).

<sup>331</sup> *The Umbrella Academy* (Netflix, 2019).

<sup>332</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

narrative and temporal expansion of the universe as most of the second season takes place in the 60s, even though the original timeline of the show is 2019.

But no matter what platform is used to tell the story, the overarching narrative of the show could be divided into seasons, with each season covering less than, equal to or more than one chapter from the paradigm until the conclusion of the same. Different sets of episodes within each season could cover different chapters, with all six chapters being completed by the end of the season, creating the *new established reality* for the next one. And then, within each chapter, each episode could also be crafted using the paradigm. Certain ‘migratory cues or hermeneutic codes’ can be set up during each episode, which further develop the *established reality* of the next episode or the next season.<sup>333</sup> Hence, this paradigm will also work well for any show where the narrative develops gradually, one season after another, or for a show with episodic storylines. But when the intention is to create a universe with canonical serialised content, at any point in the narrative of one show, no matter which chapter of the paradigm is unfolding (as mentioned in the original layout of the paradigm in chapter 3 of the thesis) characters introduced could take off, creating new spin-off properties starting from their own *established reality* while expanding further on that chapter of the paradigm and, therefore, the overarching narrative. This has been visible and utilised well in the television tradition of spin-offs, for example, in shows of the *Arrowverse*, where Barry Allen, a character introduced in the original *Arrow* show, is given his individual moment, towards the end of the episode, his setup or ‘migratory cue’, which sets up his *established reality*, starting a new narrative cycle which has now lasted seven seasons, layering the already nuanced reality of this universe even further.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Long, pp. 53–69.

<sup>334</sup> *Arrowverse* (CW, 2012); *Arrow* (CW, 2012); Long, pp. 53–69; *The Flash* (CW, 2014).

In recent years, with the advent of cross-platform storytelling, games have become an important tool for storytellers to open their world to a new or more engaged audience fulfilling the ultimate goal of achieving a higher degree of immersion into the world, achieved through interaction with a fictional, often fantastical world. Amy Green calls games an exercise in ‘digital storytelling’, where the player is actively involved and is given a chance to ‘participate’ as the story ‘unfolds’.<sup>335</sup> Games over the years have become important ‘cultural artifacts’ which, through their often complicated and expansive narratives and enhanced levels of engagement over a long period of time, can be used to deal with pertinent issues in the world.<sup>336</sup> As Green goes on to mention, more and more games are increasingly going heavier on narratives, engaging players in intricately designed layered storylines and complete characters with arcs as this allows creators to capture the attention of millions of people across countless hours and series of titles within their universe to incite similar or even stronger emotional responses as one might have to a book or film.<sup>337</sup> Green cites our ‘collective need to tell and experience stories’ as a reason for this shift.<sup>338</sup> In the case of the game being an entity, a property unfolding in one corner of a larger universe, it also helps to add multiple layers to the fabric of this new reality, explore untapped corners of the universe, introduce new characters, geographies, help sharpen the rules of the new world, all while introducing the world to an untapped audience and in case of multiplayer games, bringing them together as Zuckerman correctly mentions, for a ‘collective experience’ of a fictional reality closer to the one they live in.<sup>339</sup> Geoffrey Long mentions how the sibling director team, the Wachowskis, used the *Enter the Matrix* video game between preceding

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<sup>335</sup> Amy M. Green, *Storytelling in Video Games: The Art of the Digital Narrative* (McFarland & Co., 2018), pp. 5–35.

<sup>336</sup> Green, p. 65.

<sup>337</sup> Green, pp. 65–66.

<sup>338</sup> Green, p. 66.

<sup>339</sup> Zuckerman, ‘The Collective Journey — Part 2’.

*Matrix* properties and *The Matrix Reloaded* film to complete a critical chapter of the story.<sup>340</sup>

It opened another door for the fans to engage with the universe while expanding and layering it further. In his paper ‘A Narrative Theory of Games’, Espen Aarseth attempts to create a ‘ludo-narratological’ model for gaming narratives and discusses the spectrum of ways narratives and gameplay can be balanced within a game to create different kinds of player experience and immersion.<sup>341</sup> Aarseth notes that games and stories have certain common elements, namely, ‘a world, its agents, objects and events’, and these elements could be ‘configured’ differently to create different kinds of games.<sup>342</sup> As Aarseth goes on to expound, the world created in a game could be ‘linear, multicursal or open’; ‘objects’ used in the game can range from being ‘user inventible to being static’; ‘agents’ (characters) could go from being layered, near flesh and blood characters to being robotic stand-ins.<sup>343</sup> Above all, events in a game can be ‘open, selectable (like in a multicursal game) or plotted’.<sup>344</sup> Aarseth goes on to discuss the idea of ‘kernels’(events which form the central drama of the game narrative) and ‘satellites (supplementary events that fill out the discourse)’, and these can be fixed or flexible depending on the degree to which the creator wants to control the gameplay.<sup>345</sup>

Different games can use these elements in different ways to create unique narrative experiences within them to be placed somewhere on the spectrum in Aarseth’s model between the ‘Narrative Pole’ (games which are completely controlled by the creator, where the narrative has been fully plotted and is explored through multi-dimensional layered characters) and the ‘Ludic Pole’(pure games which proceed without any intervention from the creators and thrive completely on gameplay).<sup>346</sup> Amy Green discusses examples of games

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<sup>340</sup> David Perry, *Enter the Matrix* (Shiny Entertainment, 2003); Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, pp. 103–5; Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003; Long, p. 42.

<sup>341</sup> Espen Aarseth, ‘A Narrative Theory of Games’, FDG ’12 (ACM, 2012), pp. 129–33.

<sup>342</sup> Aarseth, pp. 130–33.

<sup>343</sup> Aarseth, pp. 130–33.

<sup>344</sup> Aarseth, p. 130.

<sup>345</sup> Aarseth, pp. 130–32.

<sup>346</sup> Aarseth, p. 132.

with ‘long form storytelling’ where players have limited to almost no control over the narrative along with those where the players are given certain choices where they are free to explore different subplots with gameplay, make certain choices which perhaps deepen their sense of immersion into the narrative making it seem like they are part of the creation of the narrative or alteration of the in-game environment through their action/interaction.<sup>347</sup> In contrast to this, Green also cites examples of ‘short-form storytelling’ which allows creators to tell intricately designed smaller narratives, giving the players choices to indulge in the gameplay through multiple characters, dividing the gameplay into chapters, making players deal with the consequences of a choice made at an earlier stage, forcing them to engage with ‘minor details if they want to reach the correct conclusion’.<sup>348</sup> As Green points out, if done well, the use of dialogue and cut scenes where the player has little to no control can often become essential to help the player engage in the thematic fibre of the game, which deepens their engagement with the narrative and the gameplay.<sup>349</sup> This kind of intricate storytelling, with multiple *focal characters*, clearly fits very well into the scope of this paradigm.

As we move away from the ‘ludic pole’ towards the ‘narrative pole’, the new paradigm could help storytellers conceive and develop the previously mentioned ‘elements’ required to design the game or bring them in from a different chapter (which might have unfolded as a game or on any other medium) and craft such a narrative through pre-designed ‘Kernels’ established and then built upon through scripted cinematic cut away scenes or interactions with non-player characters, placed strategically along with the gameplay.<sup>350</sup> Each chapter of the new paradigm could form a chapter of the game, which could be divided into various levels if required, where the player sees the designed narrative unfold seamlessly along with and often through the gameplay as the paradigm allows for crests and troughs of

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<sup>347</sup> Green, pp. 78–134.

<sup>348</sup> Green, pp. 135–91.

<sup>349</sup> Green, p. 89.

<sup>350</sup> Aarseth, pp. 130–32.

confrontations and because this is a game, momentary victories and defeats. Each subsequent confrontation and victory takes the player/ *focal character(s)* deeper into this world and towards the next chapter. Depending on the degree of control the creator wants to give the player/ *focal character(s)*, these confrontations could be varied ('variable satellites'), leading to one or multiple outcomes (all pre-plotted) in the *battle* and the *new established reality* chapter, depending on the nature of the game.<sup>351</sup>

Considering the universe developed through *The Vow* and *Warriors*, the non-linear narrative intercuts between multiple timelines and realities. It allows for the narrative openings necessary, which could be bridged through different properties created to expand the universe. For example, a film about Karna's search to find a Guru, TV shows about young Devrata fighting different battles to protect Hastinapura or his struggle to get Hastinapura to its former glory after Vichy's death would help widen the narrative, temporal and geographical boundaries of this universe, bringing in more *focal characters*, giving newly *established realities* for storytellers to restart the narrative cycle using the new paradigm. A game about the origins of characters like Parsuram, Akasi, Brindavan, exploring that time period, or about different warriors working to escape the *Chakravyuh* would give the audience some semblance of the expanse of narrative, giving them some control over it, as they explore the mythological domain first hand. They would embody characters like Arjuna, Karna, Bheeshma or Parsuram, getting a strong sense, not just of the mechanics of their character but of the universe as a whole. This kind of immersion would help audiences engage with other properties in the universe at a different level. Some of the setups in one property could be paid off in another, giving the 'Okatu' who have put in the effort to follow the narrative throughout a sense of catharsis.<sup>352</sup> But, as established earlier, the

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<sup>351</sup> Aarseth, pp. 130–32.

<sup>352</sup> Rose, pp. 39–45.

entire narrative, all the different properties across different mediums, could be crafted using the same unified paradigm.

This thesis has merely scratched the surface of what could be said about the great debt that global cinematic narratives owe to mythical narratives. Vogler's work is a testament to the continuing dependence of cinematic narratives on mythological tropes. But over the years, with the evolution of technology and how stories are created, distributed and consumed, over different mediums, new opportunities have emerged for storytellers to create new universes, nuanced realities which mimic the way people experience the reality around them and as Gomez points out, the Hero's Journey, which follows one character on a journey, perhaps does not reflect and capture the need and the new found ability people have to engage and immerse themselves into 'every story being told and every story ever told', be it world-altering moments like a global pandemic, movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo or on the screen with cinematic universes like the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*.<sup>353</sup>

Indian films, like a lot of others, have also given audiences heroes to invest in, because of the star culture that has existed in Indian cinema, perhaps since its inception. But filmmakers have also crafted expansive narratives with a large star-studded cast, creating genre-bending family dramas like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* or social dramas from the 80s like *Saaheb* (Ganguly, 85), *Biwi Ho To Aisi* (Bihari, 88), *Avtaar* (Kumar, 83) which have attempted to capture the lives and familial struggles of people in India through the lives of certain *focal characters* at a certain point in time.<sup>354</sup> It could also be said that the recent trend of retelling pivotal stories from Indian history, even though they are sold as biopics, is aimed at capturing moments that are engrained in the combined imagination of the masses. India's response to the Uri attack (*Uri* (Dhar 2018)), India's first Olympic gold (*Gold* (Kagti, 2018))

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<sup>353</sup> Gomez, 'The Hero's Journey Is No Longer Serving Us'; Zuckerman, 'The Collective Journey - Part 1'; Zuckerman, 'The Collective Journey — Part 2'.

<sup>354</sup> Anil Ganguly, *Saaheb*, 1985.; J.K. Bihari, *Biwi Ho To Aisi*, 1988.; Mohan Kumar, *Avtaar*, 1983.

as a free nation or India winning the Cricket World Cup in 1983 and in 2011 (83 (Khan, 2021) and *M.S Dhoni: The Untold Story*) are events that have been elevated to the level of modern myths as they are pivotal moments in the personal stories of Indians globally, making them part of an on-going over-arching narrative, a common shared social journey of sorts.<sup>355</sup>

While *Baahubali* was not the first Indian film franchise, it is the first time such an intricate narrative, set within an expansive universe has been developed in India, which has been, as mentioned previously, expanded in all directions, geographically and temporally through various mediums like novels, animated series, live-action webseries etc. It marks a paradigm shift in Indian cinematic storytelling. It has pushed storytellers in India to take notice of this new trend where they are looking to craft expansive universes which hook the audience and brings them back for other stories set within it.<sup>356</sup> Novel narratives are now being developed in India (and around the world), which mirror the way the narrative of *Mahabharata* or the *Vishnu Purana* unfolds, with the former being the base for the construction of this paradigm.

Kannada director Prasanth Neel's *KGF* (2018) follows *Baahubali*'s duology model.<sup>357</sup> In a post-*Baahubali* world, Chapter 1 was given a pan India release with big plans for Chapter 2. There has been a push to cast actors from different regional industries to give the film a wider appeal. The film employs a fragmented narrative where one senior, ageing journalist narrates the life and adventures of a charismatic gangster named Rocky. The film traces his life from his birth in a village in Mysore to him going to Mumbai after his mother's death and finally to him travelling to the Kolar Gold Fields, which is presented here as a post-apocalyptic netherworld, where he is sent to assassinate Garuda, the brutal

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<sup>355</sup> Aditya Dhar, *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (RSVP Movies, 2019); Kabir Khan, 83 (Reliance Entertainment, 2021); Kagti.

<sup>356</sup> Long, pp. 45–46.

<sup>357</sup> Prasanth Neel, *KGF* (Excel Entertainment, 2018).

despot who owns and runs the mine. To create ‘gaps’ in the audience’s understanding of the world or, in other words, expand the scope of the universe using ‘negative capability’, *KGF* employs a non-linear narrative, shifting perspectives, jumping timelines quite often.<sup>358</sup> The film introduces a myriad of characters and creates ‘gaps’ in the audience’s knowledge and understanding of these characters by keeping a lot (including their faces) hidden, creating a need for the audiences to watch the second part where a lot of these questions would perhaps be answered.<sup>359</sup> A character named Adheera is referred to throughout the film, but his face is never shown. A sequence sets up his death, only for it to be revealed at the end of the film that he is still alive, creating further anticipation for him to be presented as the main antagonist for the upcoming second film. The film also uses the journalist’s narration well to create confusion in the narrative, where, due to his age, he abruptly jumps ahead in the story and starts narrating Rocky’s life after the events of the first film, where he is at the peak of his power, a feared crime lord. This, combined with the end of the first film where he successfully assassinates Garuda and becomes a leader of Garuda’s ‘slaves’, create anticipation for the audience where they would want to watch the next film to know how Rocky went from being a gun for hire to being the dreaded kingpin. It is yet to be seen whether the contemporary storyline (where the journalist narrates Rocky’s story) has any dramatic impact on the overarching narrative of *KGF*, which is something I have attempted to achieve in the duology written as a part of this thesis.

The upcoming franchise *Brahmastra*, a modern tale deeply entrenched in Indian mythology, is being sold to audiences as a trilogy, set within an ‘*Astraverse*’.<sup>360</sup> Director Vetrimaaran’s gangster saga *Vada Chennai* (2018) (planned as an upcoming trilogy)

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<sup>358</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

<sup>359</sup> Long, pp. 53–60.

<sup>360</sup> Nancy Tartaglione, “‘Brahmastra Part One: Shiva’ Filmmaker Ayan Mukerji On Creating Epic Fantasy Universe; Watch Teaser’, *Deadline.Com*, 22/12/2021 <<https://deadline.com/2021/12/brahmastra-part-one-shiva-ayan-mukerji-ranbir-kapoor-alia-bhatt-teaser-1234900676/>> [accessed 1 January 2022].

explores the interlocked lives of several characters over several decades in North Chennai, with the end of the first film creating possible questions and scope to expand the established universe.<sup>361</sup> The most significant move away from creating stories with singular heroes towards creating universes is how filmmaker Rohit Shetty is now crafting his universe of police officers fighting corruption at various levels in the system, starting with one successful franchise focusing on the life and adventures of the cop *Bajirao Singham* and then expanding it with characters coming to each other's aid at various critical junctures in different but interconnected narratives as seen in films like *Sooryavanshi* (Shetty, 2021) and *Simmba* (Shetty 2018).<sup>362</sup>

As established in chapter 2, mythological narratives have been nearly indispensable to cinematic storytelling globally and in India. This relationship between mythological and cinematic narratives in India has gone from being explicit to implicit to being explicit again, essentially, on two levels. In a bid to create expansive, immersive stories for a new generation of audiences who have been exposed to global cinematic universes, storytellers went back to the trove of Indian mytho-historical characters and stories to ride the renewed wave of nationalism, which has proven to be a double edge sword.<sup>363</sup> While such films have given strong box office returns, as discussed before, there has been significant backlash from certain sections of society, often backed by politically motivated outfits and fringe groups, against the same.<sup>364</sup> But it is perhaps the commercial possibilities that this kind of expansive storytelling creates that the debt Indian cinematic narratives owe to mythological narratives now extends beyond character archetypes, plots, tropes and towards the adoption of their narrative structure.

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<sup>361</sup> Vetrimaan, *Vada Chennai* (Lyca Productions, 2018).

<sup>362</sup> Rohit Shetty, *Simmba*, 2018; Rohit Shetty, *Singham Franchise* (Reliance Entertainment, 2011); Rohit Shetty, *Sooryavanshi* (Reliance Entertainment, 2021).

<sup>363</sup> Daftuar.

<sup>364</sup> Tilak.

Like in the west, this new movement in India has obviously been aided by the entry of big Hollywood studios such as Disney and Netflix (amongst others), and with them, they have brought in their penchant for control and their streaming wars to India, increasing the number of content consumption platforms now available here. The Covid-19 pandemic also marked a significant paradigm shift in this regard as major Indian film releases had to be moved to streaming platforms. This has brought in a big shift in the way stories are being planned and released in India (even beyond the pandemic). While audiences were primarily accustomed to consuming high-quality storytelling in movie theatres, they now have the option of watching quite a few of them on their television at home. Filmmakers and producers are exploring the possibility of widening the scope of their work, trying to tell a large variety and genres of stories, catering to a larger section of the population. As mentioned above, universes that have been born as cinematic properties, like *Baahubali*, are now being extended on OTT (Over The Top) platforms, indicating that the possibility of newer platforms has emboldened filmmakers to begin thinking about expanding their ideas into cross-platform story universes and some of the planned Indian franchises mentioned above could be expanded onto different mediums.

The push created for a digital economy, brought about by the demonetisation in 2016, an increase in smartphone penetration, the introduction of cheap, faster internet on mobile and at home, along with the above-mentioned rise of OTT content platforms, have all contributed to an increase in exposure to global trends in content creation and consumption leading to the rise of an Indian fan community equivalent to the ‘Okatu’ community in Japan and the fanboys in America.<sup>365</sup> They are ready to dissect every media property available for them to consume online, and their impact on society and media is palpable. Various properties from any film, like trailers, scene snippets, songs and promotional content, are all

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<sup>365</sup> Rose, p. 39.

posted online on Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, primarily meant to start a conversation and pique audience interest before the film. The reactions of the online communities become news that is reported in newspapers (online and print) and entertainment websites, which only furthers their cause. The rise of such a community ready to engage with stories on different levels and different platforms has further emboldened studios, producers and storytellers to indulge in complex storytelling exercises. The cycle to generate content on various platforms and then control audience interaction with it has only just begun in India but is the present and the future of how stories will be produced and consumed globally. This has set the stage for interesting challenges for storytellers in the future, increasing the need for the new paradigm established above.

This new paradigm aims to give writers and storytellers a chance to keep their narrative intact throughout the universe and across mediums, extending beyond the prized properties into the planning, plotting and release of content meant to promote the former. Every trailer, every snippet, every image could introduce the audience to a certain chapter of the narrative as structured using the paradigm. Such world-building promotional content is not a new exercise for Hollywood franchises, as seen with films like *The Dark Knight*, but this new paradigm could help each component that builds this franchise to be devised as an actual story beat which is ‘canonical’ from the inception of the story itself, helping storytellers retain control of the story they set out to tell.<sup>366</sup>

Manuel Hernández-Pérez, in the essay, ‘Fictionality, Transmedia National Branding and the Tokyo 2020 Olympics’, discusses how the collapse of traditional media consumption paradigms, with all media being consumed parallelly through laptops, smartphones and tablets, along with television, has resulted in the ‘hybridisation between fiction and

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<sup>366</sup> Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005); Long, pp. 40–48; Scott Meslow, ‘How The Dark Knight Perfected Viral Movie Marketing’, *IGN*, 2020 <<https://www.ign.com/articles/the-dark-knight-why-so-serious-viral-movie-marketing-arg>> [accessed 1 January 2022].

nonfiction' thus expanding the scope of usage of transmedia storytelling beyond fictional universes.<sup>367</sup> This gives the new paradigm the opportunity to be expanded and adapted in the future bringing in other *focal characters* apart from screenwriters and other 'narratives' apart from cinema into its universe.

It is indisputable that we need a new way to think about stories, and this paradigm is an attempt to be a part of the global discourse around the evolution of storytelling. I believe that every time we take a step forward, we need to look back at all the knowledge at our disposal and find something, a clue, a hint, hidden in the past, like this thesis attempts to do with the *Mahabharata*, to begin to build a better future.

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<sup>367</sup> Manuel Hernández-Pérez, 'Fictionality, Transmedia National Branding and the Tokyo 2020 Olympics', in *Global Convergence Cultures: Transmedia Earth*, ed. by Matthew Freeman and William Proctor (Routledge), pp. 175–76.

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