

# God, gods and superheroes

Shvetal Vyas<sup>1</sup>

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*God exists and he's American.*<sup>2</sup>

Superheroes emerge when heroes fail. One possible definition of the superhero is that he (and it used usually to be a 'he') is a being with extraordinary powers who fights evil and has a recognisable costume in which to do it. As the genre evolved, female superheroes emerged, as did superheroes who did not possess supernatural powers but who fought their battles on the basis of brawn, brain and/or technology, with Batman being the most notable example of this kind of superhero.

*Watchmen* is a multi-layered comic book<sup>3</sup> that not only deconstructs various (and various kinds of) heroes, but the very idea of a hero.<sup>4</sup> The world of *Watchmen* is a world wherein superheroes appeared 'for real', that is, real people dressed up as superheroes, for a variety of reasons, and took on the roles and responsibilities that went with the costumes. These 'superheroes' could not remain the 'good guys' for long. They were often needlessly cruel and

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1 Shvetal Vyas is a PhD student in the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia. Shvetal would like to thank Prof S Sayyid, Dr Gilbert Caluya and Dr Minerva Nasser-Eddine for looking at different drafts of this commentary.

2 Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, DC Comics, New York, 1987, vol. 4, p. 2.

3 I follow Alan Moore's stand in choosing to call the text a comic book rather than graphic novel or (horror of horrors!) mature-audience miniseries. See Barry Kavanagh, 'The Alan Moore interview: Northampton/"graphic novel"', *blather.net*, 17 October 2000, <http://blather.net/articles/amoore/northampton.html>

4 This is the central argument outlined by Iain Thomson, 'Deconstructing the hero' in Jeff McLaughlin (ed) *Comics as philosophy*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MI, 2005, pp 100–129.

were used (by governments and/or armies) to quell dissent and rebellion rather than fight crime. For example, in the alternate historical universe of the *Watchmen*, America won the Vietnam War while Nixon was never impeached, because a 'masked hero' killed Woodward and Bernstein. The fear and loathing the heroes aroused lead to popular demonstrations against them, and a government Act sent most masked heroes into retirement while the few who did not retire operated like thugs and were hated by the general public. It is at this point, after they had retired, that the text begins.

This idea of the failure of superheroes, and therefore, arguably, the failure of heroes and of ideas of heroism leads one to other failures. The biggest hero to have failed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is arguably God. In a circular argument, the violence and despair that characterise our world, living in the aftermath of two world wars and regular conflicts in most parts of the world, is used as both cause and trigger: 'it is because the world is so violent that it becomes impossible to believe in God, that it becomes possible to believe that God does not exist' can exist alongside 'it is because people have given up on God that they are so violent and despairing'. According to the latter argument violence, in both actuality and representation, gets more nihilistic in a world that does not believe in God, or in the consolations that the concept of God or any other substitute grand narrative make possible. The first Superman comic appeared in 1938, which allows him to be contextualised within the framework of the Great Depression. Similarly, I would argue that the 'death of God' is one of the contexts that allow a superhero to emerge within the popular cultural imagination.

Two characters in *Watchmen* appropriate God-like spaces but do so with unsatisfactory consequences. Dr Manhattan is the only conventional superhero in the text in that he possesses scientific/supernatural powers. At the end of the text, he leaves earth to create a 'human' population elsewhere, that is, to be a God and start another world from scratch, since this one is past redemption. Adrian Veidt, 'the smartest man on earth', comes closest to a 'god-like' decision when he kills half the population of New York in order to put an end to fighting and unite the world against a perceived external enemy. This decision, made on

behalf of humanity, alienates him from it. His last appearance shows him aware of the terrible implications haunting him and unsure of whether his action will actually achieve permanent 'peace' or not. God has already failed mankind, and now both the major (and the other minor) superheroes do too.

This crisis and subsequent failure of heroism, which constitute the moral universe of *Watchmen*, is a crisis that depends on a western conceptualisation of the hero. A superhero is necessary in a secular world where (and after) God has failed. Ultimately the God of *Watchmen*, whether he is the 'real God', Dr Manhattan, Adrian Veidt or Alan Moore (as per some fans!), is indeed American.

However, it would be interesting to regard the existence and the failure of the superhero as a concept with reference to a polytheistic universe. One way of examining this is through Hinduism.

The biggest heroes of Hindu mythology are all too frequently not God-like but God-himself or God-themselves. Both Rama and Krishna are avatars (which could be translated as 'versions') of Lord Vishnu, one of the holy trinity of Hinduism. Though both are avatars of the same god, their strategies for dealing with the world are different – Rama relies on personal valour while Krishna is known not only for his mischievous and flirtatious behaviour during his childhood and adolescence but also for his stratagems and tricks, which help the Pandavas win the Mahabharat war.

This difference between the two is sometimes explained in the following terms: 'Rama is the god to be followed while Krishna is the god to be enjoyed'. Keeping such convenient classification aside, if a god-like superhero is wrong, he loses some of his god-like stature, but a god, in his sojourn on earth, can lie and manipulate the people around him and still not lose his stature. The Old Testament has a vengeful God, which is arguably a human trait, but even after taking that into account neither the biblical God nor Jesus, the Son of God on earth, lie and take sides in wars the way Krishna does. Instead, Krishna's behaviour then sanctions the

idea that strategy and flexibility are inescapable tools of worldly survival. This makes possible a deeper and more ambivalent understanding of morality, beyond the categories of good and evil.<sup>5</sup> A monotheistic God can fail the world, but a polytheistic god who has lived on earth and lied cannot ‘fail’ his devotees in quite the same way.<sup>6</sup>

This could be one of the reasons why representations of the superhero have not really captured the mass imagination in India, where gods provide solutions to the problems of life rather than fighting them on behalf of humans. I would like to stress that I do not want to use Hindu religious beliefs and Indian religious beliefs as substitutes for each other. At the same time, the heroes of comic books in India are usually derivative of American comic books, with bits and pieces from Indian mythology thrown in. Such interesting hybrids are usually comics written in Hindi that bring together suggestions of sensuality with religious motifs and an exaggerated sense of nationalism. Most English-language comics are aimed at children and incorporate ‘general knowledge’, the much-valued commodity of Indian childhood. As a cultural phenomenon, local comic books and animated films struggle to find audiences, while international comic books operate as cultural capital, circulating among a select few.

So then how does Indian culture conceptualise the hero? If one considers the *Ramayana* as the prototype and examines popular Indian cinema and television, the ideal hero is constructed through a network of relationships – the ideal hero is the ideal son, the ideal brother, the ideal husband, the ideal father, the ideal citizen, the ideal king and so on.<sup>7</sup> While the definition of this ideal is flexible and variable, what is interesting is that here one can be a hero without saving the world. And without needing to. The idea of heroism is thereby tied up with being and participating in the world rather than rescuing it. This creates an interesting situation wherein Indian audiences accept superheroes in Hollywood films and through the syndication of American shows, both of which find sizeable Indian audiences. Thus the Batman franchise

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5 I do not, of course, mean this comparison as derogatory (or complimentary!) to any one religion over the other.

6 Krishna’s lies in the *Mahabharat* are arguably ‘for the greater good’, though the multi-layered nature of the epic means that this too can be questioned.

7 In the case of Ram this is debatable because he abandoned his pregnant wife Sita in order to be the ideal king. However, the use of the term ‘puroshottam’, i.e. ‘the best of all men’, for Ram, suggests that he is popularly seen in some contexts as an ideal to be followed.

makes a lot of money in India, while *Ra.One* earns more from merchandising and distribution deals rather than audience footfall. Superhero films made by Mumbai filmmakers usually find few takers.<sup>8</sup>

Iain Thomson says that ‘our heroes help tell us who we are, what we stand for’.<sup>9</sup> To return to *Watchmen*, these heroes help tell of a world in crisis. The crisis, however, is of the western world, and non-western modes of being and imagining speak of different worlds, of different crises and of different heroes.

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8 An exception to this is *Mr India* (1987), which was a successful fantasy superhero film, but it is the only exception to the rule so far. Also, *Mr India* tapped into middle-class frustration with Indian systemic failures in a way that was as much reminiscent of the ‘angry young man’ syndrome in Indian cinema as of superhero narratives.

9 Thomson, ‘Deconstructing the hero’, p 100.