

THE APOCALYPSE: JUSTIFYING THE MODERN VILLAIN?

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ABSTRACT

Our world evolved through civilizations coming together. Every society, community, tribe of this world is founded on the cornerstones of mythology which shapes their primary ideologies. Since times immemorial, 'apocalypse' has been an important part of all the existent mythologies of the world. The Norse talks about 'Ragnarok', Islam has 'the day of resurrection', Christianity has 'apocalypse', and Hinduism has 'pralaya'. These are just a few examples of the belief that at the end of time approaches, the mankind will perish in a powerful storm and give way to a renovated, renewed world. Over the period, this mythological concept has been adapted in literature, films, and almost all mediums of storytelling. In the twenty first century, there have been multiple films and television shows where the villain of the story has used this concept as a way of purifying the world. Whether it will be Ra's Al Ghul bent on destroying the city of Gotham or Guruji in Sacred Games trying to usher in Satayuga by planting a nuclear bomb in Mumbai. The villains of twenty first century have been trying to justify their violence by labelling it as a purification of the society. This paper attempts to study this trend through the study of Marvel's most famous villain, Thanos and Guruji, the newest villain to enter this category. Through the study of these characters, the paper looks into the nihilistic approach of these characters towards the world and attempts to answer whether their villainous acts are justified through mythology and philosophy.

KEYWORDS: *Apocalypse, Villains, Thanos, Guruji, Films, Television*

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INTRODUCTION

Stories are an integral part of our civilizations. Societies, all over the world, have developed on stories which make up the mythologies of the world which eventually give basis to the major religions followed by the humankind. These are basically origin stories. They give a version of the beginning, sustaining, and the end of the world. One begins with the God creates the world in seven days, creating humans in his image, and ending it in fire. The other talks of the world being made up of natural elements, humans being children of gods and goddesses, and the world ending by drowning in rising oceans. These stories might have different versions but they have the same structure; creation, sustenance, and annihilation. The annihilation version of different mythologies is called as eschatology in the study of theology. Eschatology differs from mythology to mythology. '

Each of these versions talks of violent disruption or destruction of the world which is needed for ushering in a new world. In Christianity, The Book of Revelation gives a description of the apocalypse and second coming of Christ. It describes how, on the final day, the world is going to be engulfed in fire and Christ will come, for a second time, riding a

white horse to defeat evil and set up the kingdom of God. In Zoroastrianism, the end of days is referred to as 'renovation'. Their belief is that the third child of Zoroaster, Soshyant, will rid the world of evil and make it pure by burning it in the rivers of molten metal. The sacred texts of Hinduism are the puranas¹, talk of Kalki, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu². He will arrive on a white horse with a flaming sword and will bring 'pralaya'³ upon this earth. He will kill all the people living sinfully. The present world will perish and a new age – the Satyuga⁴ will dawn which will be a time for truth and purity. The story differs, but there's a stark similarity between all of these different accepted versions of eschatology; they all talk of a divine being bringing in the annihilation to cleanse and purify this world.

Over the period of time, just like the rest of the stories of mythology are adapted into films and televisions, the concept of annihilation has also been adapted. In the twenty first century, with streaming mediums such as Netflix and Prime Video, films and series have become the most accessible way to stories. In such an era, our filmmakers have become the primary storytellers and they are inspired by mythology and mythological characters time and again to make them a part of their stories. We now have characters who are deeply influenced by the idea of annihilation and are hell-bent upon bringing destruction and chaos in their respective fictional worlds. These characters have assumed the role of the divine being who will be responsible for 'renovating' the world and bringing peace to it. The only problem is that most of the times, they choose to do this benevolent act through violence, destruction, and chaos which eventually leads to disruption of the worldly order and thrusts upon the 'heroes' the responsibility to save the world.

Some of the most remarkable villains of the last fifty years have been 'apocalyptic' in nature. They have convinced themselves that a manmade calamity or devastation is what is needed to restore order in this world. R'as al Ghul of Christopher Nolan's 'Batman Begins'(2005) is conspiring to wreak havoc in Batman's beloved Gotham City. He cites the reason for this as a step towards renewing this world. Ultron, one of the most difficult nemesis of earth's mightiest superheroes Avengers, wanted to destroy the world using an entire country as a meteor because he wanted to bring the earth to the purest state so that it can be rebuilt. His efforts eventually paved the way for Avengers' deadliest enemy Thanos, whose 'renewal' plans were not restricted to Earth. If we talk about the television series, we can't forget The Night King. He is the greatest threat to George R.R. Martin's Westeros where the Game of Thrones (2011-2019) is being played. The Night King wants to take over the land of Westeros and create perpetual winter there, an endless night so that the evil humans quit fighting and peace falls on the land. His reasons for doing so might be benignant but his strategy is barbarous as it involves killing the living and making an army of the dead. Joining the league in 2019 is Guruji, the divine Godman of Anurag Kashyap's popular television series Sacred Games (2018-2019). An adaptation of Vikram Chandra's novel of the same name, the series has Guruji as its primary villain who plants a nuclear bomb in the city of Mumbai in order to bring the maximum level of destruction as that would usher in Satayuga, the age of truth. Through the paper we will study two of the most important villains of 2019.

Thanos (Avengers: Infinity War, 2018)

In the last decade, Marvel Cinematic Universe took over the world of entertainment by a storm. Characters of Marvel Comics were adapted on films and given new storylines. Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Black Widow, and Hulk came

¹ The scriptures of Hindus which gives the directives to live the ideal life.

² One of the holy trinity of Hindus. Vishnu is supposed to be the caretaker of the world.

³ A storm which will devour the whole world marking the end of time.

⁴ One of the four Yugas (eras). It is the era of truth and enlightenment.

out of the comic book pages and ruled the silver screen with their amazing superhero skills and will to save the world from evil alien threats. These superheroes came together to be known as Avengers who are made into a team to fight the external and internal threats that the earth has to face earning them the accolade of earth's mightiest heroes. The Avengers fight their way through enemies like Loki and Ultron only to find themselves facing Thanos, the mad Titan. Thanos is the mightiest and deadliest enemy the Avengers have to face. Thanos is on a crusade to find the six infinity stones which will make him invincible. The only force standing between him and the success of his mission are the Avengers and he won't stop at anything.

Thanos, as a character, is introduced to us in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). He is a member of the race Eternals who belongs to Titan, one of the moons of Saturn. He possesses superhuman strength, speed, and agility. He is able to perform telekinesis and is a fantastic scientist. He is trained in the arts of warfare and is a master strategist. All of these strengths combine into making one exceptionally talented being. When Titan is destroyed because of overuse of resources, Thanos takes it upon himself to restore the balance of nature and beings in the universe. To do so, he decides to find six infinity stones; Power, Reality, Space, Soul, Mind, and Time. The six stones together makes the wielder master of the universe. So much so that with a snap of your fingers you can decide the past, present, and the future of the entire universe.

According to the comics, as an adolescent Thanos was particularly attracted towards the concept of nihilism which led to his fascination towards 'death'. Later on, he was enamoured by Death (the personified form of the abstract entity). To appease her, Thanos killed his offspring and was ready to sacrifice the whole universe to win her over. The cinematic universe describes his agenda to be different. Thanos, in the movies, is disillusioned after his home Titan is destroyed. To prevent the rest of the universe from meeting a similar fate, Thanos decides to retrieve all the six infinity stones so that he gains the power to destroy half of it. He believes that if he manages to do this, he will be able to restore the order of the universe.

Gamora, his adoptive daughter, questions his actions and demands answers for wiping out half of her race on her home planet. To this Thanos answers that through his actions he brought prosperity and happiness to her home planet.

"Going to bed hungry. Scrounging for scraps. Your planet was on the brink of collapse. I was the one who stopped that. You know what's happened since then? The children born have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies. It's a paradise." (Feige, 2018)

This is the justification he gives to his adoptive daughter for murdering her family, friends, and her entire kin. He believes that all he is doing is for the greater good and he is convinced of it to the extent that to complete this insane mission, he doesn't hesitate to sacrifice his daughter. In order to retrieve the soul stone, one is required to sacrifice a loved one and Thanos agrees to do it instead of abandoning the mission. The question arises that how much is Thanos justified in doing this? An article in *Forbes* by Paul Tassi gives us an insight into the flaws of Thanos' plan.

"If his goal is to make society sustainable, can't he use the power of the Infinity Gauntlet to make that happen in a less horrific way? Can't he snap his fingers and instead of murdering trillions, produce food and water, cure diseases, and create new utopian planets for people to live on to avoid overcrowding? If the point is that the gauntlet makes him God with all six stones, can't he be the benevolent overlord he's supposedly trying to be rather than just..murdering people? With unlimited power, there should be more than one half-thought-through solution to this problem he's trying to address." (Tassi et.al)

Thanos, after gaining five stones, finally reaches the Earth to gain the final stone; mind stone. The Mind stone powers Vision, an android who is a part of the team of Avengers. Vision pleads to Wanda who has the power of telekinesis and can destroy the stone to destroy it before Thanos can lay his hands on it. Wanda does so as Thanos watches. For a moment, the viewers believe that the Avengers might be successful after all. But, Thanos reverses the whole event with the power of the Time stone. This time, he retrieves the Mind stone himself thereby killing Vision as Wanda and the rest of the Avengers watch helplessly. He later taunts the Avengers when he is asked what fun he derives by murdering people?

"Fun isn't something one considers when balancing the universe, but this..does put a smile on my face." (Feige, 2018)

This evil attitude of his is what makes him a villain. None of his reasons justify his actions because his attitude says that he enjoys murder and annihilation is his primary goal. He believes he is saving the universe but the power corrupts him.

"I know what it's like to lose. To feel so desperately that you're right, yet to fail nonetheless. Dread it. Run from it. Destiny still arrives. Or should I say, I have." (Feige, 2018)

Thanos has a personality highly reminiscent of an actual twentieth century villain. Adolf Hitler, the man who brought the greatest catastrophe on the planet in the form of World War II also believed that he was doing everything for the greater good of his country. He decided to exterminate an entire race of people just because he believed that he has been given the responsibility of cleansing his nation. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's autobiography, he says,

"All who are not of a good race are chaff." (Hitler, 1939). He goes on to talk about the elimination of Jews as a "necessary and bloody process" (Hitler, 1939). The historians believe that this anti-semitic sentiment was born out of the fact that the Jews were the most successful race in Europe at that point of time. They were rich and were doing well in the trade world which gave birth to a wave of general hatred towards them. Hitler believed that if he manages to exterminate this race, he would be able to provide a better environment to the people of the 'superior' Aryan race.

Both Hitler and Thanos believe that they are charged with the responsibility of restoring order in their respective worlds and death and destruction is the only way to do it. Just like Christ or Kalki, they need to bring in a wave of devastation in order for the world to be cleansed and purified. The living generations need to die for the coming generations to live a better life in a better world. This is what the stories tell them and they use these prophetic stories to justify their heinous crimes.

Guruji (Sacred Games, 2019)

With internet being accessible to almost everyone now, online streaming is the way to entertain. It allows one the luxury of watching movies and shows of one's choice anywhere and anytime. Netflix is the giant of online streaming. Over the last five years, it has made shows and movies of all languages and countries accessible to people all over the world redefining globalisation. It has provided a platform to the filmmakers who want to create a content different from the mainstream cinema and television. In a country like India, where media content is heavily censored given the regional, religious, and cultural sentiments, it becomes a challenging task for filmmakers who want to create shows which involve violence, nudity, crassness, and brutal realities of the world. For such filmmakers, platforms like Netflix are a boon. The streaming sites allow one to watch the shows and movies uncensored.

One of the Indian shows, which took the world of online streaming by a storm was Sacred Games. An adaptation of Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel by the same name, Sacred Games was produced by Netflix and directed by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane. The two directors are known to the Bollywood world as the master storytellers of dark and intense stories.

Sacred Games is a world describing the dark underbelly of crime, politics, and espionage of modern India. There are two parallel narratives; Gaitonde's and Sartaj's. Ganesh Gaitonde is a forgotten gangster who ruled the underworld of Mumbai in the 90's. Sartaj Singh is a young police officer who finds himself constantly trapped between a choice of doing what is right and what is right for him. Gaitonde surfaces in Mumbai after some twenty years and contacts Sartaj to warn him of a conspiracy which will culminate in a mass nuclear disaster. The viewers are introduced to Guruji in season 1 of the show as the third man who helped Gaitonde in his survival and whom he considers as *Baap*⁵. Season 2 gives us a proper introduction of the man. Guruji is a self proclaimed teacher and philosopher who runs *ashrams*⁶ to help people cope with their lost selves. He is a godman who preaches the philosophy of detachment from desire. It is hinted that he has the power to see the future and through this he earns the affection of his followers who believe that he will show them the path to salvation. He targets Gaitonde and rescues him when he is stuck in his worst crisis. He gives Gaitonde a new purpose in life and makes him realise that there is another way to live which will lead to peace and calm. Gaitonde develops a strange affection towards Guruji and believes that he is being guided towards light from a world of darkness. The viewer is also made to believe the same thing until we discover the background of Guruji.

"*Hamara janm nahi hua tha, hum avtarit hue the...Hume gehra ehसाas hota tha ki hamara janm samay ki disha palatne ke liye hua tha..hume kalyug ka sanhaar karna hai. Hume Satyug laana hai.*" (I wasn't born, I was incarnated. I always felt that I have been born to change the winds of time. I have to end Kalyuga. I have to bring Satyuga.) (Motwane, 2019).

Guruji tells all of this to Gaitonde through his book 'kaalgrantha'⁷ which leads Gaitonde to realise what Guruji is planning.

His words clearly show that Guruji believes himself to be an incarnation reminding the viewers of the puranic Kalki. He believes himself responsible for ushering in Satayuga, the age of enlightenment by destroying Kaliyuga, the age of darkness. Guruji is eventually killed by Gaitonde but that doesn't foil Guruji's plans. He entrusts his ardent followers Batya and Malcolm to carry on with the responsibility of planting the nuclear bomb with the help of an international terrorist organisation.

Guruji is the ideal apocalyptic villain who believes that 'pralaya' is necessary to end this 'taamsik'⁸ age and begin a fresh age of truth and enlightenment. In a behind the scenes video of the show, Pankaj Tripathi, the actor who essays the role described the character of Guruji as "a tsunami building under the ocean whose impact you cannot fathom". Inspired entirely by the Hindu version of eschatology, Guruji is a maniac bent upon bringing nuclear devastation on the city of Mumbai which he believes to be the most corrupted and polluted city of the modern India.

⁵ Literally translating to 'father'. Here, a father like figure or a Godfather.

⁶ Spiritual institutes.

⁷ The epic of time.

⁸ Depraved

CONCLUSIONS

In literature, villain is essentially synonymous with antagonist. Someone who creates barriers in the smooth character arc of the protagonist. He/She is someone who is wrong as compared to the right of the protagonist. In literature, we also find the lines between the protagonist and the antagonist blurring in a lot of texts. Milton's *Paradise Lost* celebrates its antagonist Satan. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is an eponymous novel which keeps the evil Count Dracula in the centre. Similarly, some of our iconic films celebrate villains. *Star Wars* is remembered for Darth Vader. Nolan's *The Dark Knight* doesn't belong to its hero Batman. It belongs to Joker, the prime antagonist. All of these characters are evil and vicious with a twisted mindset but the readers or the viewers cannot bring to hate them. The reason behind this is that the justification which their storytellers give for their actions earns sympathy. They are more of anti-heroes than villains. Villains like Thanos and Guruji do not fall in this category though. They fall under the category of psychopathic apocalyptic villains who believe that through their actions they will bring peace to the world. This is the newest trend which is being followed in the twenty first century inspired by various versions of eschatology.

The mythologists do not believe that Christ coming for a second time or Kalki arriving on a white horse are villains because these characters are parts of established canons and belief systems of the world. Also, the sacred texts describe these characters killing the sinful and salvaging the good. Characters like Thanos and Guruji are not doing either. They are not picking out the evil from the masses and killing them. Instead, they are bent upon bringing mass destruction which will result in murder of innocents. This is no benevolence but sheer terrorism. This is why the viewer doesn't feel any sympathy for the characters.

To conclude, we can see how our storytellers have now started giving their villains larger than life motives. The intentions of these villains are altruistic but their altruism is misguided and will bring only death and devastation to the universe.

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