



Crossing the Threshold: Myth, Transformation and the Indian Cinematic Hero

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Abstract— Most mythologies unfold a single recurrent pattern: transformation in the life of the hero, who sets out for an adventure and goes through the stages of crisis, ordeal, and victory. In Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), he theorised this narrative structure and named it the monomyth or the hero's journey. When this template is used for films – especially in Hindi, Tamil, or Malayalam cinema – the filmmakers do not replicate Campbell's Western-derived model but reinterpret the character's journey in different cultural, social, and political contexts. In Indian cinema, the central character, or the hero/heroine, is not a typical instance of the monomyth element but an individual who is in search of identity, an outsider challenging social and patriarchal structures, or an ordinary person confronting extraordinary circumstances. In contrast with the Western overemphasis on individualism, the hero of Indian cinema may even be a collective initiative or a community. Therefore, the article rereads the different levels of development – departure, crisis, trials, and transformation – while also questioning whether this theory can explain culturally specific narratives.

Keywords— Monomyth, Hero's Journey, Joseph Campbell, Indian Cinema- Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Archetype, Transformation, Identity, Masculinity, Female Heroism, Narrative Theory.



Historically, myth is one of humanity's oldest methods for organising the experience of being human. For this reason, many different stories often reflect similar patterns, such as the departure from the comfort place, struggles for existence, transformation of the hero, and his return home. Society smoothly blends this archetype not only in myths but also in folklore, literature, and cinema to satisfy its demands. Cinema is one form of media that captures the complexities of identity, culture, and experience. In that sense, it can be said that cinema is a modern mythology. While the traditional mythologies articulate the stories through oral or written form, cinema opens a world of visualisation, in which people experience the social realities, the hero's struggles in life, or the complexities and uncertainty in his ordinary life. In contemporary cinema, the hero is not a person who perfectly embodies all the noble characteristics. Instead, he is a common person who has all the pitfalls of a real human being. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues that myth is a cultural system of meaning. When cinema adopts this

template, it doesn't showcase the stories of people; it just transfers the cultural values.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) mainly concerns the hero's journey from departure to return. In total, he explicates 17 stages, including Call to Adventure, Supernatural Aid, Crossing the First Threshold, Belly of the Whale, Road of Trials, Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, Ultimate Boon, Refusal of Return, Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, Crossing of the Return Threshold, Master of Two Worlds, and Freedom to Live. This article, though, consolidates these 17 stages into just three movements: departure, initiation, and return. It is a debatable question, however, whether Campbell's heroic patterns are enough to explain non-Western, Indian cinematic narratives.

Indian cinema is an umbrella term referring to the mixed cinemas from a number of different states. Instead of adhering to the romantic aspects of life, Indian cinema tends to unravel the social realities of Indian society. Indian

society, however, cannot be treated as one homogeneous tradition, as each region might differ considerably from another in terms of language, regional culture, caste, class, gender, family structures, politics, religion, and urban/rural experience. In many ways, Indian cinema skilfully employs the structures recognisable within Campbell's monomyth. However, beyond the confines of this structure, Indian cinema quietly appears to be the mirror of one's regionally specific understanding of family, community, and masculinity. Within the frame of Indian air, the hero's transformation is frequently rooted in family and community, whereas Western portrayals of the hero tend to be much more individualistic.

Despite these differences, the present article employs Joseph Campbell's monomyth as the central concept. According to him, the hero's journey breaks down into three broad stages. In the first stage, the hero departs from the ordinary world for an adventurous life. There, he faces a crisis or refusal, receives supernatural aid, and crosses the threshold. In the second stage, referred to as initiation, he undergoes tests, encounters allies and enemies, endures an ordeal, witnesses a revelation that transforms his individuality, and receives rewards. In the third stage, known as return, the hero decides to go back to his home after having gone through a transformation; eventually, his return is not empty-handed but is accompanied by the elixir of life or some other prized item.

In *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Christopher Vogler adapts the concept for modern screenwriting and puts forward a more practical cinematic framework. According to him, the journey of the hero can be organized into the following stages: Ordinary World, Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor, Crossing the Threshold, Tests, Allies and Enemies, Approach to the Inmost Cave, Ordeal, Reward, The Road Back, Resurrection, and Return with the Elixir. Therefore, the heroes of Indian cinema experience ordinary life, disruption, journey, trials, crisis, transformation, and return.

In *The Heroine's Journey*, Maureen Murdock called into question the universality of Campbell's gender-specific account of the masculine hero by revealing a number of traits unique to the feminine heroine's story. Some of the most notable notions in women's narratives include separation from feminine identity, identification with masculine values, success, crisis, descent, healing, and integration. Therefore, the masculine model of the hero's journey is not sufficient to articulate the stories of all female protagonists in Indian cinema.

Other traditional concepts in Western storytelling include the functions and character roles discovered by Vladimir Propp. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp identified recurring functions and character roles in Russian

folktales, such as the hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, princess, and false hero, which can be compared to Campbell's own findings. In addition, Campbell's concept of the monomyth strongly influenced Carl Jung's archetypes. For example, Jung argued that the hero, shadow, mentor, wise old man, trickster, and anima or animus are all examples of shared patterns of identity held in common across many cultures and time periods.

Applying the mythological hero to the cinematic hero requires one to shift one's focus from abstract traditional concepts to concrete social realities. The heroes in visual texts do not possess any supernatural abilities. Instead, they confront everyday problems, such as injustice, family conflict, social prejudice, political oppression, psychological crisis, love, displacement, poverty, and class or caste structures. Therefore, they are not mythological monsters or mythical heroes, but victims of modern obstacles and ordinary protagonists who struggle against corrupt and oppressive structures.

This theoretical concept finds a vivid contemporary canvas in Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001), which visually externalises the complexities of this concept. Bhuvan, the central character in the film, is not the one who embodies heroism; rather, the entire village changes from its ordinary world to embark on a journey of sorts. The introduction of drought, poverty, agriculture, and waiting for the rain establishes an ordinary village, in which the villagers' collective condition forces them to live under colonial economic pressure. Bhuvan's acceptance of the British challenge, though an individual call, has consequences that fall upon the entire village. Collectively facing the same challenge, they gradually work together as a team.

Bhuvan's refusal to apologise is a crucial moment in the story, because the world of cricket and British culture was unfamiliar. Although the cricket field is the threshold, Bhuvan takes responsibility for the consequences of accepting a major change. Elizabeth's role can be read as a mentor who taught villagers the rules of cricket. The scene of Kachra's entry into the cricket team is another example of the hero's transformation, because to achieve this, Bhuvan had to overcome the internal social division, along with the colonial domination. Lakha's betrayal and return to the team's unity is a very strong scene for the ordeal. The climax scene represents the transformation of the entire village. They are no longer an inexperienced people but stand as a united people coordinated for the victory. Hence, the film *Lagaan* is not about the journey of an individual but the journey of a whole community of villagers, which complicates the idea of the monomyth as it has been conceptualized in the individualistic West.

Pariyerum Perumal (2018) is one of the Tamil cinema films that is particularly rich in material, including caste, class, political power, masculinity, family, rural identity, and social justice. The opening scene establishes the rural world of Pariyan and his friends. This is followed by the brutal killing of Pariyan's dog Karuppi, which functions as a symbolic double of the protagonist. The 'ordinary world' of Pariyan is not innocent or harmonious but is instead structured by caste hierarchy, spatial segregation, humiliation, and restriction of common resources. Unlike a conventional path, the hero's journey in this film starts from a world that is already oppressive rather than peaceful.

Education in law college functions as Pariyan's call to adventure, for it opens a new world beyond the social restrictions he grew up with. However, college is a new cultural space rather than a mere physical space. There were different languages, class codes, academic expectations, social hierarchies, and caste identities, proving that rigidly defined social structure had not disappeared from there after all. Pariyan's early trial was to overcome the barrier of the English language. Jyothi Mahalakshmi's (Jo) role can be read as a companion, although the character does not fit the traditional "mentor". The film opens the world of social exclusion, intimidation, and physical violence – not as one isolated act but as a repeated structure of everyday experience. The ordeal and assault faced by Pariyan as a result of his visit to Jo's house is an enforcement of his social position assigned to him by caste. Violence does not end but continues as different trials, such as when he was beaten because of a college conflict, leading him to suspect that the violence had been organised against him. Education becomes a form of resistance, which enables him to transition from a state of vulnerability to one of determination and to reclaim his father's identity and dignity when his father becomes a victim of discrimination. Pariyan's confrontation with Jo's father in the final scene is a much more sophisticated form of resistance. Pariyan says that nothing will change, as long as the social expectations remain unchanged. In conclusion, the film does not portray a triumphant journey of the hero but rather the transformation from victim to conscious subject. The film showcases the journey of an individual through humiliations and oppressions, instead of the adventures and victorious battles one might expect in a Western myth.

Malayalam cinema, especially the film *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), also offers protagonists who are less conventionally heroic. They are flawed individuals, ordinary workers, family members, emotionally conflicted people, and morally ambiguous characters. The journey and transformation of four brothers – Saji, Bonny, Bobby and Franky – is emotional and relational rather than geographical. The film challenges Campbell's

individualistic hero, in the sense that from the beginning of the film, the heroes are portrayed as isolated, in conflict with each other, and in strained relationships, but this changes precisely when they develop an emotional recognition for one another and work on family formation. Their journey gradually produces a different form of masculinity based on care, vulnerability, cooperation, and concern for family in the ordinary world, in contrast with the Western emphasis on the masculine hero's physical strength, fighting skills, tolerance of pain, and stoic lack of emotions.

The house itself is symbolic. Instead of being a secure domestic space, it resembles a neglected, unfinished, and socially marginalized space. Saji is emotionally damaged, irresponsible, and dependent on alcohol. Bonny is largely withdrawn and unable to communicate normally, because he is both deaf and mute. Bobby is emotionally detached but looking for a romantic connection. Franky is the youngest and most observant, since he is caught between the older brothers. Therefore, their ordinary world is complicated from the start by emotional isolation.

Eventually, after the brothers are forced to acknowledge that they need each other, *Kumbalangi Nights* begins to reverse conventional masculine behaviour. Instead of relying on strength, they find that silence enables them to resist domination. When Saji brings Sathi, Vijay's widow, and her child into the brothers' home, this is a major transformation of the domestic space. The house that initially functioned as a symbol of neglect, isolation, and male dysfunction starts to become a space of care, companionship, and family. The counter-heroic masculinity of Shammi's family model is defined by order, control, and patriarchal authority, whereas the Kumbalangi brothers' emerging family stands for accommodation, care, and acceptance. The film's "villain" is not simply a bad individual but instead represents the hegemonic masculinity of authority, control, respectability, possession, and surveillance. Through care, vulnerability, cooperation, and emotional attachment, the brothers gradually become emotionally involved in Bobby's situation. This means that male emotional dependence is no longer presented as a sign of weakness. This is exactly where the four brothers' journeys converge. Earlier, Saji was isolated, Bonny was withdrawn, Bobby was emotionally detached, and Franky held a marginal role within the family. Later, Saji, Bonny, Bobby, and Franky stand as a collective unit. Hence, the film is a collective hero's journey, rather than an individual one.

The films demonstrate recognisable patterns of the Hero's Journey, but the journey is culturally transformed through being situated in a non-Western context. Indian cinematic heroism frequently involves self, family, community, and society, rather than simply narrate a single

individual's adventure and victory. The monomyth should therefore be understood not as a fixed universal formula but as a flexible interpretive framework that becomes culturally meaningful when adapted to particular historical and social contexts.

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