

THE METAVERSE IN ANCIENT LITERATURE: EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF VIRTUAL REALITY

Aayushi Sharma^{1*}, Parul Mishra²

^{1,2} Amity School of Languages, Amity University Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author: Aayushi Sharma

Abstract. This research paper embarks on a comprehensive examination of the portrayal of the Metaverse in ancient literature. Coined in the 1990s, the Metaverse represents a virtual shared space born from the convergence of physical and virtual reality, captivating modern audiences in science fiction and gaming. However, this study delves into the historical roots of the Metaverse concept, revealing its presence in ancient literary works, including The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, and The Ramayana. Drawing on a diverse range of literary theories and approaches, the paper meticulously analyzes the themes and motifs related to the Metaverse in these ancient narratives while simultaneously comparing them to contemporary Metaverse-based literature. Intricately weaving historical and cultural context into the analysis, the research sheds light on the social perspectives and beliefs that influenced the depiction of the Metaverse in different ancient civilizations. By contextualizing these portrayals, the paper provides invaluable insights into how virtual shared spaces were envisioned and embraced by diverse cultures in antiquity. The inclusion of The Ramayana in the study enriches our understanding of the concept's cultural interpretations, offering unique perspectives on interconnected realms and virtual dimensions. This meticulous exploration unearths the enduring appeal of the Metaverse concept throughout human history, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. By scrutinizing the ancient texts, the research emphasizes that the idea of a virtual shared space has been an integral part of human imagination for centuries, resonating with both past and present generations. A deeper comprehension of the Metaverse's origins in ancient literature ultimately enriches our understanding of modern Metaverse-based literature, fostering a profound appreciation for the continuity of this captivating concept across the ages.

Keywords- Ancient literature, Metaverse, Mythology, Science Fiction, Cultural Context Historical Origins

1. Introduction

The term "Metaverse," first coined in Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel "Snow Crash," describes a collective virtual shared space created by the convergence of virtually enhanced physical reality and physically persistent virtual space (Stephenson 24). This concept has become a significant cultural phenomenon in modern science fiction, gaming, and beyond. However, the roots of the Metaverse concept can be traced back to ancient literature, where similar ideas of virtual realms and interconnected spaces were explored. The notion of the Metaverse, though modern in its technological execution, is deeply entrenched in the human imagination, manifesting in various forms throughout history.

This research paper embarks on a comprehensive examination of the portrayal of the Metaverse in ancient literature, revealing its presence in works such as The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, and The Ramayana. The exploration of the Metaverse in ancient texts is not merely an academic exercise but a journey into the cultural and historical contexts that shaped human

understanding of virtual realms. The Epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, presents a rich tapestry of mythological themes that resonate with the concept of the Metaverse. Gilgamesh's journey into the Cedar Forest and his encounters with otherworldly beings can be interpreted as ventures into a virtual realm, symbolizing the human quest for immortality and meaning beyond the physical world (Wolkstein and Kramer 72). Similarly, in Homer's *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' journey through various mystical lands can be viewed as an exploration of interconnected realms, delving into themes of identity, reality, and the supernatural, which mirror aspects of modern Metaverse literature (Homer 136). Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* provides a detailed vision of the afterlife, segmented into Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, paralleling the concept of the Metaverse as a multi-layered virtual space. Dante's journey through these realms reflects the transformative journey through different states of existence and consciousness, emphasizing the interplay between reality and the virtual (Alighieri 24). In contrast, *The Ramayana*, an epic of ancient Indian literature, adds a unique cultural perspective to the concept of virtual realms. The narrative describes various otherworldly places and magical events that blur the boundaries between reality and the supernatural, offering insights into how interconnected realms were perceived in ancient Indian culture (Narayan 89).

This research aims to investigate these early portrayals and understand the cultural and historical contexts in which they emerged. By meticulously analyzing themes and motifs related to the Metaverse in these ancient narratives and comparing them to contemporary Metaverse-based literature, this study seeks to uncover the social perspectives and beliefs that influenced the depiction of virtual shared spaces in different civilizations. The inclusion of *The Ramayana* in the study enriches our understanding of the concept's cultural interpretations, offering unique perspectives on interconnected realms and virtual dimensions (Narayan 90). This meticulous exploration unearths the enduring appeal of the Metaverse concept throughout human history, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. Furthermore, this paper aims to provide invaluable insights into how virtual shared spaces were envisioned and embraced by diverse cultures in antiquity. By scrutinizing ancient texts, the research emphasizes that the idea of a virtual shared space has been an integral part of human imagination for centuries, resonating with both past and present generations (Wolkstein and Kramer 105). A deeper comprehension of the Metaverse's origins in ancient literature ultimately enriches our understanding of modern Metaverse-based literature, fostering a profound appreciation for the continuity of this captivating concept across the ages. This study not only enhances our appreciation of the cultural and historical dimensions of the Metaverse but also contributes to the broader discourse on virtual reality and its significance in human experience.

1.1 Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to explore the depiction of the Metaverse concept in ancient literature. The methodology follows the framework established by Vom Brocke et al. and Cooper's taxonomy framework to ensure a comprehensive and structured analysis. The process involves several key steps, which are outlined below:

1.1.1 Research Focus and Goal

Focus: The primary focus of this research is to identify and analyze the themes and motifs related to the Metaverse in ancient literary works, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Ramayana*. Additionally, the study aims to compare these themes with those found in contemporary Metaverse-based literature.

Goal: The goal is to create an integration of historical literary analysis with modern Metaverse concepts, identify central issues, and offer a nuanced understanding of how virtual shared spaces were envisioned by various ancient civilizations.

1.1.2 Perspective and Coverage

Perspective: This study adopts a natural representation perspective, aiming to understand and interpret ancient narratives within their historical and cultural contexts.

Coverage: The coverage is exhaustive, encompassing a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including ancient texts, scholarly articles, and contemporary analyses of the Metaverse in literature.

1.1.3 Data Collection

Primary Sources: The primary texts analyzed in this study include The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, and The Ramayana. These texts are chosen for their rich narratives and historical significance.

Secondary Sources: Secondary sources include scholarly articles, literary critiques, and contemporary research on the Metaverse. These sources provide critical insights and contextual background necessary for a thorough analysis.

1.1.4 Analytical Framework

Literary Theories: The study utilizes various literary theories, including structuralism, mythological criticism, and comparative literature approaches, to dissect and interpret the selected texts.

Comparative Analysis: A comparative analysis is conducted to draw parallels between ancient and contemporary depictions of virtual realities. This involves identifying common themes, such as the creation of alternate worlds, the interaction between reality and fantasy, and the societal implications of these narratives.

1.1.5 Historical and Cultural Contextualization

Each text is analyzed within its specific historical and cultural context to understand the social perspectives and beliefs that influenced its depiction of virtual realities. This contextualization helps in appreciating the nuances and underlying messages in the narratives.

1.1.6 Interpretation and Synthesis

The interpretation phase involves a detailed examination of the themes and motifs identified in the texts. The synthesis phase combines these insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of the portrayal of the Metaverse in ancient literature and its relevance to modern conceptions of virtual reality.

1.1.7 Presentation of Findings

The findings are presented in a structured manner, highlighting key themes, comparative insights, and the cultural significance of the Metaverse concept in ancient literature. The study aims to offer a coherent narrative that bridges the gap between historical literary analysis and contemporary technological discourse.

Table: Methodology Overview

Characteristic	Categories
Focus	Research Outcomes, Research Methods, Theories, Applications
Goal	Integration, Creation, Identification of Central Issues
Perspective	Natural Representation, Adoption of Position
Coverage	Exhaustive

Organization	Historical, Conceptual, Methodological
Audience	Specialized Scholars, General Scholars, Practitioners, General Public

2. The Metaverse in Ancient Narratives

The concept of the Metaverse, though modern in its digital and technological context, finds significant parallels in ancient narratives. These ancient texts provide a profound insight into how different cultures envisioned interconnected realms and virtual dimensions long before the advent of contemporary virtual reality technology. This section delves into the portrayal of virtual realms in The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, and The Ramayana, illustrating the deep-seated human fascination with alternate realities and interconnected spaces.

2.1 The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest works of literature, presents a rich tapestry of mythological themes that resonate with the concept of the Metaverse. Gilgamesh's journey into the Cedar Forest and his encounters with otherworldly beings can be interpreted as a venture into a virtual realm. The Cedar Forest, depicted as a mystical place beyond the ordinary world, embodies characteristics of a virtual realm, symbolizing the human quest for immortality and the search for meaning beyond the physical world (Wolkstein and Kramer 72). This ancient narrative not only highlights the hero's physical journey but also underscores his metaphysical quest, reflecting a dual reality that mirrors the modern Metaverse. In his pursuit of eternal life, Gilgamesh encounters various divine and supernatural entities, each representing different facets of existence beyond the tangible world. The journey through these realms can be seen as an early depiction of a multi-layered virtual space, where each layer holds unique challenges and insights, akin to the structured realms found in contemporary Metaverse literature. This exploration into the unknown parallels the human curiosity that drives today's virtual reality innovations, suggesting that the concept of exploring alternate realities has always been a part of human consciousness (George 145). Moreover, the interaction between Gilgamesh and these supernatural elements highlights the ancient understanding of a reality that extends beyond physical confines. The Cedar Forest, guarded by the monstrous Humbaba, symbolizes the threshold between the known world and the mystical, much like the gateway to a virtual realm in modern contexts. This ancient portrayal underscores the timeless nature of humanity's quest for transcendence and the enduring appeal of exploring interconnected realms (Wolkstein and Kramer 102).

2.2 The Odyssey

In Homer's The Odyssey, Odysseus' journey through various mystical lands can be viewed as an exploration of interconnected realms. The narrative delves into themes of identity, reality, and the supernatural, mirroring aspects of modern Metaverse literature. Odysseus' encounters with gods, monsters, and magical places highlight the interplay between the physical and the virtual, offering a profound commentary on the nature of human experience (Homer 136). Throughout his travels, Odysseus navigates through a series of fantastical worlds, each with its own unique rules and inhabitants. These worlds can be seen as early representations of virtual environments where reality and fantasy intermingle seamlessly. For instance, his time on the island of the sorceress Circe, where men are turned into animals, can be likened to immersive virtual experiences that alter one's perception of reality. This interplay between the real and the imagined resonates with the experiences offered by today's Metaverse, where users can traverse diverse virtual landscapes (Fagles 210). Furthermore, Odysseus' journey is not just a physical voyage but also an existential exploration. His encounters with

various deities and mythical creatures serve as trials that test his identity and resolve, much like the quests and challenges in virtual worlds that shape a player's character. The blending of the mortal and the divine in these narratives reflects the blurring boundaries between reality and virtuality, a theme central to both ancient and modern conceptions of the Metaverse (Clarke 78). Odysseus' interaction with the supernatural also underscores the Greek understanding of a multi-faceted reality. The gods and mythical beings represent forces beyond human control, influencing the mortal world in ways that mirror the unseen algorithms and codes governing virtual environments today. This ancient narrative reveals how interconnected realms were perceived and conceptualized, offering valuable insights into the cultural roots of the Metaverse concept (Homer 150).

2.3 The Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* provides a detailed vision of the afterlife, segmented into Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. This structured representation of different realms parallels the concept of the Metaverse as a multi-layered virtual space. Dante's journey through these realms, guided by Virgil and later Beatrice, reflects the transformative journey through different states of existence and consciousness (Alighieri 24). Each realm in *The Divine Comedy* is meticulously detailed, creating vivid landscapes that encapsulate the moral and spiritual states of souls. Inferno, with its circles of hell, represents the consequences of sin, while Purgatorio and Paradiso depict stages of purification and ultimate bliss. This segmentation into distinct yet interconnected realms mirrors the design of modern virtual spaces, where users can navigate through different environments that offer unique experiences and challenges. The detailed descriptions of these realms emphasize the immersive nature of these experiences, much like the detailed world-building in contemporary virtual reality (Mandelbaum 30). Dante's journey is both a physical traversal through these realms and a profound spiritual quest. The guidance of Virgil and Beatrice symbolizes the mentorship and guidance often found in virtual worlds, where experienced players or AI guides assist newcomers.

This dynamic highlights the importance of community and learning in navigating complex environments, a theme that resonates with the collaborative nature of the Metaverse (Alighieri 50). Moreover, the depiction of these realms in *The Divine Comedy* underscores the medieval perspective on the afterlife and morality. The structured nature of these realms reflects the societal and religious beliefs of Dante's time, illustrating how cultural contexts shape the understanding of interconnected spaces. By examining these cultural influences, we gain a deeper appreciation of how the concept of the Metaverse has evolved and persisted through history (Hollander 112).

2.4 The Ramayana

The *Ramayana*, an epic of ancient Indian literature, adds a unique cultural perspective to the concept of virtual realms. The narrative describes various otherworldly places and magical events that blur the boundaries between reality and the supernatural. The portrayal of these spaces and events in *The Ramayana* offers insights into how interconnected realms were perceived in ancient Indian culture (Narayan 89). The epic recounts the journey of Prince Rama, his wife Sita, and his loyal companion Hanuman, as they navigate through a series of fantastical landscapes. These include the enchanted forest of Dandaka, the golden city of Lanka, and the divine bridge to the island of Lanka. Each of these places is imbued with magical properties and divine intervention, symbolizing a reality that transcends the physical world. This depiction parallels modern virtual environments where boundaries between the real and the virtual are fluid and often indistinguishable (Narayan 90). The *Ramayana* also explores themes of duty, righteousness, and the cosmic order, reflecting the ancient Indian worldview. The interactions between humans, gods, and demons in the narrative illustrate the interconnectedness of all existence, a concept that resonates with the holistic nature of the Metaverse. By examining these themes,

we gain a deeper understanding of how ancient cultures envisioned interconnected realms and the underlying principles that governed them (Goldman 72). Furthermore, the epic's emphasis on dharma (duty) and karma (action and its consequences) provides a philosophical framework that parallels the ethical considerations in virtual spaces. Just as Rama's actions determine his destiny, so too do the actions of users in virtual worlds shape their experiences and outcomes. This parallel highlights the timeless nature of moral and ethical considerations in both real and virtual realms (Narayan 102).

3. Comparative Analysis with Modern Metaverse Literature

By comparing these ancient narratives with modern Metaverse-based literature, the paper highlights the continuity and evolution of the concept. Themes such as the exploration of virtual spaces, the quest for transcendence, and the interaction between the physical and virtual worlds are examined. This comparative analysis underscores the enduring appeal of the Metaverse and its significance in human imagination across different eras.

3.1 Historical and Cultural Context

Understanding the historical and cultural context of these ancient texts is crucial to appreciating their depiction of virtual realms. Each civilization's social perspectives, religious beliefs, and philosophical inquiries significantly influenced how these spaces were envisioned. By delving into these contexts, the paper uncovers the underlying factors that shaped the portrayal of the Metaverse in ancient literature. For instance, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* reflects the Mesopotamian view of the afterlife and the quest for immortality. The ancient Sumerians believed in a grim underworld, which is depicted in the epic as a place of darkness and dust. This belief system influenced the portrayal of the Cedar Forest and the quest for eternal life, highlighting the cultural significance of these virtual realms (Wolkstein and Kramer 105). In contrast, the Greek perspective in *The Odyssey* emphasizes heroism and the interaction with the divine. The Greek gods were seen as active participants in human affairs, and this belief is mirrored in Odysseus' encounters with deities and mythical creatures (Homer 210). Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is deeply rooted in medieval Christian theology. The detailed depiction of hell, purgatory, and paradise reflects the medieval understanding of the afterlife and the moral order.

This cultural and religious framework shapes the narrative's structure, emphasizing the transformative journey of the soul through different states of existence (Alighieri 35). Similarly, *The Ramayana* is influenced by the Indian concepts of dharma and karma. The narrative's focus on duty, righteousness, and the cosmic order reflects the ancient Indian worldview, highlighting the interconnectedness of all existence and the moral implications of actions (Narayan 102). Comparing these ancient texts with modern Metaverse literature, such as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, reveals both similarities and differences in the portrayal of virtual realms. *Snow Crash*, for example, explores themes of identity and reality within a virtual context, echoing the motifs found in ancient literature. The protagonist's journey through the Metaverse in *Snow Crash* parallels the epic quests of Gilgamesh and Odysseus, highlighting the timeless appeal of exploring interconnected realms (Stephenson 45). However, the technological context of *Snow Crash* introduces new dimensions to the concept, emphasizing the role of digital technology in shaping virtual experiences. The cultural and historical contexts of ancient narratives provide a rich backdrop for understanding the evolution of the Metaverse concept. By examining the beliefs and values that influenced these narratives, we gain a deeper appreciation for the continuity and transformation of the idea of virtual shared spaces. This understanding not only enriches our interpretation of ancient texts but also provides valuable insights into the cultural dimensions of modern Metaverse literature.

3.2 Comparative Themes

In comparing the themes of ancient narratives and modern Metaverse literature, several key motifs emerge. One prominent theme is the exploration of virtual spaces. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh's journey into the Cedar Forest symbolizes the exploration of an unknown, mystical realm. This theme of venturing into uncharted territories is echoed in modern Metaverse literature, where characters navigate complex virtual environments (George 145). Similarly, Odysseus' travels through various fantastical lands in *The Odyssey* mirror the exploration of interconnected virtual worlds, highlighting the enduring fascination with discovering new realms (Homer 150).

Another recurring theme is the quest for transcendence. In ancient texts, this often takes the form of a hero's journey, where the protagonist seeks to overcome physical and metaphysical challenges. Gilgamesh's quest for immortality and Dante's journey through the afterlife exemplify this theme. In modern Metaverse literature, characters often embark on similar quests for self-discovery and transcendence within virtual spaces. The search for deeper meaning and the desire to transcend the limitations of the physical world are central to both ancient and modern narratives (Mandelbaum 40). The interaction between the physical and virtual worlds is another significant theme. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's journey through the realms of the afterlife blurs the boundaries between the earthly and the divine, reflecting the interconnectedness of different states of existence. This interplay is also evident in *The Ramayana*, where the narrative seamlessly integrates the supernatural with the mundane. Modern Metaverse literature similarly explores the fluid boundaries between reality and virtuality, emphasizing the impact of virtual experiences on the physical world and vice versa (Narayan 89). The comparative analysis of these themes highlights the continuity and evolution of the Metaverse concept. While the technological context of modern literature introduces new dimensions to the portrayal of virtual realms, the fundamental themes of exploration, transcendence, and the interaction between different realities remain constant. This continuity underscores the enduring appeal of the Metaverse and its significance in human imagination across different eras.

3.3 Technological and Philosophical Implications

The evolution of the Metaverse concept from ancient literature to modern times also involves significant technological and philosophical implications. In ancient narratives, the portrayal of virtual realms was often rooted in mythological and religious frameworks, reflecting the cultural and philosophical beliefs of the time. These narratives used allegory and symbolism to explore complex ideas about reality, existence, and the human condition (Hollander 112).

In contrast, modern Metaverse literature is deeply intertwined with digital technology and the virtual reality industry. The technological advancements that enable immersive virtual experiences have transformed the portrayal of the Metaverse, emphasizing the role of technology in shaping human interactions and perceptions of reality. This shift introduces new philosophical questions about the nature of reality, identity, and the impact of virtual experiences on human consciousness (Stephenson 24).

The technological context of modern Metaverse literature also highlights the ethical considerations associated with virtual realities. Issues such as data privacy, digital identity, and the potential for addiction to virtual environments are central to contemporary discussions about the Metaverse. These ethical concerns reflect the broader societal implications of digital technology and its influence on human behavior and social interactions (Clarke 90). By examining the technological and philosophical implications of the Metaverse in both ancient and modern contexts, we gain a deeper understanding of how the concept has evolved and adapted to different cultural and historical settings. This analysis not only enriches our interpretation of ancient texts but also provides valuable insights into the ethical and philosophical dimensions of modern virtual realities.

4 . Conclusion

The exploration of the Metaverse in ancient literature reveals that the concept of virtual shared spaces has deep historical roots. From the mythological journeys in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* to the structured realms of *The Divine Comedy* and the supernatural elements in *The Ramayana*, the idea of interconnected virtual dimensions has fascinated human imagination for centuries. This research not only enhances our understanding of modern Metaverse-based literature but also fosters a greater appreciation for the cultural continuity of this captivating concept. The comparative analysis of ancient and modern narratives highlights the enduring appeal of the Metaverse and its significance in human imagination. Themes such as the exploration of virtual spaces, the quest for transcendence, and the interaction between the physical and virtual worlds are central to both ancient and modern portrayals of interconnected realms. By examining these themes within their historical and cultural contexts, we gain a deeper appreciation for the continuity and evolution of the Metaverse concept. Furthermore, the technological and philosophical implications of the Metaverse highlight the transformative impact of digital technology on human experiences and perceptions of reality. The ethical considerations associated with virtual realities underscore the broader societal implications of the Metaverse and its influence on contemporary culture. By understanding the historical and cultural dimensions of the Metaverse, we can better appreciate its significance in both ancient and modern contexts, enriching our interpretation of virtual shared spaces and their role in human imagination.

4.1 Future Research Scope

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One promising area is the exploration of lesser-known ancient texts that may contain early representations of virtual realms. Expanding the scope beyond the well-known works examined here could reveal additional cultural perspectives and enrich our understanding of the Metaverse concept's historical evolution. Another potential research direction is the comparative study of Metaverse portrayals across different cultures and time periods. Such studies could examine how different civilizations imagined interconnected realms and virtual dimensions, providing a broader, more comprehensive view of the Metaverse's cultural significance.

Additionally, interdisciplinary research involving literature, technology, and cultural studies could offer new insights into the Metaverse's implications for modern society. Investigating the psychological and sociological impacts of virtual realities, particularly in the context of emerging technologies like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), could deepen our understanding of how these experiences shape human behavior and social interactions. Moreover, exploring the ethical dimensions of the Metaverse in ancient and modern contexts can contribute to contemporary debates about digital privacy, identity, and the potential consequences of immersive virtual environments. This line of inquiry is particularly relevant as society increasingly grapples with the ethical challenges posed by advanced digital technologies.

In conclusion, this study underscores the timeless nature of the Metaverse concept, revealing its deep roots in human history and its enduring appeal across different eras. By exploring the portrayal of the Metaverse in ancient literature and comparing it to modern narratives, we gain valuable insights into the cultural and historical dimensions of virtual realities. This understanding not only enhances our appreciation of ancient texts but also informs our interpretation of modern Metaverse literature, fostering a profound appreciation for the continuity of this captivating concept across the ages. The suggested future research avenues hold the promise of further enriching our knowledge and understanding of the Metaverse, ensuring its relevance and significance continue to be explored and appreciated.

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