Superhero films: Invading Cultural and Private Spaces

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The genre of super-hero films came into vogue with *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (movie –serials) in the year 1941 and it was followed by other movie-serials like *Batman* (1943), *The Phantom* (1943), *Captain America* (1944), and *Superman* (1948). Primarily the target audience for these films was children but as the subject matter grew more complex, it began to appeal a wider audience. With years, themes of these films grew graver and it became a heterotopic world as Foucault would have called it, with a conglomeration of both real and unreal, and a solution for everything where people in trouble could seek refuge. Superheroes became the vigilantes of this 'new world' and created their own religion based on scientific methods and logic. But this parallel world also mirrored some of the problems regarding faith and exposed the shortcomings of it and triggered a cultural interplay. A dying genre in the late twentieth century, it re-emerged with more psychological depth and shifting traditional notions, creating a parallel virtually real space with the power to affect mass consciousness .

Superhero comics first came out as comic strips in newspapers in 1930s' but a modern day book format of Superman was the first book to get published in the year 1938 by Action Comics. Since then this genre of popular culture enjoyed a worldwide reader base which chronicled the time and culture in a subtle way with its gradual progress. The naissance of this celebrated category of literature was sandwiched between two World Wars which played a huge role to shape the characters and stories of various comic strips. This birth

was not only threatened by wars, it witnessed other political and financial crises which not only influenced nations but also riddled the lives of common people. The slow end of the imperial world which was based mainly on capitalist politics, found it difficult to cope up with problems like Communist upsurge or Spanish civil war and largely with a threat posed by 'The Great Depression'. 1930s' saw the capitalist world trying to fight out these problems with a promise of better future. The call for equality, especially in the United States, was replaced by the 'Great American Dream' which promised a wealthy and content family life to all the Americans as is evident in several literary creations of that time like *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams or in the emergence of new popular modes of art like *Jazz* and *Blues* music (the later one tried to fill in the common psyche with a sense of nostalgia). But this turbulent time was asking for something entirely different; a new faith system which can bind the people with one single thread and at least provide an escape route if it cannot solve the problems for them. The horrors of World Wars and poverty led the people into believing in the absence of God or at least in the lack of a Christian God and this fading belief, to some extent, got replaced by the superheroes, a psychological state which Freud would call *Verschiebung* or 'displacement.'[1] Superheroes stepped in with their super powers, better judgments and sexuality[2] to fill in the void created by traditional cultures. Superhero films became a perfect instrument to serve the capitalistic purpose with its brands and merchandizes and it created a pseudo world to bring an order to the chaotic time. Comic books were cheap, portable and with tales of good triumphing over evil and the stories were often identifiable which made it easier for the readers to imagine themselves as superheroes. But these were not the only reasons. While discussing the popularity we often ignore the value of these books as fantasies which allowed a parallel breathing space to

children in a time when natural growth was often hindered by socio-political instabilities. But eventually this genre meant for the kids, evolved gradually. My focus is mainly on five films that explored characters created by comic books: *Man of Steel, The Dark Knight Trilogy* and *The Avengers.*

The population of the United States, despite its ethnic diversity, is mainly Christian. Historically speaking, there was and is always a conflict going on with other religious groups to prove the superiority of the Christians. While Christianity plays a major role in the formation of such graphic novels, pagan influence can also be felt. Interestingly this genre of superhero comics is a fusion or sometimes a subversion of traditional faith systems which is evident in recent films. The root of this ethnic unification can be traced back to the American Revolution in 1776 only after which the United States as a country started to exist. Most of its residents were common European people and fugitives who in search of fortune or reversal of fate had settled there. It was also a 'new world', and the failure of the idea of a Utopian society in Europe brought the Europeans with a promise to start afresh. These 'puritans'[3] thought that a new civilization can find a cure but ended up with the original crisis of a dystopian world. And this failure gave rise to different cultural and sub-cultural spaces[4] which further complicates the interplay. Washington Irving while expressing his concerns regarding this crisis first used the word 'Gotham' for New York City in his work *Salmagundi,* a name that also inspired the creation of Batman series. Twentieth century saw a realization of this illusory 'new world' in the fantastic world of superhero comics and the God-figure was substituted by a more justifiable God or savior, supported by the technological brilliance of the century.

The first film of the *Dark Knight Trilogy,* that is *Batman Begins,* displays a cultural conflation where the city of Sodom and Gomorrah

become Gotham city (New York City becomes a microcosmic view of the world) Biblical Yahwey is Ra's Al Ghul and Batman is Abraham who is trying to save his city from a pseudo god. The only difference is that Yahwey eventually destroys the city whereas Batman[5] is fighting against Ra's al Ghul. In the Bible, God is worried about the future and decides to start anew, He destroys it first but Batman on the verge of a probable doom's day is still hopeful and wants to give a chance to his people. One might also trace parallels between Batman's great great grandfather and Moses; Alfred describes him in the film as a man who helped in building railroads to free slaves just like Moses freed the Israelites.

Similar features can be found in the film *Man of Steel*, based on the stories of Superman. Nietzsche had discussed the idea of a superman or what he called *Ubermensch* in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) and according to him we do not need a god, what we need is a superman or a man who is better than the rest. In the film, planet Krypton is under attack and Jor –El, father of Superman, decides to send his son to Earth as Krypton is crumbling and Earth is the only place where he can survive because of the similarities in atmosphere. But he knows that his son is going to display non-earthly power due to frictional and gravitational changes and he says: "He will be a god to them" and he names him Kal-El which in Hebrew stands for 'the voice of God'. Superman replaces the traditional God.

Later in the film, while escaping from the space capsule, Superman stretches out his hands just like Christ on the Cross, he is also sacrificing his wish to return to his planet and the promise of kingship to save mankind.

Christianity is now banking on this popularity of Superman to reemerge as a powerful belief system by creating a cartoon of the Pope imitating the iconic flying style of Superman and named it 'Superpope'.

Post 9/11, this genre coming out of a dystopian world, holds a Foucauldian 'mirror' where duality and contradictions co-exist. Films like *The Dark Knight* deal with a twisted version of the biblical story of Christ. In this film, after the onslaughts of Joker one can see a lot of burning cards lying around but a closer look reveal these cards to be a collection of Tarot cards with the images of dragon, snake and devil; symbols of Satan. Joker, the main villain, is a warped image of Christ. When Gordon interrogates him, the former finds no objects or clinical data in Joker's name which can help Gordon prosecute the villain and in one scene he burns a huge pile of money which shows his disregard for the materialistic world. He draws 'sick' men (morally corrupt and victims of Gotham's capitalistic attitude) and gives them an opportunity to prove their worth. And in the end he creates a situation where at midnight he is going to decide the fate of

the people of Gotham; the just and the unjust like Christ who is also supposed to decide the fate of mankind on the wake of Apocalypse. In the last confrontation between Batman and the Joker, the former shoves the villain out of a building and then catches the latter's leg with a rope and pulls him up. But that image of Joker with outstretched arms along with other attributes of him reminds the viewer of the symbol of Christ. With one leg tied to a rope he also resembles the figure of the Hanged Man in a deck of Tarot cards; the Hanged Man symbolizes sacrifice, suffering and of being suspended in time, all of these traits illustrates a remarkable similarity with the image of Christ. Joker is a Janus faced character, he is both good and evil and in many ways he is subverting and disrupting the existing cultural norms. His acts may place him as a villain but his attributes are that of a god, only we cannot associate the meek and kind god of Christianity with him, he is more pagan. Joker actually inverts the way we look at things. When he enters the hospital in a nurse's outfit he unsettles our conventional perception of a heterosexual villain. Laura Mulvey, while discussing gaze in films in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", argues that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification," but Joker appears to contradict that, and his dialogue is not only a reply to what Harvey Dent asks him but also asks the viewer to question the conformative method they choose to shape their ideologies, and he says: "…You had plans. Look where it got you. I just did what I do best – I took your plan, and I turned it on itself." In *The Dark Knight Rises,* the character of Bane, a former protégé of Ra's al Ghul, comes to Gotham city to liberate the people from an oppressive government with a twisted promise of a revolutionary outcome: "… The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests, and cast out into the cold world that we know and endure… The police will survive, as they learn to serve the true justice." Other superheroes like Thor, a Norse God, in *The*

Avengers, have a story of being cast out by his own father Odin with a stroke of thunder, a parallel to the story of the fall of Satan. And Loki in Norse mythologies is known as a mischievous god, constantly dwelling on the idea of liminality. Hulk is a scientifically created monster. His anger, Freudian symbol of id, is the main source of his power which he learns to control but this shows a frequently manipulated shift between his conscious and subconscious self, disturbing the notion of morality.

"Art is manipulating words and symbols to achieve changes in consciousness." – Alan Moore

This genre of Comic films not only displays a cultural interplay to develop a more scientific myth but it also lashes out at other religions. Its focus is also on creating a cultural supremacy by invading other spaces and by destabilizing them it creates a stronger base for itself. It affects the psyche of the mass and creates a sense of superiority in the minds of the Americans (production houses are mostly American and the target viewer as well). In the film *The Avengers,* Black Widow, a former Soviet spy joins the American S.H.I.E.L.D to save humanity and the implied message is that of the United States as the sole guardian of the human race. Norse gods like Loki and Thor are often humiliated in this film as inferiors to scientific superheroes of United States. Captain America, another character in the film is seen talking to Black Widow about Thor as: "There is only one God and I am pretty sure that he does not dress like that," thus inferring a cultural aggressiveness. In fact, after destroying the war machine together, Hulk is punching Thor out of sheer disgust for these pagan gods. Later after tossing Loki out of his senses Hulk addresses the latter as 'Puny gods'. The epicenter for all these apocalyptic troubles is the United States and mainly cities from northern America, the growing gap between the north and the south is quite evident and it tries to establish northern America as the face of the United states. It also

gives ample scope to the progressive nation to project itself as the vigilante of the world.

Furthermore, these films are justifying the role of the United States Government in the lives of its citizens after the terrorist attack of 9/11. After the attack, the United States had developed a few new measures, one of which indicates the level of threat on the country, to constantly assure the people how their Government is acting against these kinds of terrorist intimidations.[6] But recent cases like that of Edward Snowden reveal the ongoing spying activities of the National Security Agencies on people of the United States and on foreign countries. The Government tries to justify its position by putting the security threats above personal privacy.[7] The cause of the furor is a loophole created by the administrators themselves as they have promised personal freedom earlier while building the nation. President Barrack Obama while defending his security agencies said: "There is no point in having intelligence agencies if you are restricted to the things which you can read in the New York Times or in Spiegel." (*The Hindu, Jan 19, 2014*) Michel Foucault's idea of panopticon refers to this problem with surveillance; the 'big brother' who is monitoring all is also facing a disruptive internal attack where the U.S. citizens are questioning the necessity of this system. Superhero films also exhibit similar situations. In *The Dark Knight,* Batman starts to monitor the cell phones of the people in Gotham city and justifies it by saying that it is only to track Joker, a bigger cause than the private freedom. Lucius Fox reminds him of the perils as he is invading the private space of the people and thus robbing them of their freedom which a morally correct Batman cannot and should not do. Again in *The Avengers*, S.H.I.E.L.D is an organization which tracks all the possible dangers by breaching into securities. These superhero films act on the behalf of the authority and convince their followers that they are safe and they do it in two ways: by instilling a

faith in the common psyche about the Government and by carefully avoiding the depiction of killings of the commoners. If we observe these films closely we will find that most of these films while portraying the action scenes never show the commoner's dying face. This has two possible reasons; one, these films mainly aim children to cash in the box office and they cannot risk a censor board objection and two, they do not wish to instill any sense of insecurity in the viewer. Joker while explaining his methods also clears this aspect of human psyche as he said in the movie *The Dark Knight:* "Nobody panics when the expected people get killed."

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven." - John Milton

In the heydays of Modernism W.B.Yeats predicted an arrival of a Christ like figure who would be less kind and more destructive, to eliminate anarchy from the earth:

"Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand."

The heterotopic world of superhero films are offering a fantastic space which is continuously questioning the existing order with its often disruptive concepts and speculations where the idea of hero and villain, are constantly getting mired up with the stimulus of cultural politics. This particular genre has become an 'ideological state apparatus' which creates desire for a different space and then with its visual impact drive us to a much darker world where the hero becomes a 'dark knight'. This postmodern approach to films also deconstructs gender roles and in its futuristic projection of the world, includes science to define the socio-religious space, forcing us to create a pseudo-cultural identity which oscillates between the realms of real, unreal and surreal.

End Notes:

1. It is a kind of unconscious defense mechanism, described by Freud, where the mind substitutes an aim or an object, often considered as dangerous or unacceptable, with a new one. The traditional concept of god is getting replaced in these films with a more popular superhero.

2. Recent films always show the womanizing side of a superhero like Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight Trilogy* or Tony Spark or Thor in *The Avengers.* Women superheroes are also not very far from portraying their sexuality onscreen, Following Laura Mulvey's work on Gaze, characters like Black Widow or Catwoman, they always display a skimpily clad hour-glass figure which conforms a patriarchal objectification of women but is unsettled by a concept of traditional all powerful hero fused to it.

3. In *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, authors Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury discuss the psychology of the Europeans who later settled in United States and started to shape the country following their personal ideology of a utopian society.

4. Gives rise to different cults within Christianity and makes people to reconsider pagan myths.

5. Batman is like Christ, the face of justice in the film *Batman Begins* evident from the following conversation:

Ra's: "…you have become truly lost."

Bruce: and what path can Ra's al Ghul offer?"

Ra's: "The path of man who shares his hatred of evil…and wishes to serve true justice."

II Cor.5:10. "For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, be it good or evil."

II Tim. 4:1. "I charge thee in the sight of God, and of Christ Jesus, who shall judge the living and the dead." The idea of Jesus as a judge or an advocate is abundant in *Holy Bible,* but in The Dark Knight Trilogy, in an inverted world of the just and the unjust Crane is playing this role.

6. The threat indicator, as discussed by Michael Moore in Fahrenheit 9/11, is used mainly to assure people that the Government is fighting constantly against terrorism to protect them from future attacks. But a second interpretation points out the hidden role of the authority in creating pseudo terror which affects the mass consciousness. Thus it provides the Government with an edge when it comes to invading private spaces.

7. The United States Constitution and its Bill of Rights with Fourteenth Amendment protect civil liberties.

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