

Postscript

The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea.

- Henry Bergson, *Creative Evolution*¹

[P]hilosophy involved a critique of, and literature an expression of, “being in” the world.²

- Richard J. Lane

One fine morning in June 2016, my brother, a critical heart patient, suddenly became ill. He needed a risky second time open heart surgery to replace his aortic valve which was not working. The first surgery was performed twenty years prior to this in 1996. In addition to this, there was a hole in his lungs which was leaking blood and his pacemaker also needed to be changed. Totally unaware of his condition, we took him to Vellore. The cardiologist who examined him said that he needed immediate operation, but he was not sure if any surgeon would like to take the challenge. The office of the cardiology department assigned us a surgeon; he was young, overconfident, and too eager to operate. An overconfident surgeon is not a good surgeon, we thought, and took him to a renowned cardio-thoracic surgeon based in Bengaluru. This man had a soothing presence—calm, composed, compassionate—and we immediately realized that we were at the right place. As we were not mentally or economically prepared, we requested for a few days so that we could come back and arrange the huge amount of money necessary for the operation. The doctor did not grant us permission; instead he placed his hand on his patient’s

shoulder and said in English and broken Bengali, “Don’t worry. *ami achee to*”—I’m here for you, everything will be fine. This particular gesture of care and affection—the will to care and protect—marks the individual moment of the superhero.

The next few weeks were the most intense moments which left a lasting impression on my mind. The doctor and his excellent team took care to solve every issue—medical, psychological and financial—that we had to face. In the meantime we met an old woman, so poor that she was unable to bear the cost of his son’s surgery. She started crying, took the gold earrings in her hands, and said that it was only what she had. The doctor said, “*ami achee to*”. A person left the hospital after consulting the doctor because he was unable to afford the cost of his one year old son’s surgery. The doctor sent his secretary to find them in the nearby hotels to bring them back. “No child leaves my hospital without treatment”, said the doctor when the man was brought back, and the child was operated successfully for free. When they took my brother to the operation theatre, the doctor was silent, may be slightly tensed too in spite of his vast experience of performing thousands of surgeries. My wife was talking to him. He took her hand and said that he would try the best a human can do. What more could we expect on such a moment? After ten hours, the battle was over. He won. The operation was a success.

The law of performativity does not permit deliberate citationality. The subject, as it appears, has no choice. Yet in her political theory Butler cannot disavow the presence of willed citational practice behind the construction of subjectivity. There are instances where the repetition of an act is a deliberate human choice. Judging from this angle, this particular doctor who has become a legend by his own right is a superhero. As a surgeon he can do what most of the others cannot do and he is worshipped almost as a god by his patients. Ironically enough, he also wears a mask not to hide but to proclaim his identity and saves lives every day by

performing complicated surgeries. This does not mean that he is infallible—he has his kryptonite. He also can have days when he fails to perform—the human fallacy—but it does not rob him of his respect or brings him down to the level of the others. In one of his interviews the doctor spoke about ‘magic hands’, hard work, and a burning desire to change the rule of the game as the hallmark of a genius surgeon. The word ‘magic’ complicates the statement. Magic is used here in the sense of its rarity and to some extent inexplicability—a surplus. We do not know why in spite of similar hard work and desire to excel everyone cannot perform wonders. Everybody plays cricket and many of them works incredibly hard but there is only one Sunil Gavaskar or Sachin Tendulkar who becomes the superhero by the acquisition of extraordinary skills that distinguish them from the others. There is a celebration of the moment of the individual in performative practice which creates a social affect—the recognition of a face as a singular being amid the crowd of a facelessness.

The scandal in superhero epistemology, as we have already discussed in detail, arises out of the concept’s suspension into a form. A superhero who moves in a circle following a norm imposed from outside is a superhero in a very limited sense. The superhero fails to fulfill the promise of its ‘origin.’ There is an infelicity between potentiality and actual performance causing a rupture between what it means and what it actually does. There is a serious commitment without a plan to accomplish, and in exchange, the superhero thoughtlessly plunges into the middle of actions providing temporary solutions to the recurring problems of an imaginary world. “Paradoxically”, Shoshana Felman writes in another context, “the failure to carry out the promise makes it possible to begin it again”.³ The repetition in case of the superhero does not create any difference.

The alternative aesthetics questions the comic-book superhero's authenticity, places it within a larger history, opens up silences, and delimits it by making the concept more conducive to creativity. The prefix 'super' in the concept of the "superhero" is not fixed; it is not definite or stable, and does not refer to a particular thing. The superhero is a creative tendency, it is not an object. The Indian superhero Krish, despite his allegiance to the Marvel/DC universe, reveals an interesting predisposition when he says, "The superhero is a thought".⁴ The Hindi word he uses for 'thought' is *soch* which covers a broader spectrum of meaning. It is a thought that has the potentiality to transform the world. The superheroes do not think or work alike and their different manifestations, each peculiarly differing from the other, advocates for a conceptual transformation by the intrusion of something new. There is a "line of flight", a conceptual freedom to create "an opening that allow thought to escape from the constraints that seek to enclose and define creativity."⁵ The effective life of the superhero lies not in its isolated existence but in its traveling across the world and engagement with a convoluted network of intra-active relationships within a more nuanced and larger literary and philosophical culture.

On a deciding a moment in the movie *Bruce Almighty* (2003), Bruce realizes that he is not what he thought himself to be—a difference has been accidentally conferred upon him from outside as a gift but he actually does not know what to do with this immense power. This produces a disjunction—a sense of the ridiculous. On the other hand—the superhero—as it has been delineated in this work is a common man who gradually achieves his ability to make a difference by an effort of his own. This is not accidental but deliberate creation. There is no easy way to achieve this superidentity except years of hard work, determination, perseverance, and an inexplicable surplus. "An intelligent being", writes Bergson, "bears within himself the means to transcend his own nature."⁶

Endnotes:

¹ Henry Bergson, *The Creative Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 134.

² Richard J. Lane, *Jean Baudrillard* (London and NY: Routledge, 2003), 69.

³ Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford and California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.

⁴ See, Rakesh Roshan, *Krish* (Mumbai: Eros, 2006), DVD. “Superhero ek soch hai.”

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill, *What is philosophy?* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), viii.

⁶ Bergson, *The Creative Evolution*, 159.