

Abstract

The theory of the superhero as produced by the comic-book industry and endorsed by numerous scholars in the field exhibits a violent generalization of the singularity of a philosophical concept and its immense possibility. Curbing philosophical excess, the superhero became naturalized, a commodified product of the culture industry. Fetishization of the superhero as a cultural icon and its reification into an apparently pre-given, homogenous and unchangeable identity emptied it of its active potentialities. Over the years, a formulaic and easily predictable genre developed around the concept where an accidental origin story, a dual identity, a professed mission, bright costume and an exaggerated display of power became its constituting elements. This work questions the definition and the allegedly sacrosanct nature of the superhero's origin and identity by tracing back its lost connection with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche especially his concept of Overman or Superman. It also attempts to break through the imprisonment of the concept into an insular identity, a self-inclusive genre that has been dominating the creative and critical domain since the birth of Superman in 1938. The work looks into the historical, social and cultural crisis that inspired the creation of the concept and tries to explore how the superheroinic imagination opens up diverse modes of creative thinking, transforming and exceeding its own limits. It attempts to create 'movable bridges' across time, genres and cultures by emphasizing the 'different' and often the 'funny' which always exceed the normative principles of superhero comics.

The concept, as Gilles Deleuze sees it, is a living object with an intricate and intriguing life of its own that originates with the primal human desire of naming the unnameable and preserving a moment in the incessant flow of becoming. It bears a tension within and always strives to go beyond the traceable cultural and linguistic point of origin. The concept dies when it attempts to deny and expel its inner instability and becomes insular

by clinging to the comfort of metaphysical security as it happened with the commodified production of the superhero. The ‘nonconceptual’, on the other hand, as projected by Theodor Adorno, in turn, has a disruptive force that has the capacity to dismantle any attempt to form a stable identity. Adorno calls this politics of revealing the non-identity within a concept, ‘negative dialectics’. Both Deleuze and Adorno provide a way in and a way out of, a joy of putting the chaos of existence into an ephemeral cage of concepts and the ecstasy of transcending this burdened existence by lending “a voice to its unfreedom”.

The concept of the superhero unfolds a dangerous liaison between philosophy and literature and the first chapter entitled “Re-thinking the Superhero: A Concept in the Making” reconceptualises the superhero in a threefold way. First, it questions the allegedly sacrosanct nature of the superhero’s origin and identity in the comic books and dissociates it from the preassigned conventions that historically harnessed its imaginative possibilities. Secondly, it emphasizes on the humanity of superheroes rejecting the familiar trend to see them as nonhuman or posthuman figures. Thirdly, it explores how ‘doing’ or ‘performativity’ constitutes the ‘being’ of the superhero. Widening and opening the scope of the concept, I suggest that any human who consciously reiterates a specialized act with remarkable skill and authority which constitutes his identity as a figure of extraordinary abilities, is a superhero. This new configuration creates an opening and harbours a democratic openness where to be a superhero is not a prerogative of a chosen one but open to all. The removal of ordinary task makes them more exciting and brings them down to the human world.

Once we see the inner logic of the superhero as being workless or without any set task to perform, the idea of the superhero as a unified category disappears and we become aware about the plural character of the superhero. My selection of four unusual figures from diverse genres as superheroes in the following four chapters—Narayan Debnath’s *Batul the Great* (comics), Premendra Mitra’s *Ghanashyam Das or Ghanada* (Tall Tale), Satyajit Ray’s

Professor Trilokeswar Shonku (science fiction), and one of the nine gems of Emperor Akbar's court, Raja Birbar or Birbal (mediaeval history)—all of whom have eventually been turned into comic book figures serve as an attempt to re-shape the discursive field by bringing in a space for fresh dialogues and negotiations. This transgeneric, translingual, and transcultural network of a concept introduces diversity where new co-ordinates come into play every now and then to start afresh an old friendship and form unheard of dimensions of the concept.

The second chapter titled “Tussle with Muscle” situates the concept of the superhero in a turbulent geography where there are as many culturally adapted versions of the concept as possible. The ironic juxtaposition of ‘Batul’ and ‘the great’ breaks the unwritten code of the hero / superhero cult, and starts the journey of a new category whose name and appearance quite unconsciously parodies his own self. The otherness of Batul as a superhero is also revealed in the fact that he exceeds generic expectations; he does not possess any colourful costume, a dual identity or a professed mission—three distinctive elements of the superhero genre—and yet we cannot deny his superhero status. This chapter delineates how the dilation of generic expectations by the inclusion of Batul into the superhero league opens up a new possible world by reconfiguring the boundary of the superhero genre. This transcultural predicament of the superhero governs the central concern of this chapter, and in a way, anticipates the other areas that premise this dissertation.

The main objective of the third chapter entitled “The Shah of Blah Kills the Tiger by Words” is to evaluate how Ghanada builds up a technique of presenting himself as a storyteller superhero in an *adda*. This chapter also delineates how Ghanada's proleptic imagination anticipates and answers all possible objections and creates a defamiliarization effect that collapses the divide between truth and untruth, reality and illusion. By referring to the works of Erving Goffman, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero,

this chapter analyses how Ghanada's figural imagination creates an imaginary identity that gives him freedom to live a parasitic, non-instrumental and leisurely life escaping from the policing desire of social and political institutions.

The fourth chapter entitled "Mapping the Genius" argues that what distinguishes Satyajit Ray's Professor Shonku as a scientist is his imagination which challenges the conventional and established rule or mode of science. His approach disrupts the cultural binary of science and aesthetics by performing a mode of doing science that is not constricted within a narrow boundary defined in a narrow way. Scientific knowledge is a complex historical process and the aim to exorcise science from other disciplines is a political manoeuvre. With a view to lend greater relevance to the study, this chapter centers on the making of the scientist as a postcolonial superhero—his philosophy, politics and persuasions. This chapter also serves as a critique of the contemporary culture of science that artificially restricts imagination, fiercely endorses science as the only medium of knowledge and promotes the superiority of a 'scientific mind'. This chapter reinforces the idea that non-scientific cultures and procedures which are deemed to be 'strange' and 'uncanny' carry a promise of an alternative world of knowledge.

The last chapter "Madness of Speech: Truth, Power and the Birbal Way" provides a critical analysis of Birbal's ability to decipher a situation by using his sharp intelligence and sense of humour that made him earn a distinguished position—one of the nine gems of emperor Akbar's court. Birbal's 'fearless speech' and argumentative narrative logic that reinterprets the law and the outlaw and promotes novel ways of understanding justice is also discussed in the course of this chapter. This chapter depicts his art of conversation, diplomatic imagination and its entanglement with laughter and humour; and this shows how this performance lends him the iconic identity of a superhero by way of bringing justice for people.

Within an ‘intra-active transcultural’ space, as Ranjan Ghosh puts it, that holds a disparate clutch of thinkers—Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, Erving Goffman, Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler, Wai Chee Dimock, Adriana Cavarero, Simon Critchley and others—my project works out the ethics, aesthetics and politics of superhero as a performer under the rubric of the philosophy of concept, doing and agentiality. The superheroes combine the possible, the praxis and the performance with the impossible, the overdoing and the transcendent. The split in the hero with super serves as an opening at the collapse of conventionality of thinking and sense. By tracking and disrupting the popular cultural model the work hands out a new configuration of the superhero. The concept of the superhero is always, the work argues, more than itself and thinking of the superhero includes the danger of being led to something else. By virtue of the perpetual reconfiguration of its elements, the concept of the superhero makes itself “always new” and it is always already “open onto elsewhere”.