

Chapter I

Re-thinking the Superhero: A Concept in the Making

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.¹

- Brian Massumi, “Introduction”, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Disenchantment of the concept is the antidote of philosophy. It keeps it from growing rampant and becoming an absolute to itself.²

- Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

Philosophy begins with a crisis, says Gilles Deleuze, and the philosopher’s task is to provide an epistemological remedy to it by inventing, foregrounding and fabricating a concept. The concept is a living object with an intricate and intriguing life of its own that originates with the primal human desire of naming the unnamable and preserving a moment in the incessant flow of becoming. A concept is neither ‘representation’ nor an ‘effect’; it is a ‘creation’—a human answer to a situation which is beyond the human. It is not a metaphor; it has an open future and it serves as an alternative to the dogmatic and representational image of thought. The creation of a concept is an act of producing a map without charting the territory; it is not an imitation but a continuous experimentation with the ‘real’. This act of conceptualizing intrinsically possesses a creative violence. It bears a tension within and always strives to go beyond the traceable social,

cultural and linguistic point of origin. As a product of violence it contains within itself the double movement of peace and unpeace, death and life, containment and dissatisfaction. It brings into life a momentary pleasure of solving a crisis by giving the formless a form and a pain and guilt for barring and banning a life of perpetual becoming—the sense of ‘being in the world’. But the concept dies when it attempts to deny and expel its inner instability and becomes insular by clinging to the comfort of metaphysical security. This is a metaphorical death that hinders novelty and progress and causes a great rift between ‘nature’ and ‘man’. The arbitrariness of fixed criteria for judgment limits the aim and scope of a concept and raises a question regarding its validity. But a concept always opens up and exceeds its limit; it is innately vulnerable, and hence dynamic and creative. This elusive and allusive nature of the concept leads it to a zone of indiscernibility from where it always escapes, exceeds, revolts and destabilizes any attempt to put it into regulative ideals. The literary artist’s dealing with a philosophical concept ends up in pushing the horizon and producing an affect that is “not entirely under the control of consciousness” and “is often conveyed by contagion, contamination and inspiration”.³

The suppleness and flexibility of a concept makes it vulnerable to change by coming into contact with other forms of life. In *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze writes:

In short, we say that every concept always has a history, even though this history zigzags, though it passes, if need be through, through other problems or onto different planes. In any concept there are usually bits or components that come from other concepts, which corresponds to other problems and presupposed other planes. This is inevitable because each concept carries out a new cutting-out, takes on new contours, and must be reactivated or recut.⁴

There are temporary bridges that connect a concept to other concepts belonging to different time, genres and cultures. This entanglement opens up diverse modes of creative thinking transforming and exceeding the concept’s own limit. The shared space creates a neighbourhood. The new and

existing elements come into play every now and then to start afresh an old friendship. This interaction between concepts is not negative but active and provides the power to defy the ‘apocalyptic objectivity’ of a historian who always aims to secure a single and coherent meaning of an ‘unruly’ concept. The concept bears a signature of history and yet it is outside the scope of history. In contrast to a history that narrates and shapes the chaotic forces within the concept into a manageable identity, it is necessary to write a new history that rejects the reductive, casual and overarching explanation in favour of the ‘nonconceptual’, which is shapeless and transitory. “[T]he concept does not exhaust the thing conceived”⁵, writes Theodor Adorno, and the “Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend”.⁶ The nonconceptual, 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’, “which examines the relations between the object and its concept in order to discover discrepancies and reveal hidden potentialities.”⁷ 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 the concepts and the ecstasy of transcending this burdened existence by lending “a voice to its unfreedom”⁸. These philosophical moves place the concept in the realm of future without dissociating itself from the past and the present becomes a fusion of amnesia and remembrance, nonthought and thought, poetical and political. As an uncanny thing that always slips through the net of consciousness, a concept is always more than itself; and thinking of one includes the danger of being led to another. By virtue of the perpetual reconfiguration of its elements, a concept makes itself “always new”⁹; and it is always already “open onto elsewhere”¹⁰.

Hero / Superhero

In contemporary culture, a hero is commonly viewed as a figure of suspicion. Everywhere we see a democratic zeal to put an end to all forms of hero-worships. The hero is authoritative, unpredictable and overtly political; as a figure of excess, he does not conform to the ambiance of self-censoring political correctness that governs the modern world. At the same time, hero-worship needs a certain amount of forgetfulness and the memory of an idealized event of the past. In an unheroic (or anti-heroic) age, the superhero revives the dream of heroic action and imaginative remedy to the ills of the world. It is a mutated and transformed version, or a *mimeme*¹¹, as Arthur C. Danto would call it, of the hero and shares a “zone of neighbourhood” with the mother concept. However, this shared space of togetherness is incestuous in nature and not free from the competing claims of friendship and rivalry.

In common parlance, the superhero seems to be an amalgamation of two different but mutually interdependent traditions of hero-worship. Jerry Siegel’s account of the origin of Superman reveals that his idea of the superhero was derivative of and modeled on the mythical heroes: “I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so.”¹² But can the comic book superhero be treated as a hero? As the distinction becomes hazy, suspicion grows high. In her essay “Do We Need another Hero?”, Angela Ndalianis admits this difficulty of separating the superhero from the hero:

This anthology traverses the boundary between hero and the superhero. Where does the one end and the other begin? The title *Super/heroes*, has deliberately dissected the ‘superhero’ into two in order to highlight the dual focus on these character types – the hero and the superhero – who have much in common.¹³

This amalgamation makes it difficult to define the superhero because it cannot be clearly separated from other cultural genres which portray similar characters with superpowers. The

unease and awkwardness with this infusionism is evident in its use in various combinations such as ‘super-hero’, ‘super hero’, ‘super/hero’, and finally the ‘superhero’. The superhero is a literary hybrid; he is not a hero, and yet he is; the shadow of his mighty predecessor looms large and often eclipses his life.

Taking cue from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s illuminating suggestion, let us see how etymological analysis leads to a philosophical understanding of a concept. They refer to etymology as crazy “philosophical athleticism”,¹⁴ which never ceases to amaze and amuse a thinker. The compound word ‘superhero’ is a curious combination of two cultures—a Latin prefix, ‘super—’, and a Greek root, ‘hero’. In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Genre*, Peter Coogan looks at the prefix as a modifier that exaggerates the existing sense of the hero. The exaggeration is quite visible in superhero comics but the assumption that the superhero is nothing but an inflated version of the hero is a clichéd argument and it becomes quite evident if we try to discover the hidden potential of the prefix ‘super—’ (an equivalent to German *über*, Greek *hyper*, French *sur* and Gothic *ufaro*). Coogan writes:

As with Gibson’s use of the word, *super* here is used to modify a variety of things. It points, as Verral mentions in the last line, to the exaggerated nature of pulp fiction, or the “super fiction field” as he puts it to contrast *Air Trials* with *Cosmopolitan*. He is not suggesting that a “super plane,” a “super airport,” or a “super flying force” are new kinds of planes, airports, or flying forces, but that they are exaggerated versions of the planes, airports, and flying forces that already exist. The same can be said of his use of “superhero”.¹⁵

Etymologically, the prefix ‘super’ came into English from Latin and quite interestingly it refers to ‘above’, ‘over’, ‘beyond’ and ‘across’. It brings in an aura of newness and difference to the root.

According to *Etymonline* the word ‘supersexual’ usually meant ‘transcending sexuality’ in 1895 but from 1968 the meaning changed to ‘very sexual’. This clearly visible shift in the meaning of the prefix from ‘beyond’ to ‘very much’ is, in fact, contradictory in nature. Quite interestingly, while the former suggests a break, the latter suggests an excess, a vertical connection and an intimacy with something that already exists. For Ranjan Ghosh, this verticality is a gesture of reaching out to the other which connects, communicates and introduces an aura of newness and difference: “Being across breeds the pleasure of being “out of place,” a toss amid our “heretical geographies””.¹⁶ This positional advantage adds an excess or surplus which never allows the concept of the superhero to move towards a normative perfect’ but carries a sense of the surplus and the inexhaustible, and yet it is closely linked to the world.

If we look at the genesis of the concept of the ‘hero’, we see that it harks back to the poetic sensibility of Hesiod and Homer’s Greece (8th century B.C.) where the age old rituals and conventions of hero-worship are archived in the epics—*Works and Days*, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.¹⁷ The burden of the ancient heroic genre is too heavy on superhero comics as it reveals a cross-continental connection not only with the European epic tradition established by Homer but the ancient Indian texts such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, Scandinavian *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Persian *The Shahnameh*. Superhero comics not only borrow heavily, but often they are based on the mythologies of different parts of the world. Naif Al-Mutawa’s The 99 is a Kuwaiti superhero rooted in Islamic mythology, Marvel’s Thor is based on Norse mythology, and Anupam Sinha’s Shakti has been modelled on Indian mythology. If we compare the *mahaviras* as depicted in the great Indian epics, we can see that they are not ordinary human beings, and in fact, they often possess strange superpowers. Hanuman can jump across the sea,

Bhīma has impossible bodily strength, Karna has an impassable breastplate, and Duryodhana has an impenetrable body with the exception of the thighs, his kryptonite.

In Greek mythology, the heroes are subordinates to the gods and they embody *arête* which is often translated as “virtue” but can be explained as “being the best you can be or reaching your highest human potential”.¹⁸ If we ignore Thomas Carlyle, Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell for a while, it is Northrop Frye who in his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, gives us a working definition of the hero based on the classics: “If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature.”¹⁹ And if this formulation seems to be insufficient, four years later Thomas Greene, in his essay “The Norms of epic”, reveals it all:

Epic awe, as distinguished from religious or mythical awe, springs from the circumstance that a man can commit an extraordinary act while still remaining limited. It does not matter that, in practice, the poet describes occasionally heroic action which is beyond human powers, if the hero is understood to be subject to ignorance or foolhardiness and above all to death.²⁰

Literally, the Greek word ‘heros’ refers to “a dead human invested with special power”.²¹ The heroes rise from anonymity to grandeur. They achieve name, fame, material prosperity, and above all an invincible warrior status by enacting extraordinary fits and fulfilling promises that are unthinkable or miraculous for common people. But a critical scrutiny of the heroic literature reveals that the hero’s life “contains the *agon*, the struggle between capacity and limitation”.²²

The heroes have their *hamartia*; they fall in a last battle, and as Greene says, “at the end of the movement there lies, implicitly or explicitly, the sense of limit”.²³ Despite their tremendous bodily strength, grandeur of personality as well as power to change the fate of the state, they are mortal beings. They would participate in mortal combat fired by the messianic zeal to be

worshipped as a deity after death, and yet they are no gods. Their heroism lies in subduing the fear of death before the final journey beyond Lethe, the river of oblivion. Loaded with the memory of the rise and fall of a nation, they are the relics of the past. The hero, says Carlyle, is a “vital element of manhood, the soul of man’s history”²⁴.

In the historical course of time, meanings of a word often change or transform beyond recognition. New socio-political necessities add new layers of meaning to the old concepts. The relatively new expression that emerges from the comic books, Mike Benton predicts in *Illustrated History*, was originated in pulp fiction as late as in 1917, and swiftly it became a part of contemporary public culture. It was coined to describe “a public figure of great accomplishments”,²⁵ which clearly echoes the sense of the hero. The official appearance of Superman, the first comic book superhero in 1938, however, refers to a different socio-political necessity behind its creation. It was an era of failure when the epithet ‘great’ seemed to be appropriate for both—a depression and a war. In a society devoid of hope and inspiration, Superman became a ready-made elixir; his magical touch rejuvenated the American ‘daydream’ of growth and prosperity in an otherwise shabby world of a shattered economy. In this age of turmoil, Richard Reynolds writes: “A new kind of popular hero had emerged: the self-reliant individualist who stands aloof from many of the humdrum concerns of society, yet is able to operate according to his own code of honour, to take on the world on his own terms, and win.”²⁶ Umberto Eco’s essay ‘The Myth of Superman’ (1972), which brought the superhero comics into serious critical attention for the first time, also quite eloquently portrays the illusion that surrounded the time:

Clerk Kent personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men; through an obvious process of self-identification, any accountant in any American city

secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, a superman can spring forth who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence.²⁷

Time and again this background story has been copied and recreated in superhero comics all over the world. In a different time and totally different space, Samit Basu portrays a parallel sense of apathy and disillusionment among the Indian youths in his superhero novel *Turbulence*. In this novel, reminiscing the origin story of *The Fantastic Four*, a whole host of people acquire superpowers during a flight from London to New Delhi. Interestingly, their special powers match to their own fantasies of everyday life. Tia dreams of having multiple selves to satisfy the drudgery of a ruined married life and she gets the power to copy herself like a computer file; Uzma desires to be an actress and she gets something extra in addition to her stunning beauty—a mysterious power to create an ambience that forces people to like her; and Aman, who sought for connections in the ‘city of networks’, Delhi, becomes a computer virus whose mind has access to all networks despite highest security measures. In earlier life all of them were frustrated individuals having a dream of their own, but somehow their aspirations were put under yoke by repressive socio-political culture. Life without potency produces the desire to transcend the human limit. In his emotional exuberance, Aman captures the banality of a life without superpower:

I don't know how it was for you growing up in the UK, but here, nearly all of us have this huge sense of irrelevance. We'll never change anything. The world will never know us. We grow up thinking hard work and a certain amount of ability are all we need – and then we eventually have to accept that they can only take us so far. I'm not even talking about being famous here – I've never wanted to be famous. But we never feel like we're a part of anything. Nothing to believe in or fight for. I don't know if I'm making sense.²⁸

Not surprisingly, a deep and parallel sense of political failure can also be found as motivation behind George Bernard Shaw's idea of superman or the rise of literary existentialism. Only the

subtle intellectual responses of Shaw or the existentialists seem to be replaced by a populist free play of fantastic imagination. Quite interestingly, in his novel *The Fall*, Camus cannot refrain himself from alluding to “superman”.²⁹ The disillusioned Lawyer in Camus’ novel informs the readers about his unbridled desire for power to change the world: “The truth is that every intelligent man, as you know, dreams of being a gangster and of ruling over society by force alone”.³⁰ The superhero emerges as a cultural ramification of a sense of loss where the dream of heroism transforms itself into a daydream of unlimited power and a new beginning. In Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman helplessly exclaims: “the world only makes sense when you force it to”.³¹ In his effort to make sense of a disjointed world by force alone, the superhero erects a niche of moral comfort, an illusory home in a homeless world.

As we have already seen that the superhero phenomenon, in spite of its new connotation, cannot go beyond the epic ideal of heroism, and what primarily makes it different from its predecessor can simply be explained in purely economic terms—its salability in the market of dream. The heroes, though they seem to be more than human are often like us, full of human flesh and blood. They live and die in order to fulfill our dreams. The reader of the comic-books knows that he is in a self-validating world of dream which is never to be fulfilled. In the world of the superheroes, the logic of probability is in a state of temporary suspension, the reader often laughs at the farcicality of the situations, yet a fragile hope creeps slowly inside; it is a dream of a magical solution of all the problems of his life and times.

The superhero is a product of creative human desire—an expansion of the perception to the virtual—what is yet to be. It is not only an idle day dream but an emotional response that resists the invasion of the human mind by a world governed by reason and re-establishes politics at the core of human nature. Creative and transcultural, it eludes any definition that is a-

historical, narrow and limited in time and space. The superhero has a dual affiliation both to the real and the imaginary; he is real in the sense that he cannot brush off the inevitable shadow of his precursor who has taken such a vital role in shaping the history of mankind and imaginary in the sense that such powerful beings never walked on earth. In a sense, any living being that produces surprise by exceeding humanly conceivable limit of capability, is a superbeing, but the term ‘hero’ adds an ethical dimension to the term. If morality is, to follow Zygmunt Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics*, “incurably aporetic”³², the concept of the superhero travels well beyond the popular notion based on the insularity of American values of life.

The Nietzsche Effect

In the month of June in 1938, a spectacular event occurred in America where popular culture officially announced the news of hijacking a philosophical concept in Action Comics # 1. No ransom was demanded and they did not release the victim either, but the hijacking ended as most of the philosophers would cherish to believe, in a bloodless casualty and emptying out the grandeur of a powerful concept. The suspicion is so pervasive that Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, the editors of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, decided to discard the word ‘Superman’ as the translation of the German *Übermensch*:

Overman is preferred to superhuman for two basic reasons; first, it preserves the word play Nietzsche intends with his constant references to going under and going over, and secondly, the comic book associations called to mind by “superman” and super-heroes generally tend to reflect negatively, and frivolously, on the term superhuman.³³

Though in a different manner, Arthur C. Danto also dismisses the Nietzschean undertone in Superman comics as so negligible that “readers of philosophical books might be supposed capable of disregarding such incidental connotations”.³⁴ In her long study of Nietzsche’s philosophical connection with America and his influences on the American mind *American*

Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and his Ideas, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen maintained the same distance and her book ends never ever mentioning the comic book superhero. In order to retain the purity of ‘scholarship’, they proclaimed the necessity to move beyond the diluted version of “Shaw’s and Marvel’s comic book “superman””.³⁵ It marks a clear line of demarcation by bringing in the question of authenticity and loyalty of superhero comics to the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche. To them, the comic book superhero is a prime example of a concept gone astray, and in place of exploring its nuances, they made an attempt to sever the tie and rescue philosophy from the vandalism of corrupt popular culture.

However, what we need is a diachronic approach that opens up new avenues of creative thinking by reading the concept of the superhero dialogically with the philosophical tradition of hero-worship as espoused by Nietzsche. Peter Coogan has traced the historical extent to which the 1907 translation of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* hypnotized the American mind and contributed to the development of the superhero genre. Though as a concept the superhero was always governed by the demand of the market, it always had a tendency to move away and create its own space for singularity. In Nietzsche’s revolutionary philosophy of the future, *Übermensch* has a unique place for its “singular indefiniteness and unspecificity”.³⁶ For Nietzsche, Overman is the highest stage of self-realization when man, invested with ‘madness’ and ‘lightening’, destroys in order to create: “He who has to be a creator always has to destroy”.³⁷ It is a part of an evolutionary process of intellectual advancement where human beings are “a bridge and not a purpose”.³⁸ He is the harbinger of a new dawn, a new beginning where man ‘overcomes’ himself rejecting God as the creator of the moral universe. He becomes his own God, follows his own law and leads life on earth without the illusive and allusive certainty of transcendence. By using Agambenian terminology, this process of radical transformation can be called ‘decreation’, that

is, the process where man destroys the old and summons all his “potential to not-be” into existence in order to welcome the hitherto unthought world of ideas, expressions and morality. For Agamben, it “brings the contingent – “what could have been but was not” – into view”³⁹.

To become an Overman, says Nietzsche, it requires “a sacred yes-saying”.⁴⁰ He is a creature of enjoyment coming out of an individual sense of becoming. In this sense, it seems that the traditional superhero lacks the passion, pain and progress of the self-annihilating Overman that “creates beyond itself”⁴¹. In Nietzschean terminology, what alienates the superhero from the Overman is the desire to be ‘good’ and not ‘noble’: “The noble person wants to create new things and a new virtue. The good person wants old things, and for old things to be preserved”.⁴² The superhero does not follow a creative process of transformation but takes a sudden magical leap from the human to the superhuman leaving him in a state of astonishment and guilt: “you reached the unreachable and you’re not ready for it”.⁴³ As products of mediocrity, they lack Nietzsche’s philosophical excess; they are people with superpower but without revolutionary thinking and ideas.

With all his power and enchantment, the superhero is a continual disappointment that fails to live up to the dream and optimism of Nietzsche. The superhero comics explore the myth that unlimited power is the solution of everything in the world. Relying on an extraterrestrial hope of redemption that Nietzsche so earnestly tried to dissuade us from, it fails to welcome uncertainty and chaos as the centre of life. Ndalianis writes:

[H]eroes and the myths are created in response to social change or social need. Heroic action usually has a fundamental link to the welfare of the society from which the hero comes. Heroes and superheroes have never operated in a vacuum. They respond in a dynamic way to various challenges and social needs. Whether conscious or unconscious, hero narratives give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address. Occupying a space outside culture, the super/hero often serves the function of

mediator figure that enters a community in crisis with the aim of resolving its conflicts and restoring the *status quo*.⁴⁴

Even so the superhero is less ‘dynamic’ and more ‘spectacular’ than the hero. The superhero’s life ensures predictability and lacks the sense of drama of his predecessor who performs within limit and under the continual vigilance of death. The hero plunges himself into the chaos of life and politics to change the fate of the state and establish order when the superhero waits impatiently for his turn. As the torch-bearer of tradition, he is passive and “is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain’s plans”.⁴⁵ At the demise of god, they are the gods without divinity. Despite Spiderman’s ambitious slogan—“with great power comes great responsibility”—we have enough reason to mistrust his self-imposed vocation. Ironically the superhero, with all his powers faces a different sense of limit; he cannot relieve the world of its miseries and mechanically engages himself in an impossible rationality.

“By the time Siegel attached the name Superman to his hero, Superman were everywhere”⁴⁶, writes Gavaler, and yet “By the late twenties,” Coogan writes, “the superman trope had become commonplace and emptied of philosophical content”.⁴⁷ The self-reflexive eighty’s sees a re-emergence of this connection which culminates in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Killing Joke* and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*. Moore ends the Book VI with a famous aphorism from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gaze also into you”.⁴⁸ The dismal view of the world sipped in horror and darkness which emanates from *Watchmen* is the mirror image of the chaotic world of Nietzsche:

Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not god who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It’s us. Only

us....The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world.⁴⁹

But for Nietzsche, this nihilism is not purely negative and the realization of emptiness is not divested of all light. Rejecting the metaphysical comfort, his concept of *Amor Fati*, or love of fate brings in the agency of man as the central thing in his universe and encourages “a Dionysian yes to the world as it is”.⁵⁰ This devastating frankness is not an easy way for the superhero who tries to impose sense to a world gone crazy. In *Watchmen*, the Comedian treats life as a ‘joke’ and in *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker ceaselessly teases Batman to come out of his self-protected illusion and messianic role playing:

When I saw what a black, awful joke the world was, I went crazy as a cot! I admit it! Why can't you? I mean, you're not unintelligent! You must see the reality of the situation. Do you know how many times we've come close to world war three over a flock of geese on a computer screen? Do you know what triggered the last world war? An argument over how many Telegraph poles Germany owed its war debt creditors! Telegraph poles! Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha!⁵¹

In an insane world where an argument over telegraph poles can start a world war it is useless as well as impossible for Batman, already enmeshed in a conservative ideology, to set everything ‘right’. In spite of all his superpowers, the comic book superhero remains astonishingly incomplete, narrow, and limited in his scope to transform the world.

In an interesting essay, Matthew Levy and Heather Mathews extends Foucault’s notion of *parrhesia* (“free speech” or “frank truth-telling”) to explain this devastating openness of *Watchmen* to shock the readers.⁵² In a sense, Nietzsche too is a *parrhesiastes* (truth-teller) who engages himself in a risky game with the readers which involves the danger of humiliating the age old wisdom and the necessity of moral solidarity. The *parrhesiastes*, says Foucault, “is someone who says everything he has in mind; he does not hide anything but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse”.⁵³ In their open assault, *Watchmen* and

The Dark Knight Returns, share a Nietzschean impulse to unveil the mist of quintessential goodness that surrounds the superhero and establishes a fresh equation of creative and critical readership that denies death in fixity and moves boldly towards the future by denying the inhibitions of the superhero comics to welcome newness as the crux of becoming life.

Travelling across Time, Genre and Culture

“You start dying slowly / If you do not travel,” declares the Brazilian poet Martha Medeiros, and in his book *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau*, Georges Van Den Abbeele writes, “If travel posits the risk and anxiety of death, it also signals the way to health, wealth, and wisdom”.⁵⁴ Travel is not only shifting from one place to another, it harbours an inner opposition, the lure of profit and the insecurity and risk of being lost. As an act of transgression, travel has the power to transform the traveller, but this transformation cannot move beyond recognition as the economic value of travel is calculated in terms of the traveller’s connection with an *oikos*, or home, a limiting point of reference. The home one leaves and the home one returns to are not the same place. Time passes and the world creeps inside the home, and the home moves into the world. To a psychically transformed traveller both the old home and the world start unfolding themselves in unforeseen ways. The movements from one place to another call into question the narrow ideological frameworks that govern home and open up new interpretative regimes. Similarly, a concept’s travel across temporal, disciplinary, cultural and generic boundaries extends its hermeneutic possibilities. As a particular concept engages in multifocal dialogues with different times, places and genres, it starts resonating with a polyphonic voice and stands face to face with the otherness of its own being. This act of travel beyond the culture of origin does not mean total dissolution of a concept or genre beyond recognition, but a transfiguration

that turns it from passive to active and receptive, and therefore threatening, alien, more meaningful, and evocative than itself.

If we go back to the philosophical origin of the concept of the superhero in Western thought, we see that in ancient Greece Lucian of Samosata (120-192) coined the term *hyperanthropos*; in Germany, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) used the word *Übermensch* in *Faust* before Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) hijacked it for his groundbreaking work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; and in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the propagator of a refined, self-reliant and aristocratic *Over-Soul*. Nietzsche was highly influenced by the ideas of Lucian and Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883), and in fact, he was rereading Emerson while writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In Eric Bentley's words, Nietzsche finds in Wagner "the highest of higher men, holding the key to a new epoch of art and life... a premonition of superman".⁵⁵ In one of his interviews, Stanley Cavell also marvelled at the philosophical proximity between two thinkers from different continents—Emerson and Nietzsche: "No matter how many people tell you the connection exists, you forget it, and you can't believe it, and not until you begin to have both voices in your ears do you recognize what a transfiguration of an Emerson sentence sounds like when Nietzsche rewrites it".⁵⁶ Though Ratner-Rosenhagen deliberately forgets to touch upon the history of Nietzsche's influence on the popular cultural field of superhero comics in her otherwise scholarly study, she does something useful by tracing out the influence of Emerson on Nietzsche's ideas:

[I]n late 1881 or early 1882 Nietzsche purchased a black notebook, which he devoted exclusively to excerpting forty passages from Emerson's *Essays*. Some of the passages are transcribed verbatim, while others show minor modifications. However, it is the passages in which Nietzsche turned a quotation from the original third person into first person that reveal his deep absorption in, and identification with, Emerson.⁵⁷

Emerson looks at heroism as “obedience to a secret impulse of an individual's character”⁵⁸ and Nietzsche urges us not to throw away the hero in our soul. Passage after passage from Emerson, for example, the following one from the essay “Uses of Great Men” establishes the close association between the ideas of the two thinkers:

It is natural to believe in great men...All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic; that is, their genius is paramount...Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome.⁵⁹

This excerpt from Emerson's essay plainly reveals the story of a transcontinental travel, an alliance where an American thinker influences the ideas of a German philosopher, and eventually the rethought, reformulated, and defamiliarized idea of Emerson's ‘great men’ travels back to America as Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. The history behind the concept of the comic-book superhero shows that leaving behind its German affiliation, it soon started to wear an American mask by shedding off the exclusivity and philosophical excess that characterized Nietzsche's thought.

With the passing of time literary genres develop around philosophical ideas. In the extended chronology of literatures of the world, the superhero genre appears to be very young as it was established in the late 1950s or 60s. Peter Coogan traces three immediate literary inspirations instrumental behind the making of this genre: the science fiction superman (*Frankenstein*, 1818), the dual-identity avenger vigilante (*Nick of the Woods*, 1837) and the pulp *Übermensch* (*Tarzan of the Apes*, 1912).⁶⁰ He also points out *Adventure Comics* #247 (April 1958) as the clearest example of the word ‘superhero’ to be used to identify a comic-book which “features the first appearance of the Legion of Super-Heroes and their name on the cover”.⁶¹ We have already seen how the concept is inseparably connected with the epic or heroic literatures of the past and these immediate processors reveal that the superhero genre is nothing original but all

its normative principles that ‘define’ the genre—costume, dual identity, power and mission—are familiar tropes derivative of other genres. Jess Nevins argues: “A superhero cannot be defined as being generally distinct from characters of other genres; too many examples of superheroes to name appear in other cultural genres.”⁶² Influenced by Rudiger Bartelmuß’ concept of “heroenkonzep”⁶³ in which a catalogue of heroic motifs are gathered together, he suggests a “superhero continuum”, which brings together all the living and literary superpowers of the Western tradition under one umbrella. However, he excludes the Asian and the African tradition out of his scope assuming that these two traditions did not, in any way, affect the Western concept of the superhero.

No genre can live a life of seclusion away from the other genres. They travel across the world and overlap with each other in incestuous liaison. In spite of the laborious logic of the marketplace, there is a principle of impurity in the heart of the superhero genre which has the power to confound its “sense, order, and reason”.⁶⁴ A close look into the superhero genre also reveals diachronic tendency where it begins dialogue with genres belonging to other time and place, and thereby creates, as Wai Chee Dimock argues, a “fluid continuum”⁶⁵:

They are empirical rather than logical (Cohen) and as such likely to be confronted with specimens they are not able to foresee. Even ancient genres such as tragedy and epic (which Aristotle discusses in the Poetics) get messed up as more and more unrecognizable objects lay claim to those titles.¹ The membership of any genre is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, an other empirical bit of evidence, to be added. These instances make for a peculiar morphology: literature has not solidified and (as far as we know) will never solidify into a congealed shape. Its force of incipience pulls and strains against all taxonomic regimes. The spilling over of phenomena from labels stands here as an ever-present likelihood, a challenge to any systemizing claim.”⁶⁶

Elsewhere, Dimock also observes the predominance of the rule of the mechanical clock that looks at American literature as a homogenous unit and argues for the necessity of seeing across the arbitrary barriers of nation, language, genre and culture:

I have in mind a form of indebtedness: what we called “American” literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread America texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. This double threading thickens time, lengthens it, shadowing in its midst the abiding traces of the planets multitudinous life.⁶⁷

A genre is not a product but an unfinished process which has the power to surprise by breaking away from solidified generic expectations. To think of one genre is to invoke another, and Dimock calls this interactive, translingual, transnational and transcultural frame of relationship where disparate genres share a common space, “deep time”⁶⁸.

Without denying the creativity of the comic medium it can be said, albeit ironically, that the origin of the ‘American superhero’ is not in America but ‘elsewhere’. The superheroic imagination transcends the barrier of national, temporal and generic boundaries. It is not only confined in the limited sphere of comics and has many unpredictable origins and capricious manifestations. The superhero is not a commodity; it is a form of desire, an imaginative structure in formation which defies the commercial claim to restrict it within a closed system. Originating in the human desire to transcend the limits of being human, the superhero is a transcultural phenomenon, a figuration of a figure, which exists in human imagination irrespective of time, place and culture.

This movement towards embracing the ‘planetary time’ results in scale amplification and re-thinking of the concept of the superhero against its narrow history, philosophy and politics. The ethics of ‘planetarity’ requires, writes Spivak, an imaginative flexibility to look into the distant spaces and the future which shocks the idea of belonging.⁶⁹ And in his essay “More than Global” Ranjan Ghosh writes:

[I]t is crucial to read each literary work more or less in detachment from its local roots in a specific author or locale, as well as in detachment from its place in so-called world literature. The work’s sacredness, that is, its complex relation to an imaginary realm, is what is most important about it, more important than its local and global affiliations.⁷⁰

In a critical genealogy the superhero can be traced in pre-capitalist cultural forms of the past and its comic book avatar has often been culturally translated or reformulated in strange and subversive ways in different part of the world. If we follow Ghosh’s arguments, the “sacredness” of the superhero should be understood not in terms of its existence as a popular cultural icon in comics and movies, but in relation to an extended “imaginary realm,” which is comprised of a complex intertwining between the global superhero and its strange, subversive, and culturally translated versions along with all other pre-capitalist figures of human transcendence. The uncanny intrusions of forgotten loyalties from the archive of history and the unanticipated local adaptations, mimics and satires have the power to destabilize the globalized idea of the superhero governed by predetermined laws of a conservative industry, and thereby flout the comic book historian’s desire for cartographic map-making. For Ghosh, sacred is not something godly, fixed and preservable but rather inanely connected and abysmally contaminated which generates shocks and provokes our experiences. Sandeep Banerjee finely summarizes Ghosh’s notion of the sacred as “a literary text’s refusal to be reduced to history *despite* its historicity”.⁷¹

This challenging and often awkward border crossing reveals, as Dimock writes, an “unexpected

web of allegiance”,⁷² and promises, as Ghosh argues, “a “more,” the unexpected web of meaning” which he has termed as “more than global”⁷³:

[L]ocal and global have their usual separateness and rupture; but, in what I argue as “more than global,” such ruptures often become a kind of provocation to question the promise and latency of a dialogue between the two. … So “more than global” is inscribed in what I call “intra-active transculturality” which is not about going beyond the global or reducing the local to a form of representation or meaning-formation. It is the destruction of an expressive and organic “totality” (Rigby 195) but is also a way of providing a sense of a totality, a world-wide-forming totality, whose access is not always in accessibility.⁷⁴

We are permanently trapped in the across and thinking in terms of ‘more than global’ disrupts the teleological logic of the formation of the superhero that is always already deformed in its origin. This promise of the excess or ‘more’ makes the superhero active rather than passive and not confined within space, time and genre as it travels backward to an erased past and forward to a possible future.

The idea of “trans-moment” or “trans-now” is, as propagated by Ranjan Ghosh, “about enacting a communication—difficult and debatable—between apparently incompatible paradigms of thoughts and concepts.”⁷⁵ This type of liberal, queer and even at times unsettling association adds a sudden spark of meaning to a concept randomly used in everyday life. The superhero has often been satirized and there are other uses of the idea in a variety of aesthetic, social, political, economic and cultural spheres. The easy availability of t-shirts with a superhero face or logo in the third-world countries reveals how the local markets often do not care about the international laws regarding the possession of trademark license. The Superman logo in a t-shirt worn by someone in a remote Haitian village totally devoid of any connection with the world of American superheroes opens a new horizon of meaning stripped off of its usual context. The word superhero is also frequently used in totally unpredictable contexts; as in the following

quotation from an article in the Bengali newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* dated May 6, 2018: “The police are like superman in villages. They have to take care of everything from a small pin to faraway Alaska”.⁷⁶ The amateur Hindi documentary *Malegaon Ka Superman [Supermen of Malegaon]* (2012) parodies the superhero movie conventions and depicts the drudgery of the living condition of a small town in India. It portrays a skinny, pencil-thin and sunken cheek superhero fighting a villain whose dream is to set up a tobacco empire and see India filthy: “I want to see all children, youths and old men of India spitting on the road because I love filth very much”.⁷⁷ In its retelling of the origin story, Superman is presented as a young man who works in a factory, addicted to *gutkha*, and hardly earns his both ends meet. Far away from its usual locale, this new avatar saves people from the clutches of a tobacco villain, but ironically, Shafique Shaikh, the actor who plays the role of Superman dies of oral cancer, which developed due to his addiction to *gutkha*. An amateur actor from Bangladesh—Ashraful Alom Saeed—who self-promotes himself as Hero Alom has recently become a social media phenomenon. Alom’s caricature of Superman wearing a *lungi*, a traditional dress for men worn around the waist, and *gamcha*, a thin cotton towel as cape, is hilarious. An ordinary family dog who has an extraordinary ability to tell time in a world where time has gone missing becomes a superhero in Himanjali Sankar’s novel *The Stupendous Timetelling Superdog* (2013). In Saikat Majumdar’s novel *The Scent of God* (2019), a segment is titled as “Supermen.” In a crucial moment of the protagonist’s life, an overwhelming squall of emotion makes him forget his well-organized speech and he vehemently outbursts against the ills of a saffronized institution where he has been trained since his childhood. To break away from tradition and its rituals, the novel upholds, one requires superheroic courage and imagination. These liberal uses of an idea in unusual contexts modify the way of seeing the superhero in straightjacket and are harmful for the dogmatism,

prejudice and narrow-mindedness of the comic book universe. The travel of the superhero from comic book to other spheres of literature and life challenges and subverts the assumed ‘autonomy’ of the genre and forces it to face the opposing feelings of delight and uneasiness generated by the out of place otherness of its own being.

The lethal irony behind the concept of the superhero becomes clear when a *New York Times* columnist, Thomas L. Friedman, used the term “super-empowered individuals” to describe Osama Bin Laden as someone who wants to destroy America because they are “wild”, “crazy” and “revolutionary”.⁷⁸ In Friedman’s account, Laden becomes “a super-empowered angry man”, the leader of a network of people driven by religious fanaticism not sponsored by any state who takes a vow to preserve the sanctity of his own culture against the aggressive influence of liberal America. The question arises if America is wild, free and progressive that resists normalization and welcomes change, as Laden sees it, what is there for the superhero to preserve as Reynolds claims in his book? Apparently it seems that the superheroes are doing the same thing what Bin Laden and others are doing in the name of preserving the sanctity of their culture. Just as Captain America is to the American mind, he is no less a superhero to his own people albeit tagged as a terrorist by another group which is equally eager to protect their own cultural values. In order to normalize the chaotic world, he has to become more than human and the only weapon he can use, in a similar way as a superhero does, is violence.

We have seen that the formula of the superheroes as produced by the comic book industry exhibits a violent generalization of the singularity of an age-old concept. In *On the Origin of Superheroes*, Chris Gavaler rightly denies the possibility of any definition of superhero at all:

Superheroes are the ultimate amalgams, all-swallowing über-characters that consume other genres like black holes. They defy conventional definitions because they contain too many conventions. If that non-

definition sounds cowardly, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein plays the same game with “game” (what traits do marathons, chess, and solitaire share?) . . . definitions work like erasures. I prefer the pointy end of pencils.⁷⁹

In Ghosh’s “intra-active transcultural” space inside a “more than global” world, the superheroes and its others coexist in the same space without denying the singularity or cultural specificity of each other. This ‘worlding’ of the superhero which brings all these ‘apocryphal’ uses together and connects times, spaces, genres, disciplines and cultures in a single thread do not mean dissolution of everything but an eruption of new sense, a defamiliarized understanding of the superhero. Ghosh elaborates:

“More than global” is an affection that leads one to experience the other outside oneself and eventually to know oneself better. The local is known better outside itself as much as the global is understood better in “more than global” which is, however, not beyond global...So finding oneself more in others is to become more of oneself.⁸⁰

When normativity becomes a threat, reconfiguration of a genre is necessary in order to broaden its scope. To borrow Dimock’s terminology, we can say that we need a “regenreing”⁸¹ of the superhero genre.

Superhero Comics: Commodity or Literature?

In the parochial world of superhero comics a pair of global companies—Marvel and Detective Comics—is the joint owners of the descriptive trademark license for the word ‘superhero’ (a word from the English lexicon!) since 1979 and they are eager to establish the superhero as a machinic artifact of the popular culture industry. The descriptive trademark license identifies and distinguishes the comic books produced by them as the source of all the variations of the word ‘super hero’. The S-word has become a forbidden territory and numerous people have been sued for the infringement of trademark laws by using this word in the title of their books. Dan Taylor, a comic artist, was forced to change the title of his series from *Super Hero Happy Hour* to *Hero*

Happy Hour in 2004. In a similar instance, Marvel and DC jointly opposed the use of the s-word in the title of the book *A World without Superheroes*, a comic series created by Ray Felix. What frightened these two giant companies was that, unlike the copyright, descriptive trademark license has to be safeguarded as it can be annulled if the term becomes generic. For instance, ‘cellophane’ and ‘kerosene’ were names of products but gradually they became generic names which can be used by everyone. Brian Cronin cites a very interesting case of defense of the trademark by a company where Xerox coined the slogan—“use a Xerox copy machine to make a copy, not make a Xerox”.⁸² It is clear that to preserve the ritual ‘sacredness’ of the ‘global’ superhero, it is crucial for the market to sever its tie from history, pinpoint its origin with a marker, and establish the ‘fact’ that it has the capacity to transmit its meaning unequivocally. The clever strategic alliance between two arch-rival companies in this matter has an unambiguous message—the science of economy should keep the transgressive power of fiction, which subverts the logic of the capital in check by using all possible ways—authority, money and stringent laws of genre itself. The reductive logic of the capitalist marketplace believes in attractive packaging and circulates the superhero as a narrow and predictable global icon, a naturalized cultural product, which was originated in the comic-book industry. This thesis is a critique of this naïvely essentialist originary tale. It endorses a counterbalancing move, which tackles the linear tendency of globalization by a vertical, or as Ranjan Ghosh would say a “more than global” view of the superhero.

A close scrutiny into the history of the concept of the superhero reveals that leaving behind its German affiliation⁸³, it soon started to wear an American mask by shedding off the exclusivity that characterized Nietzsche’s thought. Curbing Nietzsche’s philosophical excess, it became naturalized, a commodified product of the American comic-book industry. The

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 of the superhero where an accidental origin story, a dual identity, a professed mission, bright costumes and an exaggerated display of power became its constituting elements.

Just as the philosophers disregarded the Nietzschean influence on superhero genre, it was also necessary for the comic book industry to banish the ‘unruly’ Nietzsche, a philosopher who embraces chaos as life. Since its inception⁸⁴, superhero studies have remained as typical of ‘interpretosis’, a frantic search for origin and meaning. Key scholars have kept themselves busy in their effort to build a conservative theory of the superhero genre, which, in spite of its acknowledgement of various influences, tries to create a secure boundary around the concept of the superhero. Coogan’s definition of the superhero is noteworthy:

A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically expresses his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generally distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret.⁸⁵

This tendency is also evident in viewing the superhero as an archetypal figure. In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Reynolds finally rings the death bell of Nietzsche by showcasing the superhero as an archetypal figure in a modern American mythology that upholds the foundational beliefs and morality of a particular culture: “A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended

through heroic action—and defended over and over again....The superhero has a mission to preserve society not to re-invent it".⁸⁶

This tendency to objectify the superhero often does not allow creative freedom to the artists. The making of the superhero comics, on the other hand, is a collaborative process which brings together a group of people—writer, penciler, inker, colourist, letterer, and above all, an overseeing editor. The superhero comics are often produced under strict surveillance that curbs artistic excess and freedom of imagination. The disappearance of the author and his shared responsibility as a member of a team engaged in the production of comic books once prompted Carmine Infantino to demand a removal of his signature “Bob Kane” from all his works. They are craftsmen appointed for producing an art object for the market and this disappearance of the individual artist and the intrusion of the market into art as the most important consideration raise questions regarding originality, creativity and authorship of the comic text. The storyline is simple; it moves around a stereotypical superhero and there is barely any place for writerly experimentation with the concept. In superhero comics, convention precedes invention and intellectual freedom is often curtailed by economic necessity.

With the rise of fandom the ancient distance between the writer and the reader is dissolved in the comic book universe. “Through the discourse between fan and editor”, writes Will Brooker, “comics “authorship” was created and debated.”⁸⁷ A story is commissioned and cancelled, a letter from a dedicated fan can start a controversy and affect the editorial decisions, a fan can be hired as a writer or artist, and a writer or artist can be removed from the project instantly if he is not found ‘suitable’. In other words the artist is transformed into a casual worker in a capitalist enterprise; art becomes secondary, nothing more than a sellable thing in the

marketplace. In one of his 1981 interviews, Alan Moore wished to see less dependence upon big companies and more freedom of artistic expression:

I'd like to see, and this is pure whimsy, a return to the old-fashioned little studio set-ups like [Will] Eisner/[Jerry] Iger had in the thirties and forties. This would give the artists and writers a greater autonomy, since they'd be selling stuff to the companies as a sort of package deal. It would give them a stronger [share of] the merchandising royalties. And I should imagine that some editors might be quite pleased to save time in commissioning one complete job rather than hassling 'round trying to commission two or three separate people.⁸⁸

Walter Benjamin's essay "Author as Producer" (1934) depicts the idea of the author as the epitome of capitalist ideology that needs to be newly theorized. The dislocation of the author in the comic book universe challenges the traditional claim of autonomy of the author in a similar way as Walter Benjamin depicts the author's position as a producer of entertainment for the market. The author is not an autonomous entity. As a producer, he is forced to decide "in whose service he wishes to place his activity".⁸⁹ However the irony is that while for a Marxist like Benjamin it should be the proletariat, the writer of the comic book overtly and shamelessly takes the side of the capitalist. Benjamin's ideal example where all genres dissolve and the reader himself becomes a writer is the Soviet newspaper. He writes:

The newspaper is the arena of this literary confusion. Its content eludes any form of organization other than that which is imposed upon it by the reader's impatience. And this impatience is not just the impatience of the politician waiting for information or that of the speculator waiting for a tip-off: behind it smoulders the impatience of the outsider, the excluded man who yet believes he has a right to speak out in his own interest. The editorial offices have long ago learned to exploit the fact that nothing binds the reader to his newspaper so much as this impatience, which demands fresh nourishment every day; they exploit it by continually throwing open new columns for readers' questions, opinions and protests. Thus the unselective assimilation of facts goes hand in hand with an equally unselective assimilation of readers, who see themselves elevated instantaneously to the rank of correspondents. There is however a dialectical factor

hidden in this situation: the decline of literature in the bourgeois press is proving to be the formula for its regeneration in the Soviet press. For as literature gains in breadth what it loses in depth, so the distinction between author and public, which the bourgeois press maintains by artificial means, is beginning to disappear in the Soviet press. The reader is always prepared to become a writer, in the sense of being one who describes or prescribes.* As an expert - not in any particular trade, perhaps, but anyway an expert on the subject of the job he happens to be in - he gains access to authorship....Authority to write is no longer founded in a specialist training but in a polytechnical one, and so becomes common property. In a word, the literarization of living conditions becomes a way of surmounting otherwise insoluble antinomies, and the place where the words is most debased - that is to say, the newspaper - becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted.⁹⁰

The comic book industry, on the other hand, undergoes a reformulation of the idea of authorship for its own purpose cleverly bypassing Benjamin's dream of dissolution of genres and the Brechtian notion of "refunctioning" or "functional transformation" of forms and instrument. The reader is incorporated into the production process (Alan Moore worked as a toilet cleaner) but the author is stripped of his authority to experiment and transform the work of art.

In the capitalist marketplace, the superhero becomes a mark that can be distinctively used and reused over time. For economic purposes, the identity of the superhero needs to be coherent and definable so that it can be promoted and sold as property for the interest of a person or a particular group. One's property, however, is not an open pasture. It needs to be guarded with a wall to protect it from others. The American investigative journalist Eric Schlosser sees through this dark side of capitalism that seeks to control its products and all means of production:

The history of the twentieth century was dominated by the struggle against totalitarian systems of state power. The twenty-first will no doubt be marked by a struggle to curtail excessive corporate power. The great challenge now facing countries throughout the world is how to find a proper balance between the efficiency and the amorality of the market. Over the past twenty years the United States has swung too far in one direction, weakening the regulations that safeguard the workers, consumers, and the environment.

An economic system promising freedom has too often become a means of denying it, as the narrow dictates of the market gain precedence over more important democratic values.⁹¹

In an interview published in *Crisp Comics*, Felix also strongly argues against the imprisonment of a word which was coined before its use for the comic books:

I had heard in 2006 that Marvel and DC had jointly renewed their trademark on the word Super Hero....Even still, jointly trademarking a word does not entitle any company or individual rights over the word as DC/Marvel had proclaimed. In their eyes they own every and any variation of the word regardless of spelling, variation in a statement or sentence in the English language or foreign. Registration marks do not work that way. It's illegal and impractical. Also, registration gives you legal rights to word usage for a literal element. Meaning a specific product which uses the actual word to sell a product(s). Trademarks/registered marks are never secure and can always be brought into opposition by any party which feels that it is infringing on their registration rights.⁹²

However, very recently in 2016, Marvel and DC acknowledged their defeat and decided to withdraw their case filed against the British author Graham Jules' title *Zero to Superhero: How to Start & Grow Your Business with Zero Cash* (2013). Arguing for a more democratic use of the word superhero Jules says: "I'm a big fan of superheroes and everyone knows Marvel and DC's characters because they are brilliant. But there are many other new authors out there who also have good ideas and it's a shame they can't utilize the word themselves."⁹³

To put a word into the prison house of business is unethical from the literary point of view. What is the possibility of superhero comics becoming literature as part of the comic book industry which is conservative and resists creativity? As early as in the 1940's, Fredrick Wartham waged a war against sensationalization in comics. Jess Nevins describes superhero comics as an immature "capitalist enterprise"⁹⁴ and Aaron Meskin denies the status of literature for most of the mainstream superhero comics on the ground that they are not "creative, original, well-structured and unified".⁹⁵ Alan Moore who changed the faces of the superheroes forever

describes it as “culturally catastrophic” because it disregards the “overwhelming complexities of modern existence” and embraces a simplistic view of the world as presented by Marvel and DC.⁹⁶ In one of his interviews Alan Moore says:

I will say that when I was a child, from about 7 to 12 reading *Superman*, comics were an incredible stimulus for my imagination. They were brilliant...I don't think that superheroes or superhero comics of today are aimed at children anymore.

What are these movies doing other than entertaining us with stories and characters that were meant to entertain the 12-year-old boys of 50 years ago? Are we supposed to somehow embody these characters? That's ridiculous. They are not characters that can possibly exist in the real world. Yes, I did *Watchmen*. Yes, I did *Marvelman*. These are two big seminal superhero works, I guess. But remember: Both of them are critical of the idea of superheroes. They weren't meant to be a reinvigoration of the genre.⁹⁷

It seems that superhero comics never grew up as it remained formulaic, unoriginal and imitative. The artists who make them are professional salaried workers who work for the corporate houses to craft a story under strict editorial directives. Consequently, superhero became a reified concept that ate up its own possibilities. In spite of its philosophical connections through Nietzsche, the concept of the superhero failed to maintain its promises and except in the hands of a few exceptionally talented writers, such as, Alan Moore and Frank Miller, superhero comics failed to become literature if literature is seen as self-reflexive and capable of raising questions regarding its own origin. The clichéd world of the superheroes, Deleuze would have argued, rarely provides shocks, shatters beliefs and provokes new experiences for the readers.

Superhero: Concept, Performativity, Politics

Historically the concept of the superhero has remained a victim of a predetermined theory that conjures a narrow and specific image of an impossible figure that does not exist or exists only in imagination. This type of easy categorization or the commonsensical view of the concept has become a part of everyday life. The concepts of everyday life, unlike the philosophical ones,

uphold a shared, explicable and regulated world of common sense, which demands unquestionable submission to an ethics of universality. They are produced by habit and their origin belongs to a forgotten and unidentifiable moment of the past. Engraved deeply in our unconscious, the concepts of everyday life are readily accepted without any suspicion and recognized immediately as fixed points of reference. They are part of conformist system that reveal “inertia or failure of thinking”⁹⁸. The adherence to norms and disavowal of excess make them static and incapable to capture the fluidity of becoming life.

In a world of fiction, the superheroes often have the power to travel in time, but their embeddedness in a narrow comic book cultural past has barred their possibilities for an open and democratic future, and therein resides the necessity to think the superhero otherwise or in terms of what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls “potentiality”⁹⁹ to think or act. To think is not only the capacity to think the actual or the intelligible, which Agamben calls “potentiality to be”, but it has the power to move beyond what is present to a world of possibilities or “potentiality to not-be” or “impotence”. Concepts are inexhaustible, and if we look at the concept of superhero through Agambenian lenses, we see that it had always remained trapped into a conceivable past or “potentiality to be” that made its identity possible. With all their powers, the comic book superheroes can have only one identity, that is, an archetypal saviour, and they can channelize their power only in one way—towards a self-oriented goal of a great responsibility to save the ‘innocent’. This is their destiny. They have an originary task and they go on working in an iterative logic without causing any real effect or transformation in the society.

Agamben raises a valid question when he says: “How can a man / stop on the street and ask: *this / is my destiny?*”¹⁰⁰ Human beings, says Aristotle and confirms Agamben, do not have any originary vocation and this is what separates them from animals:

Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality.¹⁰¹

In a world where there is no messiah, the superheroes have a messianic task to perform. They are driven by a pre-conscious activity. There is no escape from a destiny that limits and confines their immense potentiality and creates a homogeneous group without any exception. Agamben rejects this homogeneous or dominant mode of understanding through his idea of “inoperativeness”. “Inoperativeness” is not inactivity but an attempt to find other routes of conceiving things which are rule breaking or come out of unorthodox experiences of life. The comic book configuration of the superhero is a denial of its future. The superheroes are always more than what we think and they have immense possibilities which are yet to come into actuality.

The concept of the superhero unfolds a dangerous liaison between philosophy and literature and this work attempts to reconceptualise 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 the superheroes rejecting the familiar trend to see them as nonhuman or posthuman figures. A resistance to see the superheroes as posthuman has long been witnessed within the field itself. Alan Moore opines: “Everybody is the hero in their own narrative....Why shouldn't people from the lower classes be entitled to a mythology of their own?”¹⁰² In *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel* (2005), the arch-enemy of Superman dreams of greatness for all human beings:

All of us – everyone – deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief, but our existence. I think there's something inherently dangerous

when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose the part of ourselves that yearns to be great. Because when forced with a myth? We can't win.¹⁰³

In fact, this trend of humanizing the superheroes started in the Silver age when the world of comics witnessed a turn from mythical to historical and the superheroes gradually became public figures who need to justify their own works. Jamie A. Hughes observes that “With each passing year superheroes are becoming more involved in “real world” scenarios that mirror the current political and social problems”.¹⁰⁴ Thirdly, it emphasizes and tries to explore 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 promotes 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 just a prerogative of a chosen one but open to all. The removal of originary task brings them down to the human world. Sean Carney rightly observes: “they are necessary because they are figures for humanity’s ability to overreach itself, but superheroes cannot be allowed to take over human responsibility from humans”.¹⁰⁵

Once we see the inner logic of the superhero as being workless or without any set task to perform, the concept of the superhero as a unified category disappears and we become aware about the plural character of the superhero. In my thesis, the selection of four unusual figures from diverse genres as superheroes—Satyajit Ray’s Professor Trilokeswar Shonku (science fiction), Narayan Debnath’s Batul the Great (comics), Premendra Mitra’s Ghanashyam Das or Ghanada (Tall Tale), 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 superheroes are not aliens, or posthuman figures born in failed scientific experiments, or accidents inside atomic reactors but they are human agencies with incredible potentiality to form an institution on their own. The world is full of a diversity of superheroes as performative individuals who are not necessarily endowed with brute physical power but gifted with a super ability which differentiates them from others. The intelligence and scientific creativity of Shonku, the raw power of Batul, the unriddling ability of Birbal and the art of storytelling of Ghanada—all these are unique qualities that posit them against expected social ideals. A reiterative performance of their authority and skill shape their distinctive identity as anti-democratic and elite subjects capable of extraordinary achievements.

“[I]n literary studies”, writes Judith Butler, “performative politics refers to certain acts of self-constitution”¹⁰⁶ where a fictional identity is constructed by “stylized repetition of acts through time”.¹⁰⁷ In her account, human subjectivity is nothing more than a “naturalized effect”¹⁰⁸ of meaning and being where a person’s profession, speech, gestures, movement and style—all contribute to the making of an apparently stable theory of identity. Whatever task the superhero vows to endorse, an exceptional performance constitutes his identity and gives him authority. To keep this authority intact, he has to perform repetitively. This performative power lends him authority to create his own space contrary to aggressive social objectification and turns the socially unacceptable into acceptable.

However this performative identity of the superhero may falter and there are moments of breakdown when the superhero fails to create the intended or desired effect. J. L. Austin notices that all performatives are “subject to certain whole dimensions of unsatisfactoriness to which all

actions are subject".¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, in his reading of Austin's text, "Signature, Event, Context", Derrida finds out a structural risk involved in performativity as every repetition carries a germ of difference:

A standard act depends as much upon the possibility of being repeated, and thus potentially of being mimed, feigned, cited, played, simulated, parasited, etc., as the latter possibility depends upon the possibility said to be opposed to it. And both of them 'depend' upon the structure of iterability which, once again, undermines the simplicity of the oppositions and alternative distinctions. It blurs the simplicity of the line dividing inside from outside, undermines the order of succession or of dependence among the terms.¹¹⁰

The superhero's identity depends upon the effect of the spectacular. Showing only what he wants to show the performative power of the superhero's activity brings into existence a being that he speaks of. Diverting attention from the inherent ruptures, hollowness and paradoxes, the superhero forcefully tries to restrict the possibility of any other interpretation of the subject. There are moments when his sovereignty as a subject is lost and he needs to regain his intended authority. There are "misfires" as Austin would say, or "counterperformatives" as Donald MacKenzie and Alice Bamford would say, which have the power to disrupt all efforts of producing a coherent subject. In her essay "Performative Agency", Judith Butler observes:

[I]t is only under certain kinds of conditions, and with no degree of predictability that theoretical models successfully bring into being the phenomenon they describe. There are occasions in which they fail, or there are 'counterperformative' instances when inverse effects are produced, and both the explanatory and anticipatory dimensions of theory are foiled.¹¹¹

The everyday individual who becomes a superhero is more prone to failure than his counterpart hero because he does not have the sovereign authority and recognition of the hero as a pillar of the state. The hero's authority depends upon illocution; his speech is his command, which demands submission from others. The superhero as a common man depends upon perlocution, which is conditional and depends upon his power of persuasion, external reality and chance

factors. The active agency that Austin discovered behind the speech acts becomes dispersed and there is no wonder that Butler finds a very “limited performative agency”¹¹² behind performative acts.

The intervention of the superhero in the normative social life and his ethics of action raise questions regarding free will or the capacity of human agencies to shape the world. While thinking of the subject Butler humourously notices a feature that is symptomatic of the traditional superhero culture: “many people do act *as if* they were not formed, and that is an interesting posture to behold”.¹¹³ No human being can escape or transcend the biological, linguistic and cultural elements that form their subjectivity. What does it mean to ‘do’ or ‘act’ when the ‘I’ is formed well before one becomes aware of his self? Does doing and acting designate the same thing or doing is merely mechanical and acting involves the presence of an agency that is sovereign and has significant control over the act? Forgetting the Derridian implication that all performatives are in a sense performances, Butler tried to distinguish the conflated nature of performance that is a bounded act and performativity that is a re-citation of a norm that precedes the performer.¹¹⁴ Performativity cannot be fully separated from performance and this opens up the possibility of choice for the subject whether to follow a norm or reject it and embrace another alternative. Butler also acknowledges that “Of course, it is possible to break with certain norms as they exercise the power to craft us, but that can happen only by the intervention of countervailing norms.”¹¹⁵ This is perhaps what Nietzsche had in mind when he proclaimed many of his paradoxical comments on the possibilities of self-creation. In spite of knowing about the deterministic nature of the universe, he prioritizes agency over structures and norms. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes:

To become what one is, one must not have the slightest notion of what one is . . . The whole surface of consciousness—consciousness is a surface must be kept clear of all great imperatives . . . Meanwhile the

organizing ‘idea’ that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down—it begins to command; slowly it leads us back from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares single qualities and fitness that will one day prove to be indispensable as a means towards the whole—one by one, it trains all subservient capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, ‘goal’, ‘aim’, or ‘meaning’.¹¹⁶

For Nietzsche, genuine agency is possible by following an individual ethic of doing that creates new convention and establishes a model of identity that do not conform to the age old customs of society and culture. Ken Gemes and Christopher Janaway elaborate:

According to Nietzsche, most humans, being merely members of the herd, are merely passive conduits for various disparate forces already existing and operating around them. Some individuals, due perhaps to conscious design, but more likely due to fortuitous circumstances, actively collect, intensify, and order some of those disparate forces, and create a new direction for them, thereby, in fortuitous circumstances, reorienting, to some degree, the whole field of forces in which we all exist. It is these individuals, according to Nietzsche, who deserve the honorific ‘person’, who by imposing their strong will exercise a form of free will and genuine agency”.¹¹⁷

The centrality of a dominant task in the life of superheroes and reiteration of this act constitutes his identity, which is not a compulsion as Butler would love to see it, but a conscious choice. Though not beyond the constructive forces that shape life, the superhero creates his own convention and has an active agency that places him against the tide of life. They are always already enmeshed in everyday chores of the society, and yet they are not normalized beings. They are outsiders and peripheral figures who are able to create exclusivity around their own selves through the performance of a disruptive gesture—a difference. The principle of excess that works in their performance has the power to dismantle the limit set by normativity and suggests fresh opening for social, political and ethical thought.

The superheroes are synchronic figures capable of rewriting history on their own. In opposition to Richard Reynolds’ thesis where he upholds the superheroes as a preserver of social

values, the superheroes possess a breaking force and an iconoclastic spirit. They do not fit into the world but manipulates the world to fit into their own schemes of life and establish a parallel discourse of power that is emancipatory as well as effective. They are very often challenged, refuted and made the butt of ridicule because in the rise of democracy no one loves to see one among them to become more important in the social ladder. Yet they succeed and create a grand effect by their ability to do what cannot be done by others. The superhero may not reach the “normative horizon of its aspirations”,¹¹⁸ yet they maintain a gravity that cannot be ignored.

The function of the present time is predominantly to promote the idea of the equal status for all its citizens and the superhero’s promotion of elitism and hierarchy is unfashionable and even shocking in a world of populism. What is the position of the superheroes in a world culture that endorses equality and abhors hierarchy? My work suggests that the acceptance of the paradoxical presence of the Aristotelian idea of “good hierarchy” in democracy is healthy. Without hierarchy the world appears to be idealistic and impractical. This defense of hierarchies is based on what can be called “appraisal respect”, a kind of admiration that we should have for those who exhibit certain excellences in their respective fields: “accepting that others know more or can do more than us communicates and enables an openness to learning and growth”¹¹⁹ Among all the writers in colonial Bengal there is only one Tagore who has earned an irrefutable position by his craft of writing. To deny that he is the most talented Bengali writer is the other name of promoting a culture of mediocrity that forcefully tries to make everyone equal. It might be politically correct but obviously the most foolish thing to do.

However we cannot see the superheroes as utopian figures with a call for impossible social action or a magical solution of the problems of the human world. They are human beings but it will be fallacious if we see them as merely governed by the same laws of mundane social

life. Both these positions disregard their anti-establishment and anti-theoretical impulses—one being impossible and the other as responsible. As figures of supreme poetic imagination, they represent the Dionysian substratum of the human mind that harbours a passion for creation. They do not represent but create possibilities as the chaotic energy of the superheroes threatens the prevalent order of society by performing a difference. Instead of upholding any particular cultural value as the slogan ‘the American way’ indicates, they often flaunt the tradition they are embedded in and can never become an integral part of society as their more influential counterpart, heroes. Their actions are capable to modify and eventually change what Charles Taylor calls the “social imaginary”¹²⁰ which always aims to secure a way of fitting together, or common understanding among the people. With a flamboyant and free display of individuality, they infiltrate and transform the seemingly familiar and ideal space of democracy. As they do not conform, people may call them mad and even laugh at them but they cannot ignore them because they uphold the magnetic power of the new, the different and the unthought. In a psychoanalytic reading the repetition compulsion of the superheroes can be seen as an effect of a trauma—murder and loss, accident in atomic reactor or failed scientific experiment—but this work looks at this ritualized repetition of performances as a pleasure principle that provides the superheroes their power, scope and stability to maintain their asymptotic relationship with the society. Their habitual performances set them apart and serve as a continuous reminder that keeps their position secure in a society that is forgetful and not capable of absorbing otherness in the mainstream politics of cultural life.

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