

Chapter 2

Tussle with the Muscle

There seems to be a new scent in the air: a sense of new and different possibilities; new ways for us to interact with history.¹

- Alan Moore, "Introduction" in Mike Mignola, *Hellboy: Wake the Devil*

The Bengali comic-book artist Narayan Debnath's (1925-) choice of the name for his 'hero' is quite unusual for a man who is destined to be 'super'.² In Bengali, the word *batul* refers to 'hand catapult' and yet in another sense it means 'short'. A catapult is not a weapon which can be controlled easily. There is always a chance of overdoing things or missing the mark. We often see that Batul does not have full knowledge and control of his power—"You don't have any idea about your actual capacity!"—and everyone around him knows that "anything can happen when Batulda is here."³ The realization of overdoing things always comes later: "Oops! What have I done?"⁴ Problematizing the position more, the classical Indian superheroes with great power in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*—the *mahaviras*—have always been depicted as colossal figures—tall and stout as the *saal* tree. In spite of the fact that an undersized hero is doubtful enough to excite popular imagination, Debnath portrays him as short on purpose. Batul is reckless, strong and often responsibly irresponsible and his shortness is odd enough to produce

curiosity and laughter in a culture where the practice of body shaming has been normalized. The ironic juxtaposition of an adjective *batul* as a proper name with another adjective ‘great’ and his existence as a subject who produces laughter by silly superheroic acts thus destabilizes the unwritten code of the hero / superhero cult. Batul is an unconventional superhero whose name and appearance quite unconsciously parodies his own self.

The Superhero Question

In his early career, Debnath might have been influenced by Dudley D. Watkins’ *Desperate Dan* (1937) and Hal Foster’s *Tarzan* (1929), but the ‘flayed look’ of the superhero which started with Brune Hogarth and is present in almost all other American superheroes, is missing in *Batul the Great* (1965). Instead of the detailed musculature, Debnath adorns Batul with an improbably proportioned body of flat muscles, a peculiarly puffed chest and very thin waist and legs. His costume—black shorts and orange or pink skintight *genji*—almost bald head and naked feet (because shoes last less than a week in his feet) give no indication of his superpower. His body makes us wonder how is it possible for his skinny legs to balance his top heavy body which can push iron beams inside the earth with minimum effort. The first glimpse of his peculiarly exaggerated body is nothing but a cartoonist’s delight.

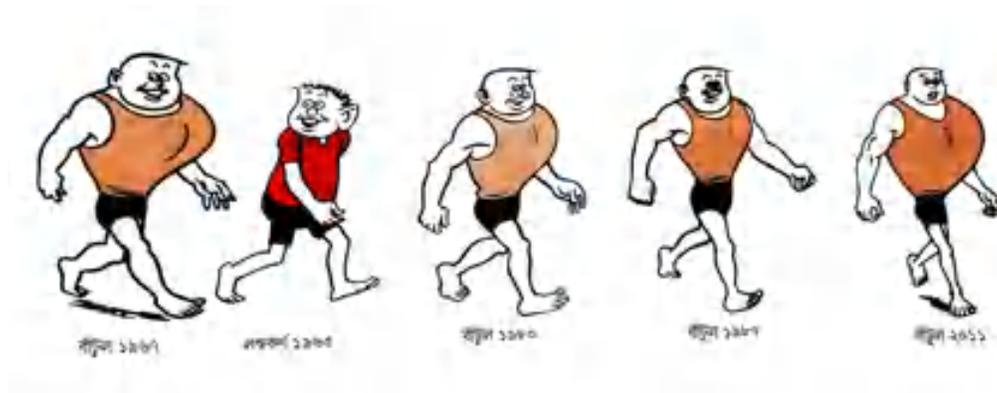


Fig. 1 The Evolution of Batul’s stature

Following Friedrich Jameson, Debnath's *Batul the Great* can be regarded as a "pastiche" or "blank parody"—a postcolonial rewriting of the Western superhero genre—leaving aside its postmodern connotation. In *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson writes:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.⁵

It is a form of "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past" where we are aware of the history, and yet we are unable to find our connection to history, and "The new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time".⁶ There is no wonder that during my conversation with Debnath he seemed to be quite reluctant to align Batul with the western superheroes:

A girl from ETV requested me to declare that Batul is a superhero, and I told them, "Well, if you say so I'm also saying that he is a superhero". I never said this myself. She requested me to say this and I said that he is a superhero, Bengal's superhero.⁷

When Debnath started the series in 1965, Batul did not have his extraordinary superpower and in last fifty years, though basically unchanged, Batul has gone through a few evolutionary phases in terms of his physical as well as mental characteristics. In his early years, like any other person, he was afraid of crocodiles, bears or angry goats and would run madly away from them. In another interview Debnath has provided us a detailed account of this transformation. We come to know that the publishers of Shuktara wanted Batul to do what Captain America did for his country, and during the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation, Debnath decided to transform Batul into a superpower.⁸ It was wartime when Batul had been given an impenetrable body, bullets started bouncing back from his chest, and in his nationalistic zeal he started fighting with tanks



Fig. 2 Batul fighting the Pakistani terrorists in Kargil

and wiping out the enemies to save his nation. Again, following the popular demands Batul became an advocate of neo-nationalist propaganda at the end of the twentieth century. Two major national events—the Indo-Pak war in Kargil (1999) and the killing of the pilgrims by terrorists on their way to the Amarnath Temple (2002)—have been highlighted by Debnath in a series called *Aekai Aeksho (One Equal to Hundred)* where Batul protects the pilgrims of Amarnath, helps the *jawans* to fight the Pakistani terrorists, and kicks them back to their own territory. The advent of Batul, the patriot, however, can be seen as an aftereffect of these shocking events which resulted in a proliferation of popular neo-nationalistic films in Bollywood: “Don’t be afraid, I’ll not punish you. I just want to say one thing that you are deceiving people in the name of those who are fighting and dying for us, for our country.”⁹ In Debnath’s representation, the enemies beyond the line of control often utter a few easily recognizable Arabic words—*iblish*, *kotol*, *dojokh*, or *behesth*—popular innuendos insinuating ‘their’ religious as well as national identity. This accentuation on the Muslim identity of the terrorists might not be just accidental. Under its comical note, it reflects the deadly hostility between two countries declared free at one midnight in 1947. Batul subscribes to this inherent ideological contradiction of identity politics, a reminder of Debnath’s own ambivalent position in a network of incorporation and elimination into the society.

Now the question arises—can we call Batul a superhero? To designate someone as a superhero who does not follow the conventions of the superhero genre can surely raise eyebrows of the critics. Batul does not wear mask. He does not display any supernatural power or use superior technology too. Yet he accomplishes numerous missions impossible because of his impenetrable body and tremendous raw power. Whereas the superheroes have a strained relationship with the society, he is much more absorbed in community relationships in

comparison to his conventional counterparts. Without the mask to hide his power, he does not even have an alter-ego which is full of insecurity and doubts. He has no origin story and has no alleged mission as Spiderman, Superman or Captain America has: “With great power there must also come . . . great responsibility”¹⁰. It is only in a post-1971 issues, we find Batul to express such an obligation: “I must go if people are in danger!”¹¹ The source of his power is not known. He doesn’t have Samson’s lock, Chota Bhim’s *laddu*, Mandrake’s hypnotic power, Thor’s hammer or Gupi/Bagha’s magic blessings. Only he consumes a huge amount of food which might clarify the secret of his power. As Sumana Roy puts it succinctly, “In a very Hindu way perhaps, it was all inside him”¹².

The Ethical Subtext and Counterperformativity

While defining comics David Kunzle indicates morality as a basic marker—it tells “a story which is both moral and topical”.¹³ The ethical subtext of *Batul the Great* is grounded on the colloquial or age old morality of Bengali culture. Growing up in the first half of the twentieth century, Debnath’s ideas are aligned to proverbial knowledge with a binary politics of its own. From his inflexible ideological position, he has to draw a clear line of demarcation—right and wrong, good and bad, true and false, hero and villain—for his readers and dissociate them from the evil influences for ‘their own benefit’. The others of the society are not normal beings and restoration of norm by making them ideal citizens is to be done either with prize or punishment.

There are, however, contradictions in Batul’s axiomatic position as a moralist. Though he is a representative of a marginalized genre his thematic as well as moral content reaffirms the traditional and the established. He experiments with a new form but the content shows nothing innovative in terms of morality. As an authoritative figure Batul is a victim of a knowledge system that has a predefined notion of either/or. This politics of transforming the other into the

same through reward and punishment often fails due to the untranslatability of the other into the mainstream knowledge system. The constant effort of the other to escape the confinement into normativity blocks the possibility of any productive communication.

The attempt to tame and civilize the ‘whipping boys’ becomes problematic when in *Marshal Arts*, with all his superhuman abilities, he loses way in a dark and smoggy day and the little child led by intuition returns home safely. A few of his contradictory attitudes include: (i) as a green warrior he saves tigers but quite unexpectedly hunts deer; (ii) he saves snakes but sells bears to the circus; and (iii) quite uncaring of the consequences, he breaks bridges to catch the ‘criminals’. The peace maker is rash in his actions and quite unknowingly destroys other’s peace of mind. The collateral damage due to his heroic exploits destroys beyond recognition, yet it is ignored as inconsequential because death and destruction are often affectless in an apparently illogical comic world. The beating of the criminals and young delinquents are often done only to enjoy the perverse pleasure of beating and except a few acts of negotiations, as with the robbers in “*Ekai Eksho*”, he relies chiefly on a problematic use of violence as a necessity—a weapon to implement the law and order of the society.

As the law-keeper of the society, Batul relentlessly works to implement the accepted codes of morality. The moralization is done using conventional proverbial codes—“Virtue proclaims itself”, “To earn fame by spending another's money”, and “A bully is always a coward”. Debnath makes Batul a typical Bengali cultural exclusivist who abhors being lured towards the excesses of the popular whether it is behaviour, movie or money. In *Batul the Great* “The cultural development of the schoolchild became a battleground” between the “civilizing objectives of the education system” and “illicit pleasures of popular culture”.¹⁴ The delinquents in Debnath’s comic strips wants to enjoy the excess of life even if by robbing a bank: “We’ll

have a storm of fun”¹⁵. They do not accept power passively but form their own paradigm of resistance. They are also unwilling to go to the school, play every prank possible on the teachers and Batul himself, and often bombard the school building itself: “Laws should be made to close the schools. It’s just useless expenditure of energy”.¹⁶ The panoptic techniques used by Batul to track the categorically deviant and rehabilitate them into the mainstream through punitive action remains a failure. The surveillance and severe punishment cannot transform the delinquents into law-abiding individuals but rather their humiliation gives birth to a kind of disgust for both the law and its arbitrator. The virulent adversaries are often knowingly in direct conflict with the authority. The adopted children of Batul as well as the ‘anti-socials’ often group together and plan to kill Batul to become free, an indication of the failure of Batul’s civilizing mission. They reveal a Plebian instinct displaying a fundamental questioning of power. In their private space, which is beyond the reach of Batul’s authority, he is derogatorily addressed as *batkul*, *udkhul*, *damra* or *dharibaaz*. However, this personal space is often invaded and Batul learns about many of their plans in advance with the help of the sidekick Lambakarna (often derogatorily addressed by their adversaries as *langboat* meaning a tail). One who has a large year as the name suggests, he has a superpower—he can hear everything even from a mile away. The politics of resisting the crude power, which always showers in the form of kick, box or hit, provides them a kind of autonomy within the oppressive structure. Batul always tries to bring them under control, and though he apparently succeeds, they often remain beyond his iron grip and he ends up with invectives—*hatachchara*, *khacchar*, *bitle*, *morkot*.

Batul the Idiot

The extraordinary muscle power of Batul is a ‘problematic blessing’ because his foolish, superhuman, and thoughtless gestures often cause trouble for his neighbours—he breaks bridges,

makes shortcut through their house, and often unknowingly hits people so hard that it grows potato on their head. The peculiar thing is that his skin is hard and impenetrable like a rhinoceros and he even does not realize what terrible things he is doing. Batul also cannot resist the temptation for food. The love for food almost leading to avarice is a recurrent leitmotif in *Batul the Great*—a reminder of the Bengali preoccupation with delicious and spicy cuisine. He has aversion for nothing—from dog food to bear meat, from shark to swordfish and even coal tar—he can eat anything with pleasure. It is not surprising that many of the issues are full of Tom and Jerry-like hide and seek games between Batul and his adversaries—the two young boys—where they madly try to protect their food from each other. Sometimes they make Batul a fool and win the food and at other times Batul makes a fool of them.

In “One and only Batul” we come across a story where he tries to make a fence around his home for privacy but when this effort results in a series of accidents for a horse-carriage and his neighbours, they decide to make the fence for him themselves. The new fence not only gives Batul his desired privacy but makes him a total outcaste in the town.¹⁷ In fact, he often uses more power than it is actually necessary and this ‘little more’ in his language becomes deadly for others. Life with a superhero may not always be beneficial but a nightmare.

At times Batul is stupid and he often becomes the victim of petty childish pranks making us burst into laughter. Everybody, including the worthless police officers around him, knows that he has an empty pot inside his brain:

Your muscles will not work much upon Pakal Peno. He has brain. He will slip just like a Pakal fish. If you want to catch him, Batul, you have to use head instead of your body! . . . If you see him, then inform me. This job is to be done not with muscles but with brain.¹⁸

Yet his enormous strength often accidentally supplements his lack of brain. In the same story Batul unintentionally pushes the police officer so hard that his head goes inside the stock of a



Fig. 3 Batul loses his food

Tree, and when he tries to bring him out holding his legs, he does it with so much power that the man comes out like a rocket and hits Pakal Peno who was passing by only to lay him flat onto the ground. With irony and teasing humour, Batul replies: “What you said was right, officer. You have taken him in your grip by your head. Ha ha!”¹⁹

The overdesire to serve people often ends up for him in paying compensation for what he does. The police does not like him because, uninvited, he does their work and wins people’ praise. Yet he is a common man fallible in every step of life. In one place, Batul fails to recognize a bear in darkness and calls it aunty ending up in hilarious laughter for the readers. He



Fig. 4 Batul catches a criminal by accident

goes to a salon to shave and is ridiculed by the barber as he does not have beard, the criminals use his power to break the jail or bank, and the doctors thank him because his superheroic exploits bring many people to the hospital. The people around him always have a hesitant feeling

for him. They often seek his help knowing that he is a disaster: “Just when I have seen Batul, I know that something unusual is going to happen.”²⁰

An Orphan Again!

In one of her essays, Sumana Roy asks a very crucial question: “Why are all these comic-book superheroes orphans?”²¹ The answer is, perhaps, hidden in the paradoxical concept of time and death in the comic books where the superhero plays the dual role of both a common man and a mythical figure. Umberto Eco writes:

The mythological character of comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore, he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman); but since he is marketed in the sphere of a “romantic” production for a public that consumes “romances,” he must be subjected to a development which is typical, as we have seen, of novelistic characters.²²

The comic-book superhero is a living myth, a performative being, whose identity depends upon a continuous re-appropriation of his trivial, often unimportant acts. In his case, the meaning of his life is not attached to death as it is with the ancient heroes nor can he grow old and retire from his inconsequential job. He has to entertain people for long, at least, as long as he is saleable in the market. To solve this problem the comic artist brings in confusion in the concept of time. In this world the real important time is the time of momentary action. This moment of action, however, is not entirely free from the traces of the past and predicts a very vague anticipation of the future. Movement in time is denied by keeping each story isolated yet somehow loosely connected to the other stories of the series and they are quite self-sufficient. There is no in-between flow of time from one frame to the next and Batul happily jumps from one action to another to overcome the endless planning and plotting of the same the anti-socials and juvenile delinquents.

Peter Coogan tackles this orphan question in another way by bringing in the idea of freedom in superhero comics:

Superheroes stand as metaphor for freedom—the freedom to act without consequences and the freedom from the restrictions of gravity, the law, families, and romantic relationships. Perhaps this is why so many superheroes are free of their families as unmarried adult orphans.²³

The superheroes might have a family affiliation as depicted in the origin stories (Batul does not have one though), but their relationships with other people have always remained extremely problematic, complicated, and hazy and they are denied a chronological biography. They act, but “To act” means as Umberto Eco says, “to “consume” himself”²⁴, the comic artist keeps the superhero always busy in merry-go-round activities. His stories are only remotely related to each other because clear relationship between them would create a sense of continuity leading towards death. Batul cannot have a meaningful romantic relationship because he cannot grow up in time, he cannot die as he has to satisfy the enormous appetite of adventure of the modern readers and he cannot marry because marriage and procreation mean gradual movement towards death. Eco

Explains:

Superman comes off as a myth only if the reader loses control of the temporal relationships and renounces the need to reason on their basis, thereby giving himself up to the uncontrollable flux of stories which are accessible to him and, at the same time, holding on to the illusion of a continuous present. Since the myth is not isolated exemplarily in a dimension of eternity but in order to be assimilated must enter into the flux of the story in question, this same story is refuted as flux and seen instead as an immobile present.²⁵

The banishment of young women from *Batul the Great* reveals Debnath’s ‘politics of asexuality’. Debnath belongs to an older and conservative generation who are uncomfortable with the idea of free-mixing between children. Women are very rare in *Batul the Great*, and wherever they are, they are presented in the form of an old aunt. When I asked him about the lack of female characters in his works, he hesitates and finally says: “The magazine in which it is

getting published belongs to children and that is why no female characters have been introduced in it.”²⁶ It is a bizarre logic, indeed. On the other hand, in spite of working in a western medium, he is also highly critical of the rampant visual culture on television influenced by the west and its effect on the blooming minds, and as a guardian, seems to guard Batul from any possibility of a romantic relationship. To Debnath, the word ‘love’ (sex is a far cry) is part of a cultural paranoia where childhood is an imagined utopia—‘pure’, ‘innocent’, and free from all ‘carnal’ desires.

The unique predicament of the comic-book superhero situates him in the horizon—in a no man’s land between the human and the post/non/trans-human. He is not human because he exceeds all the humanly conceivable limits of power; he is human because he is the creation of man, and therefore shares the pitfalls of his own creator. The superhero, to use Agamben once more, is essentially “inoperative” and without any originary “vocation” like the other human beings.²⁷ “Inoperativeness”, writes Agamben, is that possibility, which will never be actualized. Had the superhero been something other than human, he might have actualized many things, which are deemed to be unthinkable for the human beings. But the superhero cannot even think what human beings cannot; he is a plaything in the human artist’s imagination and does what he is impelled to do. He often has a much professed vocation though, that is, one of saving people in disgrace, but it is neither obligatory nor inherent rather it is imposed upon him by his creator, or to be more precise, the market. The unending struggle of the superhero to overcome the ingenious plots of the ever-plotting villains brings in a kind of circularity and stasis in the superhero’s life. The superhero himself does not act except when the villains force him to act. He cannot prevent anything. The immobile superhero, despite his immense “potentiality” to act, does not affect any real change in the world. As powerful as Batul is, he could solve, or at least try to solve the primary needs of the world—food, clothing and shelter for the hungry and

dispossessed. Yet he remains there with his scanty conservative morals and keeps himself busy in a small town saving the damsels in distress, fighting the Pakistani terrorists, catching bank robbers, and befooling himself by the childish pranks of two extremely creative juvenile delinquents. He is born for entertaining people with the joy of scantiness and any act of changing the world is impossible for him because “economics . . . denies any ‘definitive’ take on a hero”²⁸.

A Hunger for Redundancy

What is the necessity of the comic-book superheroes then? Is it only wish-fulfillment, or as Umberto Eco would say: this is a “hunger for redundancy” which keeps the interest of the readers alive in spite of the repetitiveness of superhero comics? Superhero comics, however, do not have the dynamism and creativity of wish-fulfillment as we find in this beautiful poem “Suddenly If” by Premendra Mitra:

Suddenly if, by some magic,
I’m made the king for tonight,
I’ll decree a few laws,
One or two, I’ll severely punish.
...
I’ll topsy-turvy the whole world,
Break all the do’s and don’ts everywhere,
Make a few laws of my wish,
And celebrate the event of being the king.
However mighty the truth be,
If it’s strict, it’ll be punished by me.
Suddenly if, by some magic,
I’m made the king for tonight.²⁹

The king or the hero of the poem might be a tyrant in future but he explodes with an endless possibility of new beginnings. Heidegger recognizes the immense possibility of the heroes when

he says: “the heroes we choose focus our common sense of what is most important in life, shaping our feel for which battles we should fight as well as how we should go about fighting them”³⁰. Batul’s story reverses this statement in its attention for scantiness and shows that the superheroes might not be heroes. We might wish to have the power of a superhero to become a hero. We might wish the power of Batul not to be like Batul. What deters us is the farcical situation that Batul always creates. We would love to be Superman though. The grandeur and personality of Superman would easily dupe us but Batul is a fool like us. We would never befool ourselves by knowing that we are fools.

Endnotes:

¹ Alan Moore, "Introduction," in Mike Mignola, *Hellboy: Wake the Devil* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, 1997), V.

² The comic-book culture in Bengal is barely one hundred years old. Before the arrival of Narayan Debnath in the 1950s, comics were not an accomplished literary-artistic medium in Bengal. The first Bengali comics with speech balloon appeared in 1921 and its creator was Sukhlata Rao (1886-1969). It began to flourish with Prafullachandra Lahiri's (1900-1975), popularly known as Kafi Khan, works serialized in the pages of *Jugantar Patrika*. However, it moved to maturity very quickly. Shaking off its earlier dependence on the Western form, it became original in terms of theme if not in technique in the works of Debnath, especially *Batul the Great* (1965). See Biswadeb Gangyopadhyay, "Introduction," in *Kafi Khan Samagra* (Kolkata: Lalmati, 2012). 5-7.

³ Narayan Debnath, *Batul Samagra* (Kolkata: Deb Sahitya Kutir, 2011), 5. All translations from Narayan Debnath's *Batul Samagra* are mine unless noted otherwise.

⁴ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 6.

⁵ Friedrich Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17.

⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.

⁷ Narayan Debnath, personal interview by Aditya Misra, 24th April, 2011.

⁸ Narayan Debnath, "Interview: Narayan Debnath," interview by Chirantan Kundu, , *Parabas* 4, no. 4 (2001), <http://www.parabaas.com/PB22/LEKHA22/bNarayan22.html>

⁹ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 502. The victory of the Indian soldiers over the villainy of Pakistan is the main theme of these movies. For instance, *Border* (1997), *Mission Kashmir* (2000) and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) are a few of them.

¹⁰ Randy Duncan & Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, Culture* (NY & London: Continuum, 2009), 231.

¹¹ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 507.

¹² Sumana Roy, "Small-town chest-puff: Revisiting Narayan Debnath's *Batul the Great*", *Himal Southasian* (May 2010),

<https://www.himalmag.com/small-town-chest-puff/>

¹³ Aaron Meskin, “Defining Comics?,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): 379. JSTOR.

¹⁴ Procter, James. *Stuart Hall* (London & NY: Routledge, 2004), 20.

¹⁵ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 7.

¹⁶ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 1.

¹⁷ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 103..

¹⁸ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 357.

¹⁹ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 358.

²⁰ Debnath, *Batul Samagra*, 424.

²¹ Roy, “Small-town chest-puff”.

²² Eco, “The Myth”, 15.

²³ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of the Genre* (Austin: Monkeybrain, 2006),14

²⁴ Eco, “The Myth”, 15.

²⁵ Eco, “The Myth”, 16.

²⁶ Narayan Debnath, personal interview by Aditya Misra.

²⁷ See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford U P, 2009), 1-25.

²⁸ Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, *The Power* , 234.

²⁹ Premendra Mitra, “Suddenly If,” *Kobitasamagra* (Kolkata, Signet: 2015), 615-16. Translation of this Bengali poem is mine.

³⁰ Ian Thomson, “Deconstructing the Hero,” in *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. Jeff McLaughlin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 100.