

Thinking across Time, Genre and Culture: Theorizing the Superhero in a “More than Global” World

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You wonder if everyone and everything in the world is intimately related...You pluck a thread and it leads to...everywhere (Mukherjee 231).

Superheroes are the ultimate amalgams, all-swallowing uber-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 (Gavaler 4).

[A] concept also has a becoming that involves its relationship with concepts situated on the same plane. Here concept link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems, and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have different histories. In fact, having a finite number of components, every concept will branch off toward other concepts that are differently composed but that constitute other regions of the same plane, answer to problems that can be connected to each other, and participate in a co-creation. A concept requires not only a problem through which it recasts or replaces earlier concepts but a junction of problems where it combines with other coexisting concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 18).

I

“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” (xvi). 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 movement from one place to another calls 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.

II

In the parochial world of superhero comics a pair of global companies, Marvel and Detective Comics, are the joint owners of the trademark licence for the word “superhero” (a word from the English lexicon) since 1979, and they are eager to establish the superhero as a machinic artefact of the popular culture industry. Dan Taylor, a comic artist, was forced to change the title of his new series from *Super Hero Happy Hour* to *Hero Happy Hour* in 2004; and in a similar instance, Marvel and DC jointly opposed the use of the s-word in the title of *A World without Superheroes*, a comic series created by Ray Felix. What frightened these two giant companies was that, unlike the copyright, descriptive trademark 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. A familiar case of defence of the trademark by a company was the slogan coined by Xerox: “use a Xerox copy machine to make a copy, not make a Xerox” (Cronin).

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. This 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 naturalised cultural product, which was originated in the comic-book industry. This essay is a critique of this naïvely essentialist originary tale. It endorses a counterbalancing move, which tackles the linear tendency of globalisation by a vertical, or as Ranjan Ghosh would say, a “more than global” view of the superhero. The effective life of the superhero lies, the essay argues, not in its isolated existence, but in its traveling across the world and engagement to a convoluted network of intra-active relationships within a more nuanced and larger literary and philosophical culture.

Wai Chee Dimock 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 (Dimock, *Through Other Continents* 3).

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” (Derrida and Ronell 57). 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, and it is not only confined in the limited sphere of comics. It 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. A close look into the genre reveals a crisscross of entangled relationships where it begins dialogue with genres belonging to other time and place, and thereby creates, as Dimock argues, a “fluid continuum” (“Genres” 1378). 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. To think of the superhero genre is to invoke another inevitably, and Dimock calls this interactive, translanguaging, transnational and transcultural frame of relationship where disparate genres share a common space, “deep time” (*Through Other Continents* 4).

This movement towards embracing the “planetary time” results in a scale amplification and re-thinking of the superhero genre against its narrow history, philosophy and politics. The ethics of “planetary” requires, writes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an imaginative flexibility to look into the distant spaces and the future which shocks the idea of belonging (31). 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 (111).

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, its strange and subversive culturally translated versions and all other pre-capitalist figures of human transcendence. In a critical genealogy, the uncanny intrusions of forgotten loyalties from the archive of history and the unanticipated local adaptations, mimicries and satires have the power to destabilise the globalised 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 inanelly connected and abysmally contaminated which generates shocks and provokes our experiences. Sandeep Banerjee finely summarises Ghosh’s notion of the “sacred” as “a literary text’s refusal to be reduced to history *despite* its historicity” (8). This challenging and often awkward border crossing reveals, as Dimock writes, an “unexpected web of allegiance” (Dimock, “Planetary Time” 489), and promises, as Ghosh argues, “a “more,” the unexpected web of meaning” which he has termed as “more than global” (“More” 113):

[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 (Ghosh, “Intra-active” 1199-1200).

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.

III

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to etymology as crazy “philosophical athleticism” (8) which never ceases to amaze and amuse a thinker. Taking cue from their illuminating suggestion let us see how etymological analysis leads to a philosophical understanding of the concept of the superhero. 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 a Genre*, Peter Coogan looks at the prefix as a modifier that exaggerates the existing sense of the hero 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*). Etymologically it came into English from Latin and quite interestingly it refers to “above,” “over,” ‘beyond’ and “across.”

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 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”” (Ghosh, “More” 4). 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 far away and the limitless, 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*.¹ 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 Shahanameh*. 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. The unease and awkwardness with this infusionism

between hero and superhero is evident in its use in various combinations such as “super-hero,” “super hero,” “super/hero,” and finally “superhero.”

Literally, the Greek word “heros” refers to “a dead human invested with special power” (Currie 161). In Greek mythology, the heroes are subordinates to the gods and they embody *arête* which is often translated as “virtue” but can be better explained as “being the best you can be or reaching your highest human potential” (Saraçoğlu 58). 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 (Frye 33-34).

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 (Greene 198).

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. Yet a critical scrutiny of the heroic literature of the past reveals that the hero’s life “contains the *agon*, the struggle between capacity and limitation” (202). 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” (199). Despite their tremendous bodily strength, grandeur of personality as well as power to change the fate of the state, they are mortal beings. 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 memories of the rise and fall of nations, they are the relics of the past. The hero, says Carlyle, is a “vital element of manhood, the soul of man’s history” (Carlyle 26).

The comparatively new expression “superhero,” Mike Benton predicts in *Illustrated History*, was originated in pulp fiction as late as in 1917, and it swiftly became a part of contemporary public culture. It was coined to describe “a public figure of great accomplishments” (Coogan 189) which clearly echoes the sense of the hero. Jerry Siegel’s account of the origin of Superman reveals that his idea of the superhero was derivative of and modelled on nothing but 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” (Reynolds 10). In her introduction to *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, Angela Ndalians writes:

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 (Ndaliansis 2).

The official appearance of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman, the first comic book superhero in 1938, however, refers to a different socio-political necessity and adds a new layer of meaning to an old idea. 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” (18). Umberto Eco’s essay “The Myth of Superman” also eloquently portrays the illusion that surrounded the time:

Clark 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 (15).

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 *Turbulence*, reminiscing the origin story of *The Fantastic Four*, a whole host of people acquire superpowers during a flight from London to New Delhi. Their special powers match to their own fantasies of everyday life. All of them are frustrated individuals having a dream of their own but somehow their aspirations are put under yoke by a 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 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 (Basu, *Turbulence* 51).

Not surprisingly, a deep and parallel sense of contemporary 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 obviously in an existential novel like *The Fall*, Albert Camus cannot refrain himself from alluding to “superman” (23). The disillusioned lawyer in Camus’ novel informs the reader 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” (Camus 42). 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. In Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman helplessly exclaims “the world only makes sense when you force it to” (Miller 40). 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.

The superhero is a product of creative human desire, an expansion of 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 hostile world 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 super being but the term “hero” adds an ethical dimension to the term. And if morality is, to follow Zygmunt Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics*, “incurably aporetic” (11), the idea travels well beyond the popular notion of the superhero based on the insularity of American values of life. It is a mutated and transformed version, or a *mimeme* (142-43), as Arthur C. Danto would call it, which shares a “zone of neighbourhood” with the hero. This shared space of togetherness is incestuous in nature and not free from the competing claims of friendship and rivalry. The superhero is not a hero and yet he is, the shadow of his mighty predecessor looms large and often eclipses his life.

IV

If we go back to the philosophical origin 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 Spake 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 Spake 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” (75). 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” (Ratner-Rosenhagen 295). Though Jennifer 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 *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas*, 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 (Ratner-Rosenhagen 6).

Emerson views of heroism as “an obedience to a secret impulse of an individual’s character” (“Heroism” 253); 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 a German and an American thinker:

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 (Emerson 9).

It tells us the story of a transcontinental travel, an intellectual alliance where an American thinker influences the ideas of a German philosopher, and eventually the rethought, reformulated and defamiliarised 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,² it soon started to wear an American mask by shedding off the exclusivity and philosophical excess that characterised Nietzsche’s thought.

The aversion for the “corrupt” influence of popular culture is so all pervasive that Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, the translators of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, decided to discard the word “Superman” as a 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 (Nietzsche 5).

Arthur C. Danto also dismisses the Nietzschean undertone behind the idea of Superman as so negligible that “readers of philosophical books might be supposed capable of disregarding such incidental connotations” (Danto 178). In order to retain the purity of “scholarship,” Pippin also proclaims the necessity to move beyond the diluted version of “Shaw’s and Marvel’s comic book ‘superman’” (xli). They mark 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 instead of exploring the nuances, they make an attempt to sever the tie and rescue philosophy from the vandalism of a corrupt popular culture.

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 costume and exaggerated display of power became its constituting elements. 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 1960s. 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). He also points out *Adventure Comics* #247 (April 1958) as the clearest example of the word “superhero” being used to identify a comic-book which “features the first appearance of the Legion of Super-Heroes and their name on the cover” (25). The characteristic features of the immediate predecessors reveal that the superhero genre is nothing original, but rather all stylistic and normative principles that “define” the genre—costume, dual identity, superpower and mission—are familiar tropes all derivative of other genres.

The fetishisation of the superhero as a cultural icon and its reification into an apparently pre-given, homogenous and unchangeable identity often emptied it of its active potentialities. Just as the philosophers disregarded the Nietzschean influence on the superhero genre, it was also necessary for the comic book industry to banish the “unruly” Nietzsche, a philosopher who embraces chaos as life. Superhero studies have also 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. 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” (77).

However, scholars have traced the historical extent to which the 1907 translation of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* hypnotized the American mind and contributed to the development of the superhero genre. “By the time Siegel attached the name Superman to his hero, Superman were everywhere” (7), writes Gavalier, and yet “By the late twenties,” Coogan writes, “the superman trope had become commonplace and emptied of philosophical content” (161). The self-reflexive 1980s, however, saw a re-emergence of this connection which culminates in Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and *The Killing Joke*, and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*. The “Book VI” of *Watchmen* ends with a famous aphorism from Nietzsche: “Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gaze also into you” (28). 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 (26).

But for Nietzsche, this nihilism is not purely negative and the realisation 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” (Danto 15). 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 Alan Moore’s *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker ceaselessly teases Batman to come out of his self-protected illusion and messianic role playing. 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.

The idea of a “trans-moment” or “trans-now” as propagated by Ranjan Ghosh “is about enacting a communication—difficult and debatable—between apparently incompatible paradigms of thoughts and concepts” (“More” 5). 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 satirised, 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 licence. 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 *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” (Biswas 3, translation mine). 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” (Khan). 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 clutch of the 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-promoted 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 saffronised 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 modifies the way of seeing the superhero in straightjacket and is 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 Thomas L. Friedman, a *New York Times* correspondent, coins the term “super-empowered individuals” to describe Osama Bin Laden as someone who wants to destroy America because they are “wild,” “crazy” and “revolutionary.” In his 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 which 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 normalise 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.

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 ("More" 121).

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" (Dimock, "Genre" 1380) of the superhero genre.

Notes

¹Archaeologists and philologists, however, are divided in their opinion about the extent of Homeric influence in consolidating the hero-cult.

²Jennifer Ratner-Rosengarten argues that in Germany, Goethe used the word *Übermensch* in *Faust* (1808) before Nietzsche but it was barely noticed by contemporary critics and translators.

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