Deciphering the Ontology of Racial Cultural Politics in Black Super Heroes Comic Narratives

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Abstract

The origin of the superheroes genre in popular graphic narratives medium provides a new hindsight to the genre of children's literature. However, with the introduction of black racial politics in the superheroes genre there arose a cultural shift to the conception of superheroes with the advent of DC and Marvel comic book universes black superheroes gained a popular place in the new comic books medium which provided spaces for creativity critique as a celebration in resulting in new ways of understanding the world and their place within it. Besides it reflects how black superheroes struggle to maintain their own racial and cultural identity against the white(imperialist) capitalist policy of assimilation and marginalization.

Keywords: Black superheroes, DC and Marvel comic book universes, white capitalist society, marginalization

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Introduction

Before embarking upon the racial and ethnic symbolism as presented in Black Superheroes the first question that we must think about is the relationship between superheroes to the politics of power, ideology, social relations and culture. At the most fundamental level, the idea of superheroes is a super-empowered individual who clashes and tries to supersede the evil that exists in society. The term *superhero* is borrowed from archaic legendary history but it is also heavily dependent upon the concomitant appearance of para literary books and magazines that featured during the late ninetieth and early twentieth century with exotic stories, characters, and settings (Gravaler, 2015). Against the discourses of historical significance, the genre assumed its contemporary form with the introduction of *Superman* in the pages of action comics' during the late 1930s whose commercial success in popular culture inspired the creation of hundreds of broadly similar traits characters whose exploits have subsequently appealed to large children and adolescent audiences worldwide (Cornell, 2011).

In general, the concept of *superheroes* is by definition larger than life and it casts a bright light on the more familiar social world they are both part of and ideally detached from it. The superhero genre is extremely malleable, and it serves as a perfect foil to other entertainment genres, starting from space opera to romantic comedy and social parody. Further, this superhero genre can also be characterised in terms of its tendency to transform characters into icons which metaphorically denotes that superhero stories always generate some kind of metaphorical resonance (Carney, 2005). Besides the writers or more specifically, the authors of the superhero genre are more adopt to portraying both political and intellectual nuances. But this genre of superhero is itself saturated with multiple textures of meanings. The role of superheroes is to fight crime, which means that their stories are required on some level to depict and deconstruct the boundary between law and lawlessness (Coogan, 2004). Thus, before moving upon the racial and ethnic traits that black American/Afro-American superheroes hold upon their skin a brief focus is indeed needed on the origin of superheroes as a popular genre in comic book culture (Worchester, 2008).

The concept of *superheroes* has its roots in various mythological tales, folklore, and pulp fiction of the late 19th and early 20th century. But the modern superhero archive emerged late during the 1930s with the debut of wonder characters like Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, etc in various comic books (Coogan, 2004). These characters were created by famous comic book artists or writers like Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, and William Moulton etc who embodied into their characters extraordinary abilities, moral codes and the great desire to protect the innocent victimised against all atrocities or odds. The philosophy behind the formation of superheroes lies in the moral ideals of justice and equality to the struggle for existentialism and a fight for good over evil. In another sense, the superheroes serve as a representation of human values and societal ideas which otherwise contemplate the ideas on ethics, identity and the human condition. For example, characters like Batman explore themes of vengeance and justice, while the popular Superman character represents hope against all odds of society and the struggle to perform right/good in an otherwise evil society. Thus, in essence, superheroes provide a corrective mechanism through which we can examine and reflect upon philosophical ideas in the context of larger-than-life narratives (Scott, 2011).

The very idea of *racial politics* in American culture is deeply intervened with the ideology of historical injustices biased power dynamics and formation of black societal structures. This encompasses issues such as systematic racism, discrimination, white privilege, and all-black identity formation against white cultural values (Bukac, 2019). From the legacy of slavery to the civil rights movement and the ongoing struggles for racial equality the landscape of racial politics in America is very much complex or ambiguous in nature. Further, the discourses of racial politics in America highly intersect with various aspects of culture, including media representation, education, and economic opportunity, which otherwise shape perception and experience for individuals and communities across the nation. Racial politics emphasises the importance of advocating for the rights, dignity and empowerment of black individuals and communities through various means, which include black cultural rights activism and anti-racial cultural expression (Bukac, 2019).

The postcolonial critique Frantz Fanon introduced the concept of *Epidermalization of Inferiority* while describing the black cultural politics in America in his celebrated *work Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon (2008) argued that in a racially stratified society, individuals with darker schemes are often subject to dehumanization, which leads to the internalization of feelings of inferiority and self-hatred. By critically examining the psychological effects of racism on both the oppressed and oppressor, Fanon Skillfully highlights the complex ways in which racial prejudice permeates Society and affects individual sense of worth and belonging.

Historical Framework

Now coming back to the main argument of this article is about how black superheroes and racial politics in comics are both quite complex and multifaceted. Historically, *black superheroes* faced many challenges against all mainstream identities in the white comics universe with identity often reflecting on broader societal attitudes towards the representation of race (Cochran, 2017). However, there has been progress over the years in the black superhero comic book industry. Like 'DC And Marvel comic books universe provide more authentic and nuanced portrayals of black characters which address their black social issues and showcase black cultural backgrounds and experiences. During the early to mid-20th century, black characters in the superhero comics universe are extremely rare and stereotypical in nature. The history of superheroes at first witnessed white skin coloured who fought for the well-being/Justice of the white world. But this biased way of representation slowly started a dynamic shift with the advent of 'Milestone characters' in black comic book discourses (Scott, 2011).

Analysis

The character *Black Panther* created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby is the first black superhero ever to emerge in the mainstream American comic books medium. As the king of the fictional African nation of 'Wakanda', Black Panther was portrayed as a saviour. Who fought with dignity against challenging situations. Ideally, Black Panther served as a perfect epitome of Black dignity, cultural assimilation, and an independent identity created through both psychic and physical violence. The other known black superhero character to have a merge in comic book narratorial history is 'Falcon' who was later metamorphized as Captain America. The character Falcon intersects with the philosophy of black racial politics. Falcon as a superhero challenges stereotypes offers positive representation and engages with deep

philosophical questions about race, identity, and equality. Thus, 'Falcon' as Captain America stands as a powerful symbol of black racial justice in the superhero genre. However, during the era of 1970s, there emerged a rise in black superhero characters with increasing range. Psychological and physical diversity such as' Luke Cage', 'X Men', and 'Blade'.

These characters often reflect more complex and varied representations of black cultural identity. 'Luke Cage' is a character often employed with the theme of black anti-racial philosophy from his origin to modern interpretation in various comic book texts he challenges the discourses of systematic racism and offers a powerful symbol of black strength and dignity. Luke Cage's fight against corruption and his significant role as a protector of the marginalised community reflects a broader theme of racial justice and liberation from the white imperialist ideology and practices. Further Luke Cage's stories often intersect with the ideas of class and gender along with racial formulation which provides diversity in terms of black experiences. This idea highly aligns with the work of scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw who introduced the concept of *intersectionality* to highlight how various forms of oppression are interconnected in nature. Thus, Luke Cage's fight against corruption embodies the principle of the theology of liberalism and the fight for the civil rights movement.

The very ideology behind the *racial identity* in America is complex and theoretical in its nature. It involves the personal and collective significance of race that is highly influenced by sociocultural, historical and political factors (Bulmer & Solomos, 1999). The discourses of racial identity can shape one self self-perception interaction with others, and experiences in society. A famous anti-racist American critic W.E.B. Du Bois Incorporated the term double consciousness' which sought the internal conflict experienced by' African Americans' due to their dual identity as both American citizenry and black people. Further, this duality forces the black race to navigate a world where they are constantly aware of how they are perceived by white world cultural navigation (Bulmer & Solomos, 1999). One of the prominent elements in Du Bois's philosophy Is the metaphorical construction of the 'veil' which helps in separating the cultural nuances of black people against white people's cultural homogenization in America. That prevents the black race from integrating into the main ethos of socio-cultural activities. Another noted post-colonial philosopher who sought the construction of black/racial identity against the hegemonic power culture of White Americans is Frantz Fanon.

In literary circles, Fanon is known as a prominent psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary who provided significant insights into racial identity, particularly in the context of colonialism and its psychological effects on both the colonised and colonizers. Fanon is of the view that how colonialism imposes a sense of inferiority on the colonised people which makes them psychologically, physically and culturally vulnerable. He thinks that colonised people often internalise the stereotypes and demeaning views held by the colonizers, which ultimately leads to an inferiority complex and a sense of alienation from their own primitive identity and culture. Fanon (2008) argued the desire among colonised people to emulate the coloniser culture and appearances which results in wearing 'white masks' to hide their innate black racial self. The very philosophical attribution that Fanon's critics are concerned about is the role of identity formation through violence against the white-dominated imperialist world. Further, Fanon (2008) claimed that colonialism and its discourses impose a distorted identity on the colonised groups which is marked by a sense of inferiority complex and cultural subjugation.

The coloniser's view of the colonised as inferior in its origin, primitive and subhuman species is highly internalised by the colonised people. Thus, biased ideology made by false consciousness imposed a deep sense of identity crisis and alienation among the colonised who feel disconnected from their cultural habitats as well as from the culture and status of the colonizers.

Contemporary Viewpoint

The recent criticism on the ontology of racism in superhero comics does reveal a complex interplay between identity representation, cultural politics and market dynamics. Contemporary racial critics scholars have thoroughly identified a trend of 'new racism' in comics which is otherwise characterised by subtle and insidious forms of racial biasedness (Bulmer & Solomos, 1999). This is often reflected through limited and stereotypical roles for characters of colours, despite a growing and diverse readership which highly demands more equitable representation in the narratives of comics. The postmodern superhero comics critics have emphasised that white male characters predominantly occupied central roles, with characters of coloured often relegated to the periphery or sidekicks-hyper sexualised roles. But, these strains slowly started to change with the centralization of mainline comics narratorial discourses. Thus, the contemporary discussions also emphasize the importance of examining the sociopolitical context in which these black *superhero comics* are produced and massively consumed by global comic book audiences.

Conclusion

Thus, the racial politics of black superheroes in comic book narratives is multifaceted and deeply significant in nature. The increasing presence of black superheroes in mainstream media serves as a medium to enhance the visibility and representation of black individuals in realistic mode who are otherwise subjugated in the narratorial history of white imperialism. The portrayal of black superheroes can challenge long-standing racial stereotypes by depicting black characters as complex, multidimensional and capable of unleashing power and fighting for moral justice and equality. Besides, the success of black superheroes in films and comics has highly impacted the entertainment industry which ultimately proves that stories centred on black characters can achieve both critical and commercial success. So the ideology of black superheroes often engages directly with the egalitarian themes of social justice racism and inequality that provide a platform for commentary on real-world issues.

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