



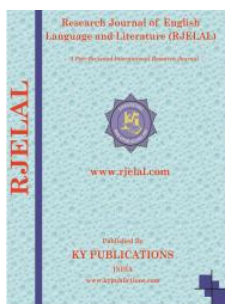
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ITERATION OF THE HERO IN GRAPHIC NOVELS: A CULTURAL RECONCEPTUALISATION

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ABSTRACT

Graphic Novels have replaced the traditional narrative with the advent of the visual culture gaining currency these days. It has taken the dissemination of images to an unimagined level - we have moved past from the ideas, the images represent and the reality they purport to depict. Graphic Novels with the visual-verbal rhetoric, represent the postmodern scenario of the American pop culture. In fact, the superhero, a potent cultural icon, standing for nobility and courage, is now a hard-edged hero in the changing times. With the advancing modernity, complex ethical interrogatives are also raised. Consequently, there is a reformulation in the protagonists who is featured as the central character and who advances the plot forward. A reconceptualisation has similarly occurred in the superhero archetype. It is a cultural reconceptualisation as it resonates with the cultural matrix of the American pop culture. The dualistic opposition of good and evil, hero and villain etc. has undergone a revision, as the heroic and superheroic traits entails a hybridisation. The moral compass of these protagonists is coloured in "murky grey", that is somewhere between black and white. As these categories become increasingly blurred, the relationship between heroism, super heroism, law and justice is further problematised. The characters develop the notion of 'revisionary' heroes and superheroes as they are depicted as outlaws and vigilantes. They are no more a beacon of goodness. The graphic novels engage in a process of literary and artistic refashioning, aimed at countering the generic expectations of readers. The revisionist heroes become a fixture nowadays. They no longer subscribe to lofty ideals and aspirations. The protagonists tend to play out a formula that reinforces a particular notion of justice and criminology. Moral absolutism is reinforced and vigilante justice takes the centre stage of action. The hard-boiled crime dramas of yesteryears are reappropriated in these graphic novels with the protagonists being noir-flavoured and with a motif of avenging their opponents.

Keywords : superheroism, justice, moral relativism, archetype, identity

INTRODUCTION

A transgressive hero in the postmodern era with a fragmented self, has evolved from the

traditional hero, and is mostly a product of the postmodern world which challenges our own understanding of morality and of good and evil. Just like the elusiveness of the postmodern condition,

the hero of the times also escapes definitions. In fact, almost all sources on post modernity devote a lengthy explanation to its inexplicability. The hero of today is therefore inexplicable. The revisionist hero has a motive, invariably like the traditional hero, but his use of violence is often unfettered and outrageous. But his passion for justice cannot be overlooked. His philosophy being utilitarian, and his morality being relative, his brand of justice and violence is indirectly justified in all these novels. We get a glimpse of such heroes in the following graphic fiction.

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986) by American graphic novelist, Frank Miller is the story of Bruce Wayne, who returns to the Gotham City as Batman even after his retirement to fight the deadly gang, the Mutants. Gotham is plagued by crime, and law enforcement doesn't help much in checking the atrocities committed by the gang. Batman is always viewed with suspicion and is alternately called as crusader as well as a menace on the society. Commissioner James Gordon retires and the new commissioner Ellen Yindel, who is against Batman and his vigilantism, issues an arrest warrant. But Batman battles the gang who terrorizes the city, and also goes on to confront his foes, Two-face and Joker. He also gets as his new Robin, a teenage girl, Carrie Kelley, to assist him. His last confrontation is with Superman, who stands by the government and the president, as opposed to Batman. This final encounter results in his death but later, it turns out to be fake, as only Bruce Wayne dies. The legacy of Batman continues.

Holy Terror (2011) also by Frank Miller features a superhero, Fixer, also a caped crusader like Batman. He along with his companion, Natalie Stack, a cat burglar, battles the terrorist group, Al Qaeda, in the Empire city. He can be called a sociopathic hero because his preferred method of opposing someone is killing them. At the start of the novel, a suicide bomber sets off accompanied by stringer missiles and jets. We see the storm of the nails and the razor blades released by the suicide bombers of an Islamic terror group. Fixer is a hero who closely resembles Batman and his ways. There is also Dan Donegal, who resembles Commissioner

Jim Gordon, obviously who supports the vigilantism of Fixer who is out to save the world from terrorism.

V, the eponymous character in *V for Vendetta* (1988) by Alan Moore is a masked and megalomaniac fighter, who plots to overthrow a totalitarian government. One night he rescues a young woman, Evey Hammond from a life-and-death situation and a bond develops between them. She becomes his ally in the attacks against the tyrannical regime. Masked in a 'Guy Fawkes' mask, a sort of terrorist of an earlier century, he dares to stand against the government and is labeled a terrorist. Together they try to bring down a fascist government. He urges his fellow citizens to rise up against the government that is fraught with corruption. He has developed skills in the art of combat and he seeks to demolish two London landmarks.

In Richard Reynolds' book *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994), he describes five traits that are common to superhero characters, the first of which involves the idea of a "man-god" in which most superheroes are similar to that of "earthbound gods" in their level of powers and abilities. The second trait reflects the importance of justice, and how many superheroes have a strong devotion to social justice that it typically overrides their devotion to the law. The third characteristic that Reynolds describes in his book is the relationship between the normal and the 'superpowered', in which the extraordinary abilities of the superhero character is frequently contrasted with the normalness of its surroundings. The fourth trait in Reynolds's book is the concept of the secret identity and how many superheroes have to uphold a split personality of themselves versus their crime-fighting alter-ego. The last characteristic that Reynolds mentions in his book is the role of superpowers in politics, and how many superheroes exhibit acts of patriotism and moral loyalty to the state.

Contrary to these characteristics, today's superheroes actually deviate from this model, but retain at least some of them. One of them is that they represent 'everyman' unlike superheroes of yesteryears who perpetuate the idea of "man-god". They have developed their skills in crime-fighting the

hard way. Social justice has taken the form of criminal justice or rather vigilante justice and law is brought forth into a lawless setting by the heroes. The superpowers of the superheroes today are like what they have developed out of effort and they are not just superhuman powers endowed to them out of some special event. The secret identity, which is preserved with the help of a mask is actually the fluid identity or fragmented identity that mirrors the cultural schizophrenia of the times. Furthermore, unlike the last characteristic, a postmodern superhero does not serve to reflect ethical values through his heroic acts. Moral relativism is a concept used to describe their sense of right and wrong. Conventional superheroes usually aligned with what is good, and develop their own agency, power and value in the world. The virtues of justice, crime fighting, honesty and integrity have been long associated with them. Bringing justice to the world and crime fighting still continue to be the motive of the revisionist hero but they subscribe to the concept of consequentialism. Being an everyman, it is easier to explain the heroes of today, their flawed self, and why they adhere to the concept.

Being an everyman bolsters the use of violence because a man can have flaws and can commit errors. His acts can turn to be erroneous. He uses his excessively violent ways to accomplish his mission. He is represented as a common man who doesn't stay still seeing lawlessness, brutality and corruption around him. And the most common flaw seen in the hero of today is his violent self. In *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman's return to Gotham City to fight crime is also described by the TV reporter as "a symbolic resurgence of the common man's will to resist" (41) and also as "a rebirth of the American fighting spirit" (41). The millionaire Bruce Wayne who has impersonated as Batman is actually a common man who stands by the citizens of Gotham city when it was terrorized by the Mutants. But he also is outrageously violent and dangerous when he takes down robbers. In an instance of the book, , a cop calls him out as he takes down robbers : "You're under arrest, mister. You've **crippled** that man!"(39) and Batman replies coldly, "He's young. He'll probably walk again. But he'll stay scared...won't you, punk?"(39). He seems

unhinged in his use of violence and is as deadly as the adversaries he battles out. This is evident in the way he deals with the Mutant gang, the Joker and the Two-face. He is aggressive as he fights out with Superman and brutally injures him also with his words : "I want you to remember, Clark.....In all the years to come.....In your most private moments.....I want you to remember.....my handat your throat.....I want.....you to remember....the one man who beat you....." (195).

The Fixer is in *Holy Terror* is depicted as one of the most violent of heroes. In crime fighting and the battling of terror, the hero finds a cause when disaster strikes Empire City. He also finds a partner in Natalie Stack, a former cat burglar with a long history of encounters with him. Bearing more than a passing resemblance to a red-caped Batman, he sports a full mask with an ammo belt. The Fixer is described as "out for blood"(68). After a long confrontation with the terrorists, Fixer and Natalie overpowers the terrorists and Fixer says : "Leave one of them alive. To Talk" (81). His acts of terrible violence are seen throughout the novel. The excessively violent act being the one in which he tortures a captive: "So Mohammed, pardon me for guessing your name, but you've got to admit the odds are pretty good it's Mohammed...What's the plan?" (82). Fixer snaps his spine and then blows him up with his own bomb-belt. Before this act, Natalie warns the terrorist about Fixer and his style: "You'd better listen to him, Moe. The Fixer is a gentle soul, but when he gets riled, well, he's been known to hurt people" (82). In the novel, Fixer is in the midst of a long war against the enemy that wants nothing less than total destruction. He is a boisterous proponent of the war on terror, as we read from the highly charged epigraph: "If you meet the infidel, kill the infidel." At the beginning of the novel, we see the tryst between Fixer and his companion which gets cut short by two world-rending explosions. Following this incident, we see that Fixer and Natalie will do everything they can to bring Al Qaeda down and protect Empire City from further devastation. They fight their way through terrorists taking up their mission against organized crime .Batman character has been obviously configured by Frank Miller as Fixer and unlike

Batman, he has no personal code of ethics against evil. He kills the terrorists on the spot, but Batman doesn't kill his adversaries. Fixer is almost always engaged in hateful speech against the terrorists and his bigoted words conflate all Muslims with terrorists.

V, the masked fighter in *V for Vendetta* uses his strength and ability to produce explosions to send a message against tyranny, and in the process he kills many people. His main goal is to spread an idea. The main character V, opposes the oppressive and controlling British government. The novel being open-ended, the reader can decide whether he or she feels that V is a freedom fighter or a terrorist, who promotes change through chaos by blowing up buildings and killing public officials. When the government has taken all civil liberties from its citizens, allowing them to spy on anyone without warrant at anytime and even establishes a night curfew, it is for readers to ponder over the significance of such a character. He inevitably stands for the power of the common people. When the attempt to kill V fails, he declares assertively, "There, did you think to kill me? There's no flesh or blood within this cloak to kill. There's only an idea." He also adds that, "Ideas are bulletproof" (236). V is actually an idea, a belief that the

'everyman' can make a difference, some sort of a reminder. We get an instance of violence when alone with Bishop Lilliman, V offers the chance to take communion and gives him a communion "wafer," which turns out to be cyanide and kills him instantly. In *V for Vendetta*, V opposes the violent ways of V. But V, who rebels against a totalitarian government convinces her that for enacting a meaningful change, violence must be used. He is out to put an end to those who kill and persecute the innocents. He uses terrorist tactics to rebel against a fascist regime which has taken control of Britain sometime in the near future.

Being multi-faceted and psychologically complex, the hero is portrayed as a normal human being without any superpowers. Yet he differs from the others in dedicating the whole of his life to revenge. He has dedicated his life to fight crime and attain justice. Justifying the use of violence and

implicating the reader in the same, war and violence are portrayed as a part of human nature. And though we detest them, they are at times, inevitable. In all the above novels, we see that the heroes use violence to achieve their ends. V uses violence to reach his goal to produce a political change from a corrupt government. Batman, similarly is out to save his city from civil violence in the form of the Mutant gang, and the evil forces like Joker and Two-Face. In the first chapter reports flash across news channels about a hideous event: "the brutal slaying of three nuns by the gang known as Mutants" (11). Further acts of violence don't let him stay still. And, Fixer is on his mission to face the 'infidels'. In all these works, the government is either corrupt or inactive, up to a point that threatens the freedom of the people, and violence becomes the only way to accomplish any substantial change.

All these novels offer a nuanced perception of the criminal justice system. Either there is an opaque government or the attitude of the government is dictatorial. No longer tenable as a protagonist, it is but this revisionary hero who metes out justice to the common people. Engaged in costumed crime fighting, his hero identity and his everyman identity works in tandem with each other. Deconstructing the ideal characteristics of typical superheroes, today's heroes are morally conflicted characters, combat everyday crime and threats against humanity. They enact social justice fighting supervillians, and these super villains can take various forms like terrorism, dictatorship, and various forms of crime. Moral ambiguity or moral relativism here is used as a tool for postmodern deconstruction of the traditional hero. These heroes provide a means for subverting our intuitive sense of right and wrong. Their action also serves to discern the moral complexity of life.

All the heroes, Batman, V and Fixer, have sported masks and they are to keep up illusions. There is a need to keep up illusions as these heroes are not altogether incorruptible or indestructible. The mask further is a manifestation of their conflicted style and personalities. A mask can be used just like an identity: for good or for evil. Mask is actually a symbolic representation of his fragmented

identity. The hero is a costumed vigilante who uses the power of the mask to strike fear, instill hope, and create mystery. They also have a blatant disregard for collateral damage, also an important feature of vigilantism. A man without a known identity is a man without laws to constrict him. And so his unknown identity is crucial for accomplishing his mission. Bruce Wayne is capable of far greater acts when wearing the mask than the normal human. He can lose himself in the persona of the mask and at times finds it hard to separate his original identity from the masked one. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman at one point of time identifies with the anarchist villain, the Joker. He sees a reflection of himself as the same violent streak is a shared trait between them:

"I see him. I see..."

"...I see....A reflection, Harvey."

"A reflection" (48).

V also loses himself in the process, and says that he stands for the idea that ordinary man is capable of extraordinary feats. As he was severely disfigured in a conflagration, he hides his disfigurement by wearing a costume of Guy Fawkes, the infamous leader of the Gunpowder Plot. The mask serves to hide his identity. Fixer is also a common man who sets out to enact 'postmodern diplomacy' (78). These are all ordinary men with no superpowers, just determination, immense willpower, and some gadgets. The mask of Batman, Fixer and V suggests the idea of invincibility and also of transcendence. Fixer philosophically ponders over the mask, that he wears physically and also about the mask and the shroud that is all around him:

"All my life, there's been something wrong. Something missing. A sense that everything I'm seeing all around me isn't entirely true"

"That this seemingly ordered world of laws and logic and reason is nothing but a shroud. A chimera"

"A mask."(68)

He also ruminates over the mask: "But every once in a long while, the mask falls away."(69)

Believing that the end justifies the means and that truth and justice are relative, what the heroes can hope for is a utilitarian solution to an unsolvable problem. This is a far cry from the original superheroes. It is much easier to relate to the standard set by these heroes, because like a common man, he can also fall prey to occasional faults and temptations. However, it is something to be pondered over that the hero has actually witnessed a slight diminution from being a cultural icon to someone who is viewed with suspicion. All of the heroes, Batman, Fixer and V are placed in a gray area, unable to be fully defined or understood. They also share a complex relationship with the state and the government. In fact, they present a counter-argument to the ability of the government to safeguard its citizens. They do not fit neatly into one particular categorization and is, therefore, problematic to define. The idea is giving the people the power to fight back, to assail the assailants, to rebel against a broken system. The iterated self of the hero mercilessly deals out his own brand of vigilante justice and smashes anything and everything in his way while pursuing the ends. His violence is gratuitous and his moral compass is inclined towards consequentialism.

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