The Viewer Perception of the Connotative Portrayal of Superhero Characters in Postmodern Screen Fiction

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Abstract

Literature enjoys the power of verbal influence through its diverse implicit and explicit connotations. Similarly, the screen fiction also exhibits the same connotative leverage of literature. The emerging genre of superheroes has taken a significant space on screen fiction. The study attempted to explore the symbolical significance of superhero characters in movies. For data collection three regular viewers were approached with an open-ended questionnaire. Their responses were recorded and transcribed and later analyzed qualitatively. The analysis reveals that the characters are mostly designed for commercial and entertainment purposes. However, these characters do portray certain geopolitical circumstances and facts.

Keywords: Superhero, Symbolism, Allegory, Genre, Screen Fiction, Movies

Introduction

Symbolism inevitably runs in literature with its vast connotative facets. In literature symbol is more than what it apparently denotes as rose for youth and beauty and tree for growth and immortality (Perrine 1974). A word or a phrase of any expression can be used as a symbol to represent something else (Shaw 1981). The School of Symbolism formally appeared in France in 1880, though the technique had been in currency long before. Symbolism is an effective tool to infuse the allegoric impact in the characters, scenes and events. Allegory expresses ideas, thinking, and inner conflict in a way which seems imaginary or unreal apparently; but the interpretation of unfolded meaning of the expression changes the apparent meaning of text or any piece of writing. Allegory can be employed in any form or genre of literature (M.H Abrams, 1999). As a term, allegory is derived from Greek 'allegoria' means speaking otherwise. When allegory is applied to any form of literature, it is considered that the device allegory will work at two levels of meaning; one is literal or apparent meaning and second is contextual or hidden meaning (J.A Cuddon, 1991).

Generally, fiction is work of narrative in verse or non-verse in which the characters and the plot are developed visionary. The reality is depicted in narrative; hence a technique of portraying the characters and incidents is applied in a fictitious way to narrate the events in a certain plot sequence. The term fiction, according to M.H Abrams,

is applied to the novel in which the life is demonstrated through a long narrative prose. It means fiction is long narrative work of literature that includes novel and even short story. In short, the term fiction is applied to any literary narrative (M.H Abrams 1999). In 1960, the term Postmodern appears replacing the prefix 're' with the age of innovative dimensions of thinking; therefore, the postmodernism literary era begins after the modernism and sometimes it is considered that the postmodern age began after the World War II (Albany 2008). Hence, the postmodern age is marked as the post-World War II and bears excessive influence of the of war. The age is identically featured with its sub genres and superhero being one of them.

The postmodern era is marked with a remarkable synthesis of literature and science. Literature becomes more broaden than ever before. Superhero is the icon of superhero genre; along with specific superhero genre, the superheroes are also the part of science fiction in which the robots play the role of a superhero. In superhero genre, the most commercially hailed superheroes are: Superman, Hulk, Iron Man Spiderman etc. The other instance of superhero is Robot from science fiction (Christen Russel 2012).

The new genres emerged in literature especially the science fiction in which many sub genres are associated like: Cyberpunk, Space Opera, Military Science Fiction, Hard Science Fiction, etc. Being a significant genre, the superhero genre is an inevitable part of postmodern fiction. It gets a great popularity in the years right after World War II particularly in 1945 to 1952, mainly this span of time known as golden age of superhero genre (Peter Coogan 2006).

Superhero is the powerful protagonist in strength and abilities to face the critical condition and circumstances. In contrast with conventional type of hero, the superhero does not face tragic fall. Superhero shows his strength, fights against the evil powers, and saves the world from evils. The particular costumes are the insignia of the superheroes. Superhero is a noble character who does not think of himself, a selfless character; his strength is advanced which is not found in the traditional heroes, the touch of advance technology is also seen in his character (Peter Coogan 2006).

Rationale
The current study is the presentation of the idea how charters can be applied for geopolitical purposes. The benefit of this research, on the first hand, is to broaden the research approach in literature and pay attention to the postmodern literature particularly to the superhero genre. The postmodern fiction is a vast area to find out the allegorical impact as a whole. Therefore, researchers narrowed the space of research attempted to find the connotative significance of superhero characters especially the way they are portrayed in movies. The genre has significantly taken over the due space of movies and screen. Hence, the popular movie charters were selected for the study to achieve the best possible responses. The Avengers and Superman Returns are the movies on which the research was conducted. The events and symbols were used to prepare questions from the movie viewers. The researchers rely on the primary data to find out the symbolic significance of superheroes guided by the lead question what they represent and how.

Literature Review

◆ **Symbolism**

The symbols can be categorized as Arbitrary and Persona symbols (Shamisa 2004). Arbitrary symbols are the regular literary symbols which can easily be personified for their significant denotation. Hence the spring is the symbol of youth and freshness. Whereas the Personal symbols are a pure creation of writer, they pose a little riddle but offer a real creative flavour once deciphered. Another classification is derived on three areas namely: Significative, Metaphoric, Sacramental (Rokni 2009). All Arbitrary or common symbols are treated as significative symbols such as the symbol of @ employs the meaning of email. The Metaphoric symbols are used for natural phenomena as the lion is used for strength and power. The Sacramental symbols are used for myths and customs.

◆ **Superhero**

The word superhero appeared long before 1938 when Superman was published first time; Mike Beton excavated the word superhero in 1917 when the word was used for the iconic man of public who is known for his achievement (Golden 1992). The writer, Gibson, of *the Shadow's Adventures* used adjective *super* before nouns such as Super + foe, crook, criminal, spy, mind, head; he also coined the word super villain, although Gibson used the adjective showing his characters a powerful one, yet he did not have the intentions to create new type of hero or villain (Murray 1997). Later many writers used the adjective super when they produced their work. The writer of Bill Barn, Charles Spain Verral, also used the adjective *super* in 1937 (Murray 1997). Superman appeared as first superhero having the characteristics of new type of hero, before it term super was not used for the characters as it was exploited for the character of Superman (Murray 1997).

Superhero is not an ordinary character; he has his own distinguished qualities, which signify him a unique in character and in abilities. As Peter Coogan (2006) identifies superhero:

> "It is the heroic character who prefers the social services; he has
> the mission to fulfill with the super strength and power. His
> abilities are not matched with the ordinary man; he instinctively
> has super powers of mental and physical abilities."

However, the influence of advance technology cannot be neglected on his character. His attire is his main insignia, which determines his significant appearance as superhero. Super hero has the dual identity, when he is directed to the mission he transforms himself from common to particular.

In the superhero genre, there is a cultural conflict that the adolescent men are not in the contact of cultural problems: for this, the Captain Marvel is

transformed from Billy Batson - a newspaper carrier; Spider man from Peter Parker (Peter Coogan 2006).

◆ **Mission as an integral feature of superhero**
Mission is the primary characteristics of superhero, which shows him as a superhero. He does not fight for himself but for others; specially, for the people who are oppressed; and he is considered a hero of downtrodden people. Therefore, it is superhero's mission to save people, he takes an oath to serve the people and give benefit to mankind (Siegel 1938). Superman is one of the superheroes who comes on the earth to save people. He also takes efforts to save the people like other pulp fiction heroes (Robeson 1964).Superheroes have exaggerated powers. They can flight, pull the heavy things without taking much effort, and stop the bullets. (Peter Coogan 2006).

The traditional elements: plot, setting, character, icon, and theme, of any form of literature collectively define any genre's existence. Superhero genre takes its name from his character superhero's influence, like other genres such as the Western, the mystery, and the soap Opera; these genres, in fact, have nothing to do within their names but the heroic characters are the perspective behind their definition (Peter Coogan 2006).

◆ **Symbolic Significance**
The character of any narrative whether it is of narrative or dialogic has some ideology behind its creation. The superhero genre is perceived with a significant ideology. Jeri Siegel, Joe Shuster and Will Eisner and many other first creators of super heroes presented superhero for 'common man'. Superhero used to fight against corrupt government; he helped the poor and oppressed. Superhero took the side of common citizens and used to fight for their rights. In short, the ideology of superhero creation was the welfare of the people who were under the oppression of the corrupt government body. The WW II gave a new ideology of superhero and the writers like Joe Simon and Jack Kirby employed jingoistic ideology behind the creation of superhero. The Captain America is one of those patriotic superheroes who fought for America in World War II. After World War II, the ideology changed, now America being superpower faces many challenges from the world, therefore the superhero comes to help the government and military powers of America in the critical situation of postwar. When operation against Americans starts the superhero reacts accordingly and opposes the American millenarianism (Peter Coogan 2006).

Procedure
Under the guidance of the available study by Peter Cogan and Miroslav Kohut, the qualitative research method was exploited. The researchers selected the area of Shaheed Benazirabad - SBA District for population. For superhero genre, the researchers decided

to prepare questions on superhero movies only as there are a vast number of people who like and watch superhero movies.

The research procedure was adopted from the research models used by Peter Coogan on his study "The Secret Origin of Genre" and Miroslav Kohut, in his thesis on the topic "Superheroes: The Philosophy Behind Modern Myth". The researcher selected three people who specifically watch superhero movies. The casual viewers were dropped from the sample only those who had been through a range of superhero movies and could analyze and share a mediocre non-expert viewer. The three volunteers were respectively a bank manager, a teacher of literature, and a student of literature. For data analysis, only the primary data obtained from the participants was processed and analyzed quantitatively.

◆ **Instrument**
The researcher applied two types of instruments for data collection: observational interview and questionnaire. The observational interview was applied for pilot testing to select the movie(s) for designing the questionnaire. Later the questionnaire was applied to above cited sample selected from the research population. The research is not a case study of any particular fiction movie or superhero. However, the researchers narrowed the area of research regarding the superhero movies. Hence two movies were selected after the initial observational interviews: *The Avengers*, and *Superman Returns*. These movies were not deemed as a case study of superhero movies.

◆ **Survey Interview**
The research on the connotative and symbolical findings in the superheroes movies required open-ended questions. A survey questionnaire was designed and exploited to determine the movies for the present study. The same questionnaire was used to ascertain whether the expected participants had a moderate idea on international politics.

◆ **Data Collection and Analysis**
The data was collected in person by the researchers and the responses were qualitatively analyzed to draw out the results subsequently.

Questionnaire Analysis

Item No. 1: *Role that superheroes play apart from entertaining*
The first and second participants had a similar idea about the scientific advancement, which shows the futurity through the super heroic actions apart from the entertainment. The third participant had concluding sentence different but when he said that the authority could not do normally means he was pointing towards the futuristic approach to science. Therefore, the first

question can be safely concluded in a sense that superhero had futuristic advancement demonstration in their actions.

Item No. 2: *Similarity between the superhero stories or movies and real life*
First participant did not find any similarity between superhero stories and real life but second and third participants perceive some resemblance. The second participant considers it a display of strength and weakness and third participant finds the helping nature of human being in superheroes. Hence, the conclusion is that the participant who had the knowledge of literature saw reality in the actions of superhero whereas the participant who had not been the student of literature just portrayed the super-heroic actions as imaginative creation. The perception in this situation is relevant to the viewers' background.

Item No. 3: *Superheroes as philanthropists*
It is because of the viewers expectations; they wish to see them do such acts. Most of the superhero characters are stereotype philanthropists who help people in their extreme need. It is unanimously assumed by the audience that a superhero must exhibit his superhuman qualities by involving himself in philanthropist acts.

Item No. 4: *The Avengers is the symbolical representation of American war against terrorism*
Two participants agreed to the superhero characters depicted in the movies represent allegorical meanings. One participant did not accept this type of allegory and he considers it a mere commercial act.

Item No. 5: *The Avengers symbolizes the NATO force*
The participants answered that it might be a striking similarity. The Avengers were different in shapes, but they assembled on one platform and in the command of Captain America-the one of the Avengers. Therefore, the collaborative fight against enemy who wanted to destroy the world symbolizes the NATO force. The participants to agreed that statement that the Avengers symbolize the NATO force.

Item No. 6: *Symbolic significance of various items and gadgets*
One participant could not recognize the symbolical representation, but he did not agree to the point raised through the question. The rest of the two participants believe that the characters and events possess some symbolic representation in contemporary context.

Item No. 7: *Representation of any religion on Nationalism*
    Participants consider it a universal approach and they disagree to link it specifically with Christ and America.

Item No. 8: *American dominancy*
    First participant did not fully agree with the statement on allegorical representation. His answer was dependent on other movies if they were giving the same theme from any angle. The second participant completely denied. Third participant expressed clearly, that he could see what was asked. Therefore, it can be said that allegory of America being superpower returns in Superman Returns is found.

Item No. 9: *Most of the superheroes are from America?*
    According to first participant, there is no motif behind the superheroes creation. It is the creative thinking, which makes create the superheroes. Second and third participants had same idea that there may be the political impulsion behind the creation of superheroes.

Item No. 10: *Superheroes of America means Superpower America*
    The first participant particularized this symbolism to the captain America that American supremacy is shown through the character of Captain America. The second participant did not accept this statement. The third participant agreed with the symbolism. Therefore, it is concluded that superheroes present the supremacy of America.

Recommendation
- There is a need of broader level of research on the subject.
- The superhero movie characters may not be used as the instruments of political agenda.
- Students may be exposed to this powerful genre at early stages of academic career.
- The study emphasis to maintain a balance between the commercial gain and literary objectives through superhero fiction.

Conclusion
The findings suggest that symbolism, due to its inevitably popular and powerful impact on the viewers, occupies paramount importance in literature. The emerging superhero characters are a proof how powerfully literature can be exploited for multi-faced purposes. These characters are catchy and befitting for the modern screen fiction. They have significantly helped literature to escalate and survive on the screen. Although they are enormously commercialized and at certain points their literary significance is severely compromised. However, the fact that the superhero has genre has been highly successful

bringing a refreshed audience towards the literature cannot be ignored. It is realized that majority of the audience/readers tend this genre as a means of entertainment, but the critical analysis reveals certain elements of national chauvinism in it. This research was an attempt to find out the allegorical impact of superhero fiction and the results reveal that viewers regard it as a manipulation of literature for political gains. The researchers have attempted to achieve this goal through survey and observation. A significant symbolic impact is found in the superhero fiction.

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Appendices

1.   The observational questions
The researcher went to people and started discussion on the movies while they were discussing any topic on societal issue. There he turned the discussion towards the movies reflecting the discussion topic. There he asked them some questions not in a series but according to the situation; for he started discussion about Hollywood movies and then moved to the superhero movies. The questions asked to people were as following.

Question No1:   What are the superhero movies you have seen yet?

Question No2:   Which superhero movie did you watch last time?

Question No3:   Who is your favorite super hero?

Question No4:   What is the reason behind your likeness of your favorite superhero?

Question No5:   Who is more powerful superhero in your perception among Spiderman, Superman, Hulk, Ironman, Thor and Batman?

Question No6:   Which movie do you like more among these: Superman, Spiderman, Ironman, Hulk, Thor, The Avengers?

Question No7:   Why do you like the movie you have referred before?

Question No8:   If two movies Hulk and The Avengers shown in cinema or on cable network at the same time, which movie will you prefer to watch.

Question No9:   Which movie is more entertaining among these: Thor, Spiderman, Hulk and The Avengers?

Question No10: The movie with individual superhero has more worth seeing or with group of superheroes.

2.   Selection of questions based on allegorical perspective
The ten questions were included in the survey questionnaire. The researcher included those questions very carefully that at first, he read the script of movie The Avengers 2012 then he saw the movie in which a group of superheroes assembles and fights with the enemy. Apart from movie The Avengers, he read and watched the movie Superman Return. After that the researcher got the questions from the actions and events of movies which he considered allegorical representation.

Questions included in survey

Q.No. 1:   Is there any role that superheroes play; apart from entertaining, if yes what?

Q.No. 2:   Do you find similarity between the superhero stories or movies and real life?

Q.No. 3:   Why superheroes always portrayed as philanthropist?

Q.No. 4:   Do you consider *The Avengers* is the symbolical representation of American war against terrorism?

Q.No. 5:   The Avengers symbolizes the NATO force which is led by Captain America. What do you say about it?

Q.No. 6:   The Scepter, which Loki possesses, is the symbol of power that he wants to snatch from America, but The Avengers do not let him do so. Is this agreeable note?

Q.No. 7:   Does this appear in the mind when you see in movie the Avengers, Thor, god of thunder, symbolizes the Christ which means the divinity is supporter of American rule over the world; or America wants to make it realize to the world so.

Q.No. 8:   *Superman Return*s symbolizes the American dominancy over the world as a super power because after 9/11 it was thought that America would soon lose its supremacy.

Q.No. 9:   Why the world's most superheroes take birth in America not in other country?

Q.No. 10: Superheroes of America means Superpower America.