

PARADOX OF GENDER EQUALITY IN HOLLYWOOD SUPERHERO MOVIES

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Abstract: Since 1920 with the release of *'The Mark zorro'* directed by Fred Niblo and Theodore Reed Hollywood has been entertaining the world with superhero movies. But what striking in these Superhero movies is the delineation with the stereotypical gender roles. This genre of movies witnesses male protagonist, and if woman is found in the movie, either she is projected as frail, or to assist their male counterpart in scuppering the perilous elements in society or from the universe. Gender equality is rarely reflected in Hollywood superhero movies, rather relentless appearance of male superhero in this genre of movie firmly establishes male chauvinism in film fraternity. Male superhero has been projected as protector, saviour, and on the other hand, women are hardly found as a saviour, rather they are saved whenever they are at stake by male superhero. In spite of male domination women are found playing lead roles in some movies like *Catwoman*, *Wonder Woman*, *Snow White and the Huntsman* etc. Their appearance in the lead roles seems to be the initiation of diminishing the misrepresentation of stereotypical gender roles. But the storyline of the movies at the end always takes woman protagonist to the condition where she has to yield to the dominance of patriarchal social order. This article centers on the conscious hypocrisy of the male dominated capitalist authorities of Hollywood film fraternity stands as an impediment to obtain equality in gender roles especially in Superhero movies.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people do not know.”

— Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*

Introduction: Can Sherlock Holmes be denominated as ‘Superhero’? If the answer is negative, undoubtedly he can be regarded as ‘hero’ on the basis of his deeds. But what distinctive characteristics demarcate the hero from the superhero? **Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (8th Edition)** defines hero as **“a person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good,** whereas **superhero** is a heroic character with a universal, selfless prosocial mission; who possesses superpower- extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, and /or mental skills (including mystical abilities)¹. From the definitions, the differences between ‘Hero’ and ‘Superhero’ are vividly discerned. Since time immemorial world has been witnessing the emergence of superheroes in the role of saviour, protector of the civilization, race or a group.

In reply to Hancock’s query- **“Who are we?”**, Mary Embrey’s stock answer was - **“Gods, Angels – Different cultures call us by different names. Now, all of a sudden it’s superhero.”** in the movie **Hancock** (2008) directed by Peter Berg. As the concept of hero story lies deep in ancient, all earliest mythologies and religious books hold the hero story as their integral part. The legends of gigantic heroes are clearly evident in Classical as well as in Indian mythology. In Greek mythology, the existence of heroic figures like **Achilles**, the hero of Trojan war and the central character of Homer’s *Iliad*; **Odysseus**, the legendary Greek king of Ithaca, the hero of Homer’s *Odyssey* is found. **Hercules** is noted for his

strength and great adventures in Classical mythology.² In the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata** of Indian mythology, the quasidivine figures like **Lord Krishna**, **Ramchandra** are discerned. Old English Period, **Beowulf** is the greatest, and earliest heroic poem where the superhero Beowulf with his great abilities enfranchised the Danish people from the icy grip of Grendel, a mere monster, and exterminated Grendel’s mother, a half-human creature, who raged to avenge the murder of her offspring, and protected his own kingdom from the fire spitting dragon, though in this combat he received fatal blow.

“.....I believe myself no poorer in battle-prowess in works of war, than Grendel himself; so I will not put him to sleep- take life away from him!”³

These heroic symbols exhibited their societies’ values and cultural needs through catering help to the race, nation dwelling in crisis. Gloria Steinem even proclaimed while commenting on the mythic status of wonder Woman in her introduction to a collection of Wonder Woman comics that **“Mythology is a collective human memory.”⁴**

There is an undeviating link between superhero movies produced in Hollywood and comics published by publishing houses-Marvel and DC comics. The superhero characters from the comic books appear in the silver screen. The visual presentation of narration found in comics dates back to the cave paintings. Gradually the story-telling through graphic presentation evolved in many cultures. In this respect, Egyptian wall paintings can be cited where images are seen with hieroglyphics. Through evolution modern comics emerged. James Kochalka

in the book entitled *'The Horrible Trust About Comics'* (1999) states regarding comics that **"comics are a way of creating a universe and populating it with characters using a secret that works in the simplest and most direct way possible to enter the 'reader's brain ...series of little pictures and groups of words arranged in a rhythmic pattern to create and activate a world inside us."** In the year of 1938 *'Action comics#1'* was brought out by **DC comics** that heralded the genre of superhero comics which received immense popularity in the coming years. A red and blue-costumed strongman lifting a car over his head, and annihilating the automobile, as several terror-stricken men stumble about and strive to flee appears in the cover of the book, and world gets acquainted with a super strong avenger, Superman whose motto is to enfranchise people, not only the American citizen, rather regardless of creed, colour and nationality, from troubles and punish the wrongdoers. Through the major depictions of masculinity in the superhero comic characters these North American comic books step forward towards the male hegemony. Where the major depictions of masculinity (**Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Wolverine, Thor, Iron Man, Hulk, Deadpool, Captain America** and so on) found in the superhero comic characters, female superhero character is not entirely ignored but a few female characters namely **Black Widow, Wonder Woman, Ms. Marvel, Catwoman, Supergirl** etc, if not in large number, appeared.

"Our sacred duty to defend the world"- articulating by this line Diana aka *Wonder Woman*, the princess of Themyscira, not only strives to put an end to the war of all wars in the world dominated by masculine power as it appears to her as *'sacred duty'* but also rejuvenates DC's faltering movie world, and registers itself in the Hollywood film fraternity as the very first doing well woman-led superhero movie. The date **15th May, 2017** is historical in Hollywood in several aspects – firstly, world witnessed the release of the very first feminist superhero movie- **Wonder Woman**; secondly, a movie based on the comic female superhero character for first time began soaring high with grand success (*IMDb- 8/10 and Rotten Tomatoes- 92%*); thirdly, for the first time a female director is entrusted with 149 million USD for the movie. and fourthly, the film fraternity experiences the great directorial skill of a lady director named **Patty Jenkins** who has successfully provided a blockbuster female superhero movie. In the movie, we find an island, which is devoid of male domination, where a tribe named Amazons consisting of only female members dwell. This tribe appears to be entirely nescient about their opposite sex, rather male part holds no worth for them as they perfect their lives themselves. The movie is

undoubtedly a feministic one where Diana is found arriving in London only to put an end to war of all wars, and she protects the innocent people with her sword, shield and magical lasso, but in doing all these acts, she always pays heed to the suggestions of Steve Trevor who embodies patriarchal dominance. At the end of the movie, Diana is seen to stay in the world dominated by patriarchal society. In a way, Diana is also subjugated to the social order laid down by male members of the society. The female superhero comic character – **'Wonder Woman'** originated from the thought of bringing in gender equity in the comics fraternity. In the magazine entitled **'American Scholar'** (1944), William Moulton Marston, the creator of **'Wonder Woman'**, explained his character: **"Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Nor wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman."** (*"Why 100,000,000"* 42-43)⁵

The genre of Superhero movies commenced its journey with **Superman (1978)**, and henceforth, this genre of movies only embraces success producing blockbuster movies, especially with the dominance of masculinity in the lead roles, in the box office. Whereas History records the booming accounts of male-led superhero movies, unlike **Wonder Woman**, crestfallen and futile story reiterates the superhero movies where woman plays the role of protagonist.

No sooner had **Superman** appeared in comics than this superhero ascended the zenith of success with colossal popularity. Probably this popularity spurred the director Richard Donner to direct the first modern big budget superhero film- **Superman** where Christopher Reeve found in the lead role. Just like the Superman comics, with the release in 1978 this movie began soaring high with its wings of success. After bagging the grand success with **Superman**, Richard Donner and Richard Lester again brought back Superman series in 1980, and that time with **Superman II** which also turned out to be a blockbuster hit with gross income of 190.4 million USD. In the end of twentieth century and beginning of twenty-first century a great number of superhero movies – **Spiderman (2002), Batman Begins (2005), Man of Steel (2006), Iron Man (2008), The Thor (2011), Avengers (2012), The Wolverine (2013), Guardians of the Galaxy (2014), Captain America: the Winter Soldiers (2014), Batman v Superman : Dawn of Justice (2016)**, etc. hit the box-office, and most of them have been able to bring broad smile on producers' face with a huge profit.

The comic world is replete with very strong and dynamic female superheroes, but unfortunately, no superhero movie, if **Wonder Woman** (2017) excluded, where woman found in leading role could turn out to be a blockbuster one. But the distinctive characteristic of this genre of superhero movies is the obvious authority of male superheroes over these movies which might be the impact of patriarchal society. However, to comprehend the supremacy of masculinity in this genre of movies we have to go back to the quintessential roots of these movies i.e. superhero comics as these movies are the adaptations of the popular comics. In the comics, one can easily find masculinity which is the exaggerated visualization of (barely) human body.⁶ Lynn Segal suggests that *“to be ‘masculine’ is not be ‘feminine’, not to be ‘gay’, not to be tainted with any marks of ‘inferiority’— ethnic otherwise.”* Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist, depicts how veneration of human traits such as aggressiveness, physical strength, and gallantry in American men got glorified at the end of nineteenth and early twentieth century as the alleged adverse impact of socio-economic condition of that period. That glorification of masculinity got fabricated in superhero comics. (Kimmel, 83-112) This dominance of male characters in Hollywood superhero movies can be analysed in respect of Laura Mulvey’s seminal theory of the **male gaze**. The theory suggests that female identity is determined by the their male counterpart of the society, and females have been relegated to the status of objects to be admired by male for their physical appearance.⁷ Her theory vividly indicates the patriarchal social system where women’s growth in every sphere of society is strictly controlled by male, and manipulated social order is also discerned in this genre of movies. In the article entitled “Can Masculinity be Terminated” Susan Jefford argues that the contemporary superhero is the heir of 1980s’ Hollywood’s action movies, and her opinion regarding the movies of that period is - *“American masculinity was largely transcribed through spectacle and bodies, with the male body itself becoming often the most fulfilling form of spectacle. Through the period, the male body – principally the white male body – became increasingly a vehicle of display – of musculature, of beauty, of physical feats, and of a gritty toughness.”*⁸

In the genre of Superhero movies, gender role is found stereotypical, and women are showcased as victim and man appears every time as her protector, saviour from the perils using his phenomenal abilities. In the movie, **‘The Avengers’** released in 2012, a team of superheroes including **Iron Man, Captain America, Black Widow, Thor, Hulk, Hawkeye, Quicksilver** -is found on the screen

striving to shield the world from a super villain. Hope of gender equity rises a little when Black Widow, the main female character, is noticed as part of a team mostly empowered by masculinity. But soon hope turns into dejection. She is only one character found crying on screen in this movie. The viewers met her as a prostitute in scanty attire for the very first time. This presentation of the main female character in this movie obviously leads to patriarchal paradigm. Not only in ‘The Avengers’, other superhero movies also treat the women as if to conform to the social order laid down by male. Let’s look into another superhero movie- **‘The Amazing Spider Man’** (2012) where Peter Parker, the Spider Man, is found having love interest for Gwen. The characterisation of Gwen in this movie appears as a mere female character and she grows up only to be the love interest. The very stereotypical gender role attributed to Gwen in this movie and in the end, Spider Man saves her life. Another movie, **‘The Dark Knight Rises’** projects how two strong female characters - **Catwoman** and **Miranda Tate** become the prey to the familiar social code where women are defined by men or protected and saved by them. Miranda Tate is with the villain Bane and owes her life to him. Deceiving Bruce Wayne she sleeps with him. On the other hand, Catwoman yields to Batman’s plea to protect Gotham, though he has often been represented as one who is selfish and hankers after own freedom. She also decides to fight Bane along with the hero Batman.

The very first woman-led superhero movie, **Supergirl** based on the adaptation of **Supergirl** comics, appeared on the celluloid with Helen Slater in the lead role in 1984. The hopes that pushed Superman franchise to promote female superhero movies with **Supergirl** (1984) turned into a heavy critical and financial disaster as it fell short to receive admiration from critics and movie lovers. Perhaps Supergirl, Batman’s cousin, could not go beyond Batman’s massive masculine power to establish her own strong identity and it led the movie to commercial failure. The year 2012 also witnessed the release of another movie entitled **‘Catwoman’**, where we find Halle Berry in the lead character. The movie is regarded as all time worst of comic adaptation in the superhero genre. Warner Bros never thought of having the catastrophic response from the critic as well as from audience for the movie **Catwoman** while investing \$100 million dollar and casting Oscar winning actress Halle Berry in the title role of the movie. Through the attire of this feline antihero it is evident that there is a serious attempt to exhibit her sexually more alluring as if she is objectified only to conform to patriarchal social fabrication rather than illuminating her femininity. The movie barely managed to fetch only 10% score at Rotten Tomatoes and ended up just

making \$40 million domestic and \$42 million dollar from foreign countries.⁹ Another movie -Jennifer Garner starrer *Elektra* (2005), female-led superhero movie, followed hot on the heels of *Catwoman* (2004).

One question arises in this context – why does Hollywood produce superhero movies? Only to entertain the world, or something else? To satiate our inquisitive mind we have to peep into the socio-economical plight of America when the ever first superhero- Superman incarnated in the page of comics. The nation was going through turbulent situation in 1940'S without any shaft of hope in sight. It was that time when *Great Depression* (1929-1939) raged, and it was the first approaching decade since stock market crash of 1929, and it was worst economic setback for the industrialized world. That unprecedented economic downturn caused tens millions of Americans jobless. While disastrous economic deflation seriously damaged the backbone of the nation, southwest part was ravaged by the natural calamity known as the Dustbowl. In that grim socio-economic plight, America was badly in need of a saviour, a protector, and above all, a hero who could rejuvenate the entire nation from that debacle with his astounding superpower and infuse aspiration of well heeled nation to the citizens. In September, 1938, **Superman** debuted in 'Action Comics #1' and immediately he had been linked to America's hopes, needs, desires, and social norms.¹⁰ **"Good economic times usually signal the death of superheroes, and bad economic times see a surge in their popularity"**— opines Mark Miller, an acclaimed comic book writer.

The superhero icons like Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mel Gibson, and Tobey Maguire in Hollywood superhero movies as the embodiment of patriarchal power establish America's 'masculine' force globally. Even in this world some powerful personalities are reified as superhero, and people's expectations lie in them, and these strong figures' significance escalate as these real world superheroes are desired to be found in the actions of eradicating such matters detrimental to society, resolving intricate issues – consequently installing a society – which is not at all vulnerable and where prevails only peace. At times powerful political leaders appear on the pages of newspapers, and magazines as comic superhero as if to exemplify the 'hard-bodied' image of masculinity. On 18th February, 2002, *Der Spiegel*, a German weekly news magazine, brought out an issue which featured American President of that time – **George W. Bush** and his four noteworthy cabinet ministers as comic book superheroes and action movie icons like **Batman**, **Rambo**, and **Conan the Barbarian** in the cover page. The caption of the cover read: **"Die Bush Krieger: Amerikas Feldzug**

Gegen das Böse" (*The Bush Warriors: The Americas Crusade Against Evil*)¹¹ Too much dependency on superpower figure results in obvious corroding individual ability and consequently marring the society from achieving utopian self-dependent state. In this regard, **Lex Luthor**, archenemy of Superman, who nurtures abhorrence for this superhero for purportedly crushing human potentialities, achievements and dreams, opines that **"All of us – everyone – deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief, but our existence. I believe there's something inherently dangerous when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose when faced with a myth? We can't win."**¹²

Simone de Beauvoir in her ground-breaking book *The Second Sex* (1949) states - **"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"**¹³. This statement exposes that the phenomenon of gender is not inherent, but the social construct. Social structure becomes the decisive factor in forming gender roles. Michel Foucault, a great French philosopher, discussed the inevitable relation among power, body and sexuality in his writings. He opines that body and sexuality are cultural constructs rather than natural phenomenon. He asserts that **"Nothing in man - not even his body - is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self recognition or for understanding other men."** (Foucault 1991, p.87-8). In this regard, Judith Butler says that **"The identification of women with 'sex,'...is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and, hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is purportedly enjoyed by men (Butler, 1990, p.19)."** It is found that the pertinacious cultural stance always derogates the female body on the male/female binary. Hence, male and female body are constructed ideas to exercise power, and at times, in film fraternity woman gets promoted in lead character which seems to be the emancipation from the subjugation to the power, but actually, it is antithetical. Patty Jenkins, the director of first woman-led superhero blockbuster movie *Wonder Woman*, on the other hand, holds a different opinion regarding *Wonder Woman*. She strongly opposes to the policy of polarizing this strong character to a particular gender, and shaping her as feminist hero. As Jenkins considers *Wonder Woman* **"is just a universal character"**¹⁴, she never desires Diana Princess to be deemed from feminist approach.

The late twentieth century and the beginning of twenty first century could be viewed as the golden period in Hollywood film fraternity, especially, in the genre of superhero movies. The leading production houses – Marvel Studios, DC Extended Universe,

Warner Bros have been entertaining the world through promoting mainly male dominated superhero movies for few decades. Through producing female-led superhero movies, Hollywood film industry seems to be challenging the very root of patriarchy, but the close observation unearths that all the female superhero characters based on comics, some way or the other, get victimized and subjugated to the plexus weaved by masculine dominant part of the society. Hence, the claim of establishing gender equality in Superhero movies through woman-led films is nothing more than illusion. The dream of a

serene and sustainable world will never turn into reality unless gender equality is attained in every sphere of life. **“Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Providing women and girls with equal access to education, healthcare, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economics and benefit societies and humanity at large”** – says United Nations.¹⁵

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