



‘Mutant and Proud’: Magneto as the Voice of the Voiceless

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Abstract

Superhero films have been dominating the film market for almost a decade now. They are items of popular culture that have the capacity to draw a large number of audience due to their high entertainment value. It is under the disguise of a superhero action film that the X-Men film series has delved into various social issues from marginalisation of minorities to studies of disabled people. The research paper looks at the Jewish subtext in the movie ‘X-Men: First Class’ to study and analyse why such a potent undertone is present in the film, especially in the representation of the character of Erik/Magneto and what such an undertone offers to his character. The research seeks to understand how this Jewish connection of the character Erik, his traumatic childhood experiences at Auschwitz, the contrast of his experiences to the privileged life of the character of Charles and his representation as both a victim and victimiser enables him in emerging as the anti-hero and the representative voice of the voiceless in the film.

Keywords: Pop-Culture, X-Men, Subtext, Magneto, Anti-hero

Full Text

“The superhero film has displaced the superhero comic in the world of mass culture” (Bukatman 118). Superhero films have been dominating the movie markets for almost a decade now. Marvel has been finding huge success with all its cinematic ventures. Not only that, superhero films often have mammoth budgets and rope in a lot of money for their production companies based on their vast viewership. Superhero films, especially those based on comics are often thought to be targeted to a certain kind of audience, mainly teenage boys. However, statistics show that superhero films have been drawing a very large audience and due to its entertainment value, it has the potential to reach the masses. Superhero films may even be seen by some as a more cinematographically sophisticated version of the ‘Bollywood Masala’ movies that are often judged to be commercially successful without tickling your intellect. However, superhero films are not as simplistic as they are thought to be. Very often superhero films have delved into various themes that are socially relevant though it may not appear as so. One such superhero film is the X: Men film series which, under the garb of a superhero action film have delved into various issues like discrimination, intolerance, disability studies and marginalization of certain sections of the society that are perceived as deviant. The research paper will look into the Jewish subtext as observed in the films, especially through the character of Erik ‘Magneto’ Lensherr. The research will look into one film primarily, ‘*X-Men : First Class*’, for the same.

Why does Magneto’s character have such conspicuous Jewish undertones to him? Why are the characters of Charles and Erik, though they serve the same purpose of protecting mutants, represented as two opposite binaries? Do Magneto’s intentions, which may be seen as noble and are largely motivated by his childhood trauma, make him different from other one-dimensional villains? Why is the status of Magneto as a victim and a survivor stressed upon? Does Magneto represent the voices of the voiceless in the film?

‘*X-Men: First Class*’ is the fifth instalment in the highly successful X-Men film series based on the comic book characters of the same name appearing in Marvel comics, developed by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. ‘*X-Men: First Class*’ is a prequel that maps the origin story of the main characters of the film series Charles Xavier and Erik Lensherr. The origin story, as is the case with comic books as well, is “the most interesting part” (Bukatman 121) of the movie as it maps the transformation of Charles and Erik into Professor X and Magneto respectively and the formation of their respective groups ‘X-Men’ and the ‘Brotherhood of Mutants’. The movie is set against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The Nazi geneticist, Sebastian Shaw, tries to use the Cuban Missile Crisis to start the Third World War in order for mutants to emerge as the dominant species on earth. Charles and Erik

along with a host of other teenage mutants team up to stop Shaw from carrying out his devastating plan.

The movie has been taken up for research because it is in this movie that an often neglected aspect of most commercial movies comes in the forefront which is the subtext of the movie which runs “parallel or often directly counter to the most obvious levels of meaning” (Beard 212). The research seeks to analyse the Jewish subtext of the movie in order to understand how Erik’s traumatic childhood experiences, at the Nazi Concentration Camp, Auschwitz, in contrast to Charles’ rather privileged life, shapes his character and eventually leads to his crusade against humans. It is this conspicuous and potent Jewish connection of Magneto, his status as a Holocaust victim/survivor and his representation as a “victim-cum-victimiser” (Abrams 114) that makes him come across as less of a traditionally one-dimensional comic book villain and more as an anti-hero, who fights not just for himself but for the welfare of his fellow mutants, in order to make their voices heard.

The research that has been done in the area of comic books or comic book films have often stressed upon the superiority of the comic book genre over the comic book films. It is often thought that comic books are a more developed and comprehensive whole that often explore the stories of individual characters deeply. Not only are the characters in comic books well developed, the story lines are as well. It is common perception that such a depth is often not seen in comic book films. However, in the present scenario the tides have turned for comic book films are now being accepted and embraced more openly than comic books themselves. Comic books often have also been associated with Jews. Studies done in this area have looked more often not at Jewish characters but the writers and creators of these comic book characters like Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Jerry Siegel, Will Eisner who were first generation American Jews who have often been thought to represent their insecurities as first generation American Jews, living in the times of growing anti-Semitism, into their characters. Comic books have come to be known as a genre dominated by Jews and developed by Jews. This is not only because of their creative genius but also because comic books were not considered to be a ‘fine art’, Will Eisner, a notable Jewish comic book writer, on the overwhelming presence of Jews in the comic industry, remarked, “There were Jews in this medium because it was a crap medium. And in a marketplace that still had racial overtones, it was an easy medium to get into” (qtd. in Royal 4). Jews were present in the comic book industry simply because they weren’t allowed to work in more sophisticated areas. In fact, very often these writers adopted more gentile names to be able to get into the writing business. It is no wonder then that the writers who have faced such discrimination in their daily lives reflected it in their characters too. Not only issues of the Jews, but the discrimination faced by the other minority sections of the society have also been represented in their works. The X-Men series have often

thought to have delved into themes that are socially relevant and talked about minorities that are socially oppressed from disabled people to the ones that are seen as socially deviant. However, the research will only look at the Jewish subtext seen in the movie, '*X-Men: First Class*'. The research will use various qualitative methods such as content analysis, narrative analysis, and visual analysis to interpret meaning from speech, conversation, and visuals to analyse the various themes that emerge and how the Jewish connection is established to add new dimensions to the character growth of Erik.

The opening sequence of the movie '*X-Men: First Class*' depicts a crowd of Jews being taken to a Nazi Concentration Camp, Auschwitz in Poland 1944. The camera focuses on a lady and a frightened young Jewish boy (Erik), who is clearly identifiable as Jewish by the Yellow Star of David stitched onto the breast of his flimsy coat. The young Jewish boy, Erik (Brett Morris), is forcefully separated from his parents and it is in this moment of great distress and anguish, as he sees his family being led away, that his powers are manifested. Erik is a mutant who demonstrates the "telepathic ability to generate a magnetic field with which he can manipulate, bend or deflect metal objects" (Abrams 115), as is made evident when he bends the iron gates of the camp while trying to get to his parents, even as four grown German soldiers struggle to hold him back. It is in this scene that clearly establishes the Jewish heritage of the character Erik/Magneto. "In this way, his representation invokes anti-Semitic discourses that constructed Jews as 'super intelligent' and 'freakish', especially given that his mutant powers derives from his mind – Jew/ Yiddische Kopf – rather than his body which in contrast is much weaker" (Abrams 115). This Jewish connection is very important, indeed for it adds "depth and gravitas" (Glyn 40) to the story and the character. It is therefore not surprising that the very same scene has been the opening scene of the first instalment of the X-Men series '*X-Men*' (save for the difference between the actors because of the staggering thirteen year difference between the release of the two films) not only because this connection couldn't be stressed enough but also because of the obsession with the narratives of various superhero films with trauma, because physical transformation alone doesn't arouse interest in the characters (Bukatman 121-122). The scene also shows a man watching these events unfold from a window above while calmly sipping tea, which shows how unaffected the Nazis were at the plight of the Jews. In juxtaposition, in the very next scene, a young Charles is introduced, who lives a life of luxury, living in a sprawling mansion in Westchester, New York in the same year. The first few minutes of the film do a splendid job in both introducing the plight of a young Jewish boy, Erik and in showing the contrast between the kinds of lives the two main characters have led.

In the scene that immediately follows, we see the man who had earlier been watching Erik from the window, Sebastian Shaw, introducing himself to Erik as Klaus Schmidt, the doctor at the camp. He tries to get on good terms with Erik by distancing himself from the Nazis by decrying the aesthetic motives behind their plans for generating a superior gene pool and by offering the starving boy something that would interest him more, chocolate. It is soon enough clear that his intentions are sinister for he wants Erik to display his powers again so he can carry on with his plans of creating a dominant genetic species and Erik is an important jigsaw piece in that puzzle. He threatens to kill Erik's mother if he fails to do so and Erik is powerless to stop his mother from getting killed. In a fit of rage, after his mother is murdered, Erik destroys Shaw's lab and kills two German soldiers, while Shaw laughs maniacally. However, he fails to escape from the clutches of Shaw who hands him the same coin he threatened him to telepathically move. This is where, for the first time we see Erik being completely powerless to prevent his mother from getting murdered. This is also probably where his resolve to be able to protect the people he cares about is established, though he soon resigns to his fate.

In the scene that happens eighteen years later, Erik (Michael Fassbender) is seen now as a grown up man. A close up shot of the tattoo of his prison number on his arm is shown, while he is playing with the same coin that Shaw handed him so many years ago. Despite his genetic powers, when he was young, he was powerless to prevent the murder of his parents and the genocide. Yet, once he is liberated and grown up, he tracks and hunts down Nazis in his search of Shaw (Abrams 115). Erik goes to a bank with a piece of Nazi gold made from the possession of the Jews. There, he threatens a bank employee to get the whereabouts of Shaw. In the scene, he very eloquently narrates, "This gold is what remains of my people. Melted from their possessions. Torn from their teeth. This is blood money." He uses physical force to get his information. Though the information only leads him to another dead end, he kills the ex-Nazi he finds on his journey to find Shaw. It is often perceived of 'bad' characters or villains in films that they are unequivocally bad. But it is being observed that villains are often victims of their circumstances and are made into 'villains' because of the environment they grew in or the situations they encountered. (Fischhoff 45-50). Same is the case with Erik who acknowledges that he went down the path of death and destruction because of the evil that he was subjected to, as is evident from his dialogue, "Let's just say that I'm Frankenstein's monster." It is later revealed through some flashbacks that Erik was also tortured and experimented on at the hands of Shaw.

Through various dialogues in the movie, Erik constantly makes references to his time at the Camp and tries to defend his fellow mutants. When the Central Agency of Intelligence (CIA) call on mutants to stop Sebastian Shaw and to discover new

mutants, he puts his foot down and claims that “If a new species is being discovered it should be by its own kind. Charles and I find the mutants. No suits.” Charles also goes along with Erik’s plans. Though Erik was unable to protect his kind before, here we see him actively trying to protect his kind in any way possible. Through his dialogues, it is clearly discernible that Erik’s actions and motivations have “arisen from his experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust” (Baron 50) and he feels a need to protect his fellow mutants.

In a very interesting scene fifty minutes into the movie, Charles and Erik are shown sitting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. overlooking the obelisk, Washington Monument. The Lincoln Memorial is seen as a symbolic centre focused on race relations and it is here that we see Charles and Erik clearly juxtaposed in both their ideals and ambitions. Charles is visibly excited at the prospect of helping his fellow mutants while Erik is wary of the methods being used to identify them. He remarks, “Identification, that’s how it starts. And ends with being rounded up, experimented on, and eliminated.” Erik is understandably wary as “a victim of a previous genocide who reasonably anticipates that paranoid humans will subject the mutants to the same fate European Jewry faced during World War Two” (Baron 48). Erik’s fears prove to be reasonable at the climax of the movie when the Americans and the Soviets unite against the mutants.

Another scene from the movie where Charles and Erik are seen as playing chess and discussing Shaw’s sinister plan to go at war against humankind, an interesting parallel is drawn between Charles and Erik representing the “ideological and tactical differences” of two of the most famous leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (Baron 48) as represented in their dialogue

Erik: what started as a covert mission, tomorrow mankind will know that mutants exist. Shaw, us, they won’t differentiate. They’ll fear us. And that fear will turn into hate.

Charles: Not if we stop a war. Not if we can prevent Shaw. Not if we risk our lives doing so.

Erik: Would they do the same for us?

Charles: We have it in us to be the better man.

Erik: We already are. We are the next stage of human revolution. [...] Are you really so naïve as to think that they won’t battle their own extinction?



Image 1: Charles and Erik representing ideological binaries

In many ways, Charles also represents the need of various American Jews to fit in the society that hated them. His character reflects the sentiments of the generation of American born Jews “who sought social acceptance and social mobility through assimilation.” (Baron 45).

At the climax of the movie, after having killed Shaw, Erik is seen as delivering a speech in order to unite the mutants by proclaiming that the humans are the ‘real enemy.’ As the Americans and the Soviets both unite to kill the mutants by firing their missiles at them, Erik, who has the power to control metal instead launches those missiles at them. When Charles asks him not to kill those men for they are just good innocent men following orders, Erik makes a powerful statement, “I’ve been at the mercy of men just following orders. Never again.” It is these constant reminders of Erik’s status as a Holocaust survivor that makes his motives “genuinely understandable” for he wants to “prevent another holocaust, albeit this time against the mutants” In this light, it is the non-mutants who become evil in their desire to end mutants, simply because they are different. (Abrams 116) It is also a reminder of the fact that victims are just as capable of becoming victimisers. In this manner, through the character of Magneto, the writers of the film “normalise Holocaust survivors by suggesting that a Holocaust survivor is just as capable of repeating the crimes of his perpetrator as any other victim” (Glyn 40).

The audience might object that a Holocaust survivor is cast as a villain but it becomes very important to understand that Erik/Magneto is not an “innately evil man seeking world domination” (Baron 48) but a victim of a genocide who reasonably fears that his kind may be exterminated because of their fear of the unknown. “Magneto’s behaviour and beliefs are given a convincing ideological

foundation” (Abrams 116). Magneto’s crusade against the humans largely stems from his understandable and justified fear and weariness of the human kind for he has already been a victim at the hands of human cruelty. “Magneto has become a rare thing in superhero comics, he is a character who has actually grown and developed, he has become a less straightforward villain, more of an anti-hero[...] and this is largely because of the retrofitting of the Holocaust into his backstory” (Glyn 38).

So we see in many ways that Erik/Magneto is not a wholly evil. His motives for protecting his kind are both understandable and defensible. It is very easy to pin a person that goes against what society constructs as ‘right’ as deviant and evil. In fact that is how villains are most often portrayed in movies. It is lamentable that “Hollywood villains are mere devices to impel heroism” (Fischhoff 52) this way, villains become mere binaries used to highlight and contrast the evil of the villain against the saintly good of the hero. Sebastian Shaw in this movie is one such character because we see no redeeming qualities about him. However, Erik is a multifaceted character who can’t be viewed as a villain. He is not entirely evil and can’t be classified as a villain. Erik’s childhood experiences allow us to see him in a manner that is different from the way we’d view other villains in superhero movies, who are usually one dimensional like ‘The Scarecrow’ in ‘Batman Begins’ and ‘Syndrome’ in ‘The Incredibles’. Though Sebastian tries to convince Erik that their purpose is the same, to establish mutants as the dominant species, Shaw’s motives are selfish while Erik’s motives stem from his desire to never be at the mercy of a powerful majority, the humans, again. In all of this, Erik also differs from Charles because Charles seeks to assimilate the mutants in the society by seeking the approval of the humans which is naïve on the part of Charles due to his refusal to accept the cruelty of the human race. Erik, however, has been a victim of the cruelty of humans and their fear of the humans and knows that humans will never accept a dominant species into their society. Therefore, he wishes to grant humans any agency and to rise above them. Therefore, perhaps it is Charles and his naiveté who is “the real, albeit unwitting villain of the films” (Abrams 116-117). In contrast to Shaw, who is the typical villain seen in the superhero movies, Erik emerges not as a villain, but as an anti-hero.

The research has been an attempt at understanding and perhaps establishing Erik/Magneto as an anti-hero instead of as a villain as he is thought to be. The Research however has not looked at the various other themes that arise from the movie series such as studying the marginalisation of certain minority groups in the society, disability studies, how aesthetic values construct our identity primarily in the characters of Raven (Mystique) and Dr. Hank (Beast), how the Jewish elements in both the comics and movies is amplified because the writers and creators of the comic books who are Jewish, and so is Bryan Singer, the director of more than half

the X-Men movies and how their own beliefs are reflected in the movies and comics. The research has attempted to understand the Jewish undertones to the character of Erik/Magneto by only looking at the movie 'X-Men: First Class.' The other themes can all be taken up for further study. It is also imperative to understand why taking up such a research is important. The research largely has been an attempt to understand how certain minority and oppressed sections in the society that have been victimised can take up arms to defend themselves against their oppressors. In a society like ours where fringe groups like the Maoists and the separatist leaders and armed militants in Kashmir have taken up arms against their government which they perceive as 'oppressive', such a study becomes increasingly important in understanding the sentiments and beliefs of such groups.

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Image Cited

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