Re-Wiring the Self and Memory in the Posthuman of Superhero Comics

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“We’re gonna make you indestructible. But first, we’re gonna have to destroy you.”

Introduction

The distant dream of transforming human beings into a better version of themselves has always been a part of the human imagination. The trace of our earliest ancestors can still be found in the primates. The process of evolution has led humans to the present stage. With time, every aspect of the human body underwent a gradual change, and with it, society has also been restructured and reconstructed. Technological advancements are made to move the human race one step further. However, the idea of creating a better society through carefully selecting a partner for procreation can be found in the words of Plato. The 1940’s saw an intensification, even an institutionalization of eugenics. The term was first coined by Sir Francis Galton in the year 1883. (History.com Editors) This later gave birth to man’s preoccupation with a superior human body which transcends the average human existence, based on Nietzsche’s concept of the übermensch. In the hands of the Nazi regime, eugenics sought to enforce biopolitics predicated on the idea of racial superiority. Following in the wake of eugenics, the branches of transhumanism and posthumanism were born. The incorporation of a technological extension in a human body or tinkering with the basic DNA of the human body leading to the creation of super humans became a popular trope.

Übermensch: the precursor of the Posthuman superhero

Nietzsche first discusses the figure of an übermensch or “overman”, who is superior to the average human being, directly associating it with his Theory of Will to Power. By virtue of the superiority gained by the übermensch, he either desires to destroy or protect. A sense of self-actualization is reflected in the power play between the powerful and the weak. The contrasting characters of the superhero and the villain is a true portrayal of this belief in the will to power. This desire to overpower the weak adds meaning to life. A superhero’s actions can contribute to achieving a sense of fulfilment by protecting the weak. The desire to help and protect humanity drives the actions of a superhero. The human, according to Foucault, is a historical and cultural construct. (Garland) The superhuman in the form of the übermensch counters the idea of being human through his ability to overcome the physical and metaphysical limitations endured by the socially constructed idea of a human. In spite of being endowed with superhuman powers without access to any form of sovereignty, the characters of the Winter Soldier, Wolverine, Jessica Jones, Doctor Manhattan, Lucy, and Vision share the common trope of enabling a better life for society.
Their bodies become the site where the power relation between the strong and the weak is played out. The übermensch sets the stage for the development of superheroes as a popular cultural trope.

**Transforming into the Posthuman**

The superheroes and their representation always include an origin story which points at the exact moment when the average person transforms into the enhanced superhuman. Wolverine, however, was never truly an average human, with his mutated gene enabling him to heal faster than anyone. However, the pain endured in the process and the loss of memory transforms Wolverine into a raging man with little sense of the consequences of his actions. Jessica Jones, on the other hand, is an experimental superhero. She survives a fatal accident that alters her genetic code. Nonetheless, the super strength she acquires forces her to accept the responsibility of saving people. The psychological trauma she endures turns her into a reckless alcoholic. Her ability to connect to other people and her standards of morality are equally twisted. Much like Jessica Jones, the character of Bucky the Winter Soldier also lacked agency when turned into a super soldier. The body horror endured by the Winter Soldier is clearly evident in its representation on screen.

Through the integration of bionic arms coupled with constant brainwashing, Bucky is transformed into a killing machine. He has no right over his body or his own consciousness. Bucky is an assassin who follows orders he never questions. During his battle with Captain America, Bucky fails to recognize his closest friend. The moral obligation connected with memory is completely eradicated. However, Captain America’s words “till the end of the line” break through Bucky’s brainwashing. In a fight between a machine and human nature, Bucky overcomes his conditioning.

Following the trend of accidental superheroes, there is also the character of Lucy from the 2014 film of the same name. Lucy, the protagonist, accidentally absorbs a manufactured enzyme named CPH4. As her mental and physical capacity increases, her moral compass appears to decrease. Doctor Manhattan, from Watchmen, is a similar superhero, whose body is broken down into atomic particles when he gets trapped inside Gila Flat’s test vault. Akin to Lucy losing her
sense of pain and fear, Doctor Manhattan can no longer experience any human emotions. He sees himself as someone beyond the grasp of humanity.

The character of Vision in the *Avengers* series walks beyond the posthuman, becoming a transhuman. The transhuman varies from the posthuman with reference to the degree of restructuring of the body. Vision is a new species altogether, being the bodily representation of an AI. Ultron, the AI created by Iron Man (Tony Stark), develops a twisted concept of humans being flawed. He chooses not to be contained in the manner of binary codes; instead, he desires a body for himself. Ultron is a classic example of AI transforming a utopian concept into a dystopian world. This fear of AI turning rogue is reflected in the words of Stephen Hawking, who believed that “…the development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race". (Hawking quoted in Skelley) Ultron’s ultimate aim was to create a more advanced form of himself, in the process eradicating the human race in order to save the world from the hands of a species gradually destroying the earth. Vision is a true synchronization between Artificial Intelligence and advanced Biotechnology. Vision’s skin is manufactured by combining human tissue with vibranium, thereby making his body indestructible. He is not a human being with bodily enhancement; rather, Vision is an embodiment of all the elements that a human being lacks. The groundwork of Ultron’s belief stems from the transhumanist concept of singularity. Body enhancements targeted towards countering human limitations forms one of the basic principles of both Posthumanism and Transhumanism.

**Consciousness and intentionality**

The true nature of human consciousness is a fluid concept. The significance of the relation between the mind and the body is crucial to the understanding of consciousness. Whether consciousness is restricted to the mind alone or integrated into the bond between the mind and the body has been debated for a long time. The advancement in computer technologies creating the possibility of saving consciousness in the form of binary code has further spurred on the belief that human consciousness can exist on its own even in the absence of a body. Even so, being situated into an artificially constructed foreign body, the brain re-accommodates itself, thereby also altering the connected consciousness and intentionality. The sense of intentionality born out of the hybridization of the human and the machine creates a new form of intentionality. This is possible only due to the enhanced capability of the body. This form of *hybrid intentionality* is situated beyond the limits of the human body. The manner in which Wolverine, Jessica Jones, Lucy and the Winter Soldier choose to fight is directly linked to the indestructible nature of their body along with the superhuman strength they have acquired. Their perception of the world and their sense of moral obligation also undergoes a massive change.

Posthumanism contradicts the very essence of humanism, which accepts the centrality of human beings. The central belief of humanism is in the superiority of the human in contrast to all other species. Posthumanism develops on the premise of the human body being limited by its transient nature. It strives towards creating an entity through physical enhancements capable of
overcoming the limitations of the body. However, whether human beings cease to be humans due to the enhancements has been a matter of debate among various theorists. The changes in human consciousness affected by the upgrade of physical ability is the focal point in posthuman studies. In the words of N. Katherine Hayles, “Human mind without the human body is not human mind.” (Hayles 222-246) his is clearly reflected in the constant struggles faced by the characters of Wolverine and Jessica Jones, trying to come to terms with the change in their moral sensibilities. The technologically enhanced body of the Winter Soldier also clearly depicts the loss of human consciousness and sensibilities. Lucy is similarly transformed into a superior being, transcending corporeal limitations. Her enhanced intellectual capacity renders her incapable of feeling human emotions. Her cognitive skills follow a logical mindset, stepping over the fallacy and frailty caused by emotions. An important marker of the posthuman is the notion of intentionality. What sets apart Vision from his precursor Ultron is this very intentionality. Both Ultron and Jarvis are Artificial Intelligence created to further human capacity. On the one hand, Ultron views humans as an inferior race to be substituted by procreating a single self, based on his own image. Vision's body becomes the site for the coming together of two minds, namely Ultron and Jarvis. Vision's actions are dictated by the intention of Jarvis, who believed in helping humans without altering their sense of individuality. Although Ultron aimed to create an image of himself in Vision, his destructive intentions are overpowered by the more benevolent desire of Jarvis the humans. This coupling of an artificially manufactured indestructible body and the contradictory intentions of Ultron and Jarvis creates a new species in a manner reminiscent of the transhumanist model of posthumanity. Even though Vision is an android, his choice to defend and protect human beings is inspired by Jarvis’ intentions. What essentially distinguishes a man from the man-machine hybrid is the ability to experience emotions. However, one of the plates from the Avengers comics depicts Vision experiencing sorrow and shedding tears. This expression of emotion complicates the differentiating factor between humans and the android. This is entirely the result of the synthesis between man and machine to create a transhuman being, who is at the same time similar and different from a human being.

The importance of intentionality can also be seen in the figure of the Winter Soldier, who is able to overcome his psychological conditioning due to his desire to save his friend Captain America. Wolverine and Jessica Jones, in spite of their raging personalities always verging on the edge of destruction, are ultimately guided by their intention to protect the people around them. Even the character of Lucy ultimately transforms herself into a pen drive handing over knowledge acquired without passing through the various stages of evolution. Her intention, as made clear with her interaction with Professor Samuel Norman, is to help humanity progress with the help of the knowledge passed by her to the Professor. In all the superheroes mentioned earlier, the body enhancements are not in the shape of appendages which can be easily added or removed at will without instituting changes to the moral self. Instead, the modifications are permanently integrated into the body, thereby altering the mind, morality and consciousness.

Conclusion

The critical analysis of the selected characters from a theoretical perspective depicts the manner in which consciousness and sense of morality is affected by the changes introduced in the body. The pain and horror endured during the process of enhancement further adds on to the lack of moral perception. The centrality of the position and significance of the human with regards to posthumanism and transhumanism alters the perception of the superhero's self. The accidental and experimental methods of imbibing the bodies with superhuman strength, overcoming the arduous process of the various stages of evolution, restructures the very essence of body, mind and consciousness. The posthuman/transhuman body of the aforementioned superheroes undergoes an alteration not only in the physical state but also the psychological and emotional state. The role of technology in bringing such an alteration is crucial to the understanding of the concept of posthumanism.

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