

Article

Indianization of the Cape: Indian Superheroes as Harbingers of Cultural Reclamation in the Contemporary Superhero Scene

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Abstract: Superman, through the efforts of Jerry Siegel, has founded the superstructure for the Superhero formula since 1938, which has gained prominence throughout world cultures. Owing to Superman's origins, Superheroes have often been tagged as an American discovery that has been carried on since. The same also becomes responsible for overshadowing various Indian superheroes struggling to make a presence in contemporary Indian scenarios. This study, therefore, aims to focus on the Indian Superhero figure, contextualized within the Indian subcontinent, thereby contesting Western frameworks. Using the decolonial frameworks by Fanon, Bhabha, and Thiong'o, this study aims to use a tripartite structure to situate the evolutionary history — from Colonial Shadows to Indian attempts in Superhero creation, mythical and folkloric interpretations as a means of Indian reclamation, and modern contemporary undertakings in various media forums signifying present and future implications.

Keywords: Indian superheroes; cultural reclamation; de-colonizing; Indianizing

Introduction

Hillary Chute's seminal work, "Why Comics?" (2017), dedicates a chapter to superheroes titled, "Why Superheroes?" (Chute 69). While claiming that "the figure of superhero has become a deep, integral feature of American Culture," she also adds that it has flourished through "wars, global crises, and shifting social values" (Chute 70). Here, she also quotes an excerpt from Brad Meltzer's "The Book of Lies" (2008), which not only designates Superman's origins but also pens down Siegel's inspiration behind it, which also became the motto of successive superhero formulations since (Chute 72). The text understands that, although not evident, Siegel's inspiration behind creating 'a bulletproof man' came from a shoplifting incident that led to his father's death (Chute 72). Hence, Superman's hermeneutics as 'a beacon of hope' and 'the last surviving son of Krypton' on Earth resonated widely with the cultural annotations, tumultuous war times, and successive superhero formulations. While present-day scenarios contest variations in the aesthetics, novelties, and moral nuances of superheroes, They Have principally become synonymous with Western ideals, even though creative attempts have been made to tailor them to fit the preferences of other national cultures.

India, the centerpiece of this study, has a complex history of borrowings, imitations, and, more recently, original creations, which may be on par with those of its Western counterparts. Initial beginnings occurred when Delhi became the hub of piracy culture, which brought the first wave of superhero existence within India. A pirate circulation of anime, comics, and superhero films reached a discrete public, which initiated an illegal yet resilient media ecosystem (Sundaram). Successive waves also came forward with the borrowings of Lee Falk's Mandrake the Magician (1934) and Phantom (1936), and successive fictional figures like Flash Gordon, Buzz Sawyer, etc., to the Indian markets by Indrajal Comics under Bennet, Coleman and Co. The next wave was contextualized by Gotham Comics India, under the Gotham Entertainment Group LLC, from 1997 onwards, which brought an influx of foreign comic publishers, such as DC and Marvel, to the Indian audience. Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and others thus stormed a market where Indian contemporaries like Raj Comics and Amar Chitra Katha became overshadowed. Although its run was short-lived, attempts akin to these continue to highlight what Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Homi K. Bhabha speak to regarding decolonization. Although it would not have been possible to understand comics without the contact of Western forces, it eventually caused what Fanon caught the drift of in "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952). While Fanon targets three spheres of colonial oppression, colonial alienation, by far, remains the most apt consequence that befalls the Indian Market of Western comic products ('Fanon on Colonialism'). Cut off from one's history, language, and identity is what Fanon professes about colonial alienation, which also coincides with the predicament of Indian Audiences — Western comics preferred over Indian comics, a system of thought that essentialized Western-made goods over the indigenous. Understating the importance of language, Thiongo's "Decolonizing the Mind" (1986) understands the hermeneutics of language as an aspect of politics and culture. The study aligns more closely with the cultural segment and, in relation to Thiong'o's understanding of language as both a tool for colonization and decolonization. Previously discussed were Western borrowings

within Indian markets, which contested and won the language conflict, leading to Western domination of the Indian comic market. Along with language, underlying connotations of culture and politics may also be denoted in due regard. Although gone are the days of Western borrowings and imitations, “Decolonization remains an ongoing struggle, as many legacies of colonialism continue to shape the world in which we live” (Rani). Current contexts call the Marvel Cinematic Universe an impactful influence over the Indian Popular Culture climate, which not only popularized Marvel’s hold in India but subsequently rekindled the lost flame of Indian Indigenous Superhero narratives, thanks to PM’s ‘Make in India’ and ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ campaigns. However, Y.S. Das discusses the sorry state of the Indian Comics market, saying that, “Even as people are hooked onto Marvel and Manga, sales of comic books have dipped and Indian Superheroes are fighting for survival.” (Das). Consequently, Siddhant Adlakha takes note of a grey area — “Since the start of the Marvel boom in 2008, India has seen a slight uptick in local big-screen superheroes (like Tamil-language Hero and Malayalam-language Minnal Murali), but none of them have had the cultural staying power of the Avengers.” (Adlakha). Contextualizing such a phenomenon, Bhaba’s inputs on Hybridity become an optimistic plight, which sees the usage of an ‘in-between space’ (Mambrol). Although the process is criticized on various grounds, Bhaba’s ultimate goal was to prove the existence of a third hybrid space, which comes from cross-contact with colonial and colonized forces. The highlighted plight of Indian Superhero figures surviving within the West-dominated Indian market reflects Bhaba’s modus operandi on hybridity. While, comic publication houses like Raj Comics through *Nagraj*, *Doga*, etc. or TV attempts like *Shaktimaan* (1997-2005), *Karma* (2004-2009) and *Hero - Bhakti hi Shakti hai* (2005-2007), aim to tip off the power ambivalence in a western dominated market, the usage of Western principles with Indian belief systems, can only lead so far. With a fluctuating graph about the present and future of Indian superheroes, it is only with time and technology that truly Indian Superhero figures might be seen on the high table. Although talks in ‘comic-towns’ have come to testify to the existence of non-Raj comic initiatives, such as Graphic India and *Bullseye Press*, etc. Indian Superhero scene still has to cross over its now seemingly adolescent stage by also touching upon social conditioning, narrative techniques, and artistic methods.

Putting to light the Indian Superhero figure, this study aims to question the freedom from Western makings of the Superhero — if it is actually possible? The same shall follow a counter questioning of the developments of modern Indian initiations within the Indian Superhero narrative — if such are capable of standing at par and/or reclaiming the Indian identity within such regards.

Early Days of Borrowings, Inspirations, and Mythic Conjugations

With a rich culture and heritage akin to that of the Indian Subcontinent, for which India came under the heel of British Colonial powers, it often comes as a surprise why the efficient use of it is sidetracked so many years after Independence. It is beyond doubt and evident that Indian themes and aesthetics are now gaining prominence within the Indian media market. Examples follow movies like *Mahavatar Narasimha* (2025), which is not only an epoch within the Indian animation industry but also a

victory in the regard of Indian culture — initially sidelined but now gaining momentum. Successive themes in universalized movies like Hanu-man (2024) and one-shots like Kantara (2022) are slowly but surely suggesting that the formulation of authentic Indian culture, aesthetics, and beliefs is here to stay. Most importantly, the use of an Indian mythic hero comes close to the American notion of a superhero. However, what is the case with the authentic Indian superhero scene in particular?

Comic developments were much later in India (Rao, 38 & Menon, 208). Initial attempts involved the Indianization of American imported texts through translation efforts and later partnerships, which significantly influenced the climate of the Indian Superhero and Comics scene. Instances of such adaptations can be traced through Gotham Entertainment's Spider-Man: India (2004), which Indianized Spider-Man's American origins, and Virgin Comics' partnership with Gotham Comics India, bringing characters like Devi, Snake Woman, and the Sadhu, whose characterization was not alien to Indian Culture. Attempts of this nature, which succeeded earlier translation efforts and previously discussed borrowings, such as newspaper clips and meager serializations, were only aimed at mere audience appeasement. Thus, amalgamating native linguistic aspects with visuals that are alien by nature further aggravates what Thiong'o and Fanon had discussed. However, Indigenous attempts, through Anant Pai, the founder of Amar Chitra Katha, and characterizations of Bahadur and Fauladi Singh by Indrajal and Diamond Comics, respectively, helped establish early Indian initiatives with comics. Thereby, signifying a break from Westernized notions of comics and superhero formulations. About the attempts made by Anant Pai, Indrajal Comics, and Diamond Comics, Suchitra Mathur thus decodes that, "These first Indian superheroes, therefore, appear to point toward the development of a distinctly indigenous superhero tradition that shares with the ACKs a self-conscious distancing from the Anglo-American comic tradition." (2010, 177).

However, it was Raj Comics (1986), created jointly by Raj Kumar Gupta, Sanjay Gupta, and Manoj Gupta, that formulated the aim of giving Indian audiences a homegrown sense of pride in having their own superheroes, following the American trend. Under their banner, "The home of Indian Action Superhero Comics", their first and eventual vanguard superhero, Nagraj (1986), encapsulates what Bhabha aimed through his conceptualizations on 'Hybridity.' Armed with the knowledge of serpents holding a cornerstone in Indian religious beliefs and amalgamations with the American Superhero formula, Nagraj thus creates a hybrid space with snakes coming from his wrists as projectile weapons, enacting Spider-Man's web shooting as well as his web-swinging capabilities. This is also accepted by Sanjay Gupta, who claims that "the main inspiration behind the creation of this superhero was Spider-Man" (Mathur 178). Similar prospects also align with Shakti, who, akin to Nagraj, enacts a hybrid characterization and is also part of Raj's superhero roster. The character's abilities also reflect the makings of Marvel's Ghost Rider, which is seen when the protagonist Chanda becomes the host for Shakti. The character's makings parallel the Indian representation of Shakti through the Indian female deity, Maa Kali, resonating through superpowers such as the third eye and the ability to heed female calls of distress. Although her figure is often eroticized through the use of tiger skin motifs and

Westernized dress patterns, she remains assertive in her radical protest against colonial-patriarchal forms in narrative as well as in medium. Other characters like Tiranga (Captain America's counterpart), Doga (a mixture of grey characters like Batman and Punisher), and Parmanu (inspired by the likes of DC's Atom and Marvel's Ant-Man), eventually formed Raj's own super-team akin to Marvel's Avengers and DC's Justice League. Although 'hybrid' they may be, coupled with instances of imitation, they undoubtedly gave Indian audiences a sense of belonging which was otherwise a source of 'Colonial Alienation' amid Fanon's undertakings and in an Indian market full of Western figures.

While comic-book iterations played their part, a notable aspect of superhero creation in its heydays recalls Mathur's claim that, "this figure of the Indian superhero appears to draw more obviously upon another indigenous popular culture tradition, namely, Hindi cinema." (Mathur 177). The same also stands true due to factual instances like the re-imagination of Bollywood's angry young man, Amitabh Bachchan, as Supremo, which "draws upon several features of the American superhero that had been conspicuously absent in earlier Indian comic book superheroes." (Mathur 177). Anil Kapoor's Mr India (1987) is also known for "its redefinition of the Indian superhero as an 'average Indian' who has special powers bestowed on him by science, in this case the ability to become invisible" (Mathur 177). Amidst all this, imprints of American Superheroes like Superman and Spider-Man also became evident. The depiction of an 'average Indian' with a nerdy appearance, which subsequently changes into a brave superhero, eventually became the talk of the town. The aforementioned Raj comic character, Nagraj, as per TV renditions seen in *Rakshak Nagraj* starring Raj Premi digs at Superman's alteration from Clark Kent to the Superhero we know and love — from Superman's signature curl translated to a 'snake-hood' hairstyle to Clark Kent's journalist front altered to fit Raj, Nagraj's human alter ego. Synonymous attempts are seen in Mukesh Khanna's *Shaktimaan*, who retains the comic human alter ego of Gangadhar and works as a photographer. Hybridization attempts are portrayed through 'the chosen one' and reincarnation tropes imbued by powers retained through 'Kundalini Yoga'. Similarly, *Hero - Bhakti hi Shakti hai* treads lightly into the canon of Clark Kent, Superman's nerdy human disguise, through Joy Sehgal, played by Sumeet Pathak. However, his superpowers replicate the instance of Green Lantern's power ring that is operated by sheer will. The plot also follows similar instances of the Green Lantern narrative, which, in this regard, appeases Goddess Durga, leading Joy to become Hero and save the day.

Such instances, note a few but the most prominent attempts of the early days in Superhero creations within the Indian subcontinent. However, amid such phenomena, Suchitra Mathur suggests that "the Indian media, especially the informal sector of Indian bloggers, have been at pains to remind us, the Indian superhero has been around for much longer. Exactly how much longer is once again a matter of debate" (Mathur 175). Hence, such creations suggest a broad overview of the noble cause of Indian Superhero creators and enthusiasts, who have subsequently and painstakingly paved the way for further creative attempts, which are discussed in the subsequent section. Although Western powers inspire most of the attempts listed here,

it is of no consequence that the Indian element also makes its presence known. Thus, it provides future generations with a foundation to build upon and improve upon in the future. After all, such attempts eventually lead to decolonization, and as suggested by the critics mentioned above, it is often a violent, rigorous, and painstaking process, nonetheless.

Modern Contemporary Makings in the Indian Superhero Atmosphere

Thanks to the undertakings of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel Comics not only established a big-screen narrative but also inspired other media institutions to follow suit in their efforts to universalize their content. This move also suggested a leveling up from the stereotypical notion that comic books, in their themes and medium, are a childish initiation. With the initial introduction through Iron Man (2009) that eventually culminated in Avengers: Endgame (2019), the idea that superheroes form larger-than-life representations became something to be considered preemptively. Waves of the MCU also reached India, which eventually led to projects focused on establishing Cinematic Universes. Meanwhile, the parallel Indian fandom also began idolizing MCU superheroes and the actors behind them, especially Robert Downey Jr., who eventually became the MCU's godfather, fanonically. Thus, enacting Foucault's discourse on Power and Knowledge. Previously discussed instances of Indian Superhero creations follow up on West-mandated images — muscular builds, spandex tights, and superpowers — which projected the image of the 'American dream' encased in white, blue, and red. The case for India, however, presents itself as stagnating under the Western obsession with muscles, unique identifiers, and superpowers. However, it has somehow managed to coexist with a distinct Indian identity. Instances of Indian mashups can be found all over social media through fan creations made by Indian fans, primarily through the usage of AI tools. Previously discussed characters also enact the instances of American Superhero figures like Superman, Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, while adorning them with Indian cultural markers — Nagraj's Snake aesthetic, Shakti's Third Eye, Shaktimaan's 'Kundali chakra', Tiraga's Indian dig on Captain America, Doga's replication of the Hindu deity *Kalbhairav*, etc., hallmark the instillation of Mythological representations and Saffron ideologies, however, with the situation of Western physicalities.

Preceding the influx of MCU on Indian shores, makeshift Indian superhero media already existed, but they were nowhere near resonating with the American Superhero identity. Amitabh Bachchan's *Shahenshah* (1988), *Toofan* (1989), *Ajooba* (1990), and the previously discussed Anil Kapoor's *Mr India* (1987) mandated the early Indigenous Superhero climate in India — no superpowers, just an 'average Indian' with a sense of responsibility. The next undertaking was marked by popular movies like *Krrish* (2006), which marked the initiation of Superhero narratives in India and presented the capabilities of Indian Superhero narratives, similar to those discussed earlier. Post the MCU wave, one shot movies like *Bhavesh Joshi Superhero* (2018), *Lakadbaggha* (2023), and universalized movies like *Bramhastra Part-I: Shiva* (2022), the previously planned one-shot like *Krrish* which turned to a franchise, as well as regional hits like *Minnal Murali* (2021), and *Hanu-Man* (2024) of the Prasanth Verma Cinematic

Universe, brought in authentic Indian Superhero experiences raised from Indigenous myths, lifestyles, and other cultural signifiers. Roma Chatterjee suggests, “comics scholars have studied the adaptation and transcreation of the predominantly American superhero model in different countries. These works have shown how such a figure, usually identified with the nation, serves to foreground particular cultural values.” (Chatterjee, 121). While she claims the statement instead of comic scholars, it evidently applies to Indian media culture that is associated with the Superhero figure.

Non-Raj Superhero Comic houses all seem to have been susceptible to emergence, thanks to the MCU wave, as discussed earlier, which brought the MCU fandom in India while rekindling the lost flame for original, indigenous works in the same vein. Even with the persistence of stereotypical viewpoints, such institutions manage to survive and thrive within genuine comic fandom bases. Graphic India (2012-present) heads the mission for authentic Indian superhero comics and picks up where Raj Comics falls short. Unlike Raj Comics, whose developments fell antithetical to modern innovations, Graphic India helmed it with a tripartite partnership consisting of Sharad Devrajan, Gotham Chopra, and Suresh Seetharaman, which eventually managed to rope in US Comic Giants like Stan Lee for *Chakra: The Invincible* and Grant Morrison for *18 Days*. Amitabh Bachchan is also included in the fore, with *Astra Force*, which will be a massive step up from his *Supremo* comic days. Parvin Palande, in his article, suggests Devarajan’s fanaticism for comic books as the prime source of his vision, saying that, “he remains a fanboy first, he says. That is why his house is stacked with piles of comic books from floor to ceiling. Those give him his super power.” (2015). His aim of making “Indian characters as larger than life as a Spider-Man or Batman” (Shashidhar, 2013) also speaks volumes about his mission, which is now seeing materialization. Holy Cow Entertainment (2011-present) also accounts for due recognition with accolades coming from known institutions like Comic Con India, often suggestive of an echo to DC’s Vertigo/Black Label imprints and Marvel’s grittier narratives. Grounded in mythology and contemporary takes on superheroes, founder Vivek Goel, while sharing his views during Comic Con 2019, suggests his lone presence in the industry with no competition whatsoever. He says —

“I do not see anyone emerging (with such themes), because I think the problem is that there is no industry over here. The Indian comics industry is more like a boutique industry. There are hardly any new players coming in. I really hope that more and more people start coming in, so that we get a variety of the kind of comics we are getting in India. The market is very untapped, and there is much talent over here.” (Madanapalle)

While his views highlight the barren condition of the Indian Superhero comics industry, he, along with his HCE, has done their part through the mythic Ravanayana and contemporary, costume-less superheroes like Aghori, Shaitan Singh, Caster, the Last Asuran, and Dehek, making up the HCE roster. Other lesser-known publication houses include Bullseye Press, whose instance falls as an Indie publisher in line with more grounded and compelling narratives focusing on the Indian superhero figure — most retaining allusions to iconic comic initiations like Action Comics #1 (1983) known

for Superman's first comic appearance, and manga adaptation for their original character *Zaalim Manjha*, altered to *Zaalim Manga*. Moreover, Vimanika Comics primarily features the meeting of superheroes with Indian Gods. Hence, their adaptations of Indian myths in contemporary spaces — notable among which is *the Sixth*, *The Legend of Karna*, which sees the NRI businessman Karan Vir Oberoi having vivid dreams of Mahabharat's unsung warrior, Karna.

Armed with digital and AI innovations, many such publishing houses have emerged, which have been welcomed with great success, with audience response appreciating their efforts. Falling in line with the heyday efforts, the new-age comics in India are not only inclined to channelize the Indian superhero figure but are also ensuring they stay true to Indian culture. Modern contemporary figures are not adamant about portraying superheroes in suits, but are more inclined towards exploring their moral complexities and other aspects that make them relatable and human. The aforementioned superhero characters, such as Zaalim Manjha, are often depicted wearing a white kurta and jeans, suggesting a modern, contemporary inclination. In contrast, mythic superheroes are often depicted in armor, which the Indian populace is already accustomed to. Instead of introducing foreign superheroes to the Indian market, like their predecessors, Indian superhero comic creators have engaged in a massive push towards creating self-independent, all-Indian superheroes that are being connected to and adored by the audience.

Conclusion

Comic books as pictorial art have remained in existence throughout history, as Aruna Rao claims (Rao 38). However, she also suggests, "Comics are now a ubiquitous part of contemporary India, but little is known about who makes them, and even less about who reads them. (Rao 37) Due to the cartoonish and surreal aspects that comic books and superheroes embody, the medium and the theme have often been dismissed as childish endeavors. While efforts by pioneers like Anant Pai, Sanjay Gupta, and Sharad Devarajan have brought immense innovations within the Indian comics circle, along with the MCU wave, they have, however, not been able to sprout a primary collective readership, akin to the ones found for Marvel and DC. It is also worth noting that while indigenous superheroes have come to the fore, it is neither possible nor recommended to separate from the general superhero function — a problematic origin that eventually leads to the birth of a superhero, whose life remains riddled with problems similar to our own. Robin S. Rosenberg understates that by saying, "We care because we can relate; we see ourselves in their characters, their dilemmas, their transformations (Rosenberg 11). While decolonization remains persistent, the colonial aspect within a society remains a necessary evil that keeps cultures in close contact. Therefore, comics and superheroes may be a foreign product; however, efforts by pioneers and contemporary creators have made it 'desi'. Thereby, alluding to the Indianization of such Western materials.

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