



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE BIO-FRIENDLY MASS-DESTROYER: RISE OF ECO-TERRORISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY SUPERHERO UNIVERSE

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Abstract:

Eco-terrorism has grown to become a powerful opponent of superheroes in contemporary comic books and movies. Seen as an inevitable alternative for the androcentric views traditionally promoted by such works, Eco-terrorism has successfully struck a chord with the reader/viewers. Ra's al Ghul and Thanos, two eco-terrorist super-villains, have managed to become iconic figures and garnered immense fan-favour despite their radical ideologies and extreme measures. Despite their ultimate defeat, they have successfully problematized the ideological and political scape of the superhero discourse.

Key Words:

Eco-terrorism, philosophy, villain, ideology, bio-centrism, anthropocentrism, radical, extreme, balance, civilization, inevitable.

I. Introduction:

The recent boom in superhero movies has made possible the gradual defacing of the demarcating line between the 'heroes' and the 'villains'. The questions related to moral and ethical duties of the superheroes have been further problematized as the so-called villains have often represented the moral standpoint, become a source of philosophical wisdom, and even provided comic relief. The popular culture has embraced such multifaceted 'villains' over the somewhat stereotypical heroes, and consequently the heroes too have been placed in a gray zone, making the viewers' moral choice even more difficult. One fine instance might be seen in the portrayal of some iconic villains in the last few decades in both comic books and movies which might be one of the reasons to have brought the very notion of eco-terrorism to the mainstream. Ra's al Ghul (from Batman comic books and the DC Universe) and Thanos (from the Avenger movies of the Marvel Universe) are two such eco-terrorists who have succeeded in garnering a considerable amount of sympathy, and even support, from the readers/viewers despite their radical, genocidal views.

II. Methodology:

The current paper attempts to consider how the wise application of the theories related to Eco-terrorism (“an act of violence committed in support of ecological or environmental causes, against people or property”) has enriched the ideological and philosophical dimension of the superhero comic books and movies; thus altering and considerably raising the critical consensus regarding such books/movies in the process. (Wiki_Eco-terrorism)

III. Results and Discussion:

Ra’s al Ghul, a centuries-old worldwide eco-terrorist, is not only the arch-villain of the Batman, but also a father-figure to him. The Batman, a perfect representative of what Ra’s al Ghul calls the ‘misguided idealists’ in the 2005 Christopher Nolan movie *Batman Begins*, resonates the typical mindset of the U.S. government that considers the eco-terrorists to be mere special interest extremists. What is beyond the understanding of Batman is the idea of Biocentrism, which is described as "a belief that human beings are just an ordinary member of the biological community" and that all living things should have rights and deserve protection under the law. (Wiki_Eco-terrorism) The government-endorsed policy might well be understood as Anthropocentrism; i.e. the belief that human beings are the most important entity in the universe. (Wiki_Eco-terrorism) The irony lies in the fact that the very idea of Batman revolves around the creation of terror, chaos and darkness, albeit for a noble cause; i.e. the further empowerment of law and order. The bat-suit that Bruce Wayne dons to terrify the criminals, aligns him with the wild, primal forces of nature. Yet, his fight is for cleansing the Gotham city of poverty and crime. Theoretically thus he is the guardian of the order of the civilized society.

In the complex visual-metaphorical treatment of Christopher Nolan, this ambiguity has been enhanced to a considerable degree. Thus in his first installment of the Batman trilogy, the viewers are presented with the almost enticing philosophy (aided by the brilliant oratory skill of Liam Neeson) of Ra’s al Ghul, the trainer cum moral guru of Bruce Wayne:

"No one can save Gotham. When a forest grows too wild, a purging fire is inevitable and natural. Tomorrow the world will watch in horror as its greatest city tears itself apart, through fear. The movement back to harmony will be unstoppable this time." (*Batman Begins*)

The comic-book version of Ra’s al Ghul sounds no less radical in his firm bio-centric, or even eco-terrorist, perspectives. In the story entitled ‘The Tangled Web’, Bruce Wayne sums up the radical strategies of Ra’s al Ghul to Alfred: “Ra’s has only one goal – to forcibly restore the ecological balance of the planet by wiping out most of civilization.” (*Tangled Web* 5) Ra’s seems to be quite delighted as he divulges and explains to Bruce/Batman his plan of global mass destruction:

“[Following the detonation of bombs in the Antarctic polar region] Water levels will rise across the globe. The coastal areas of every continent will be completely submerged. The major industrial centers of the world will be destroyed. Millions...billions will lose their lives. But those who remain will watch as the earth cleanses herself of mankind’s toxins. Her fragile ecosystems will regain their balance. The world shall be renewed.” (*Tangled Web* 13-14)

Quite surprisingly, all this sounds quite logical, and the entire philosophical standpoint, whether in the comic book or in the movie, might end up striking a chord with the reader/viewer. Indeed, this is ‘radical environmentalism’, characterized by the belief that human society is responsible for the depletion of the environment and, if current society is left unchecked, will lead to the ultimate complete degradation of the environment. (Wiki_Eco-terrorism) The mythical League of Shadows (an ancient and powerful secret society whose stated purpose was to restore balance to the world by enacting purges at various points in history) is thus an artistic representation of the organizations (such as ALF, ELF, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, PETA, and Earth First!) that have been accused of eco-terrorism in past few decades. (Long 19-22)

Beginning in the 1960s, ideas that arose from radical environmentalism are "based on the belief that capitalism, patriarchal society, and the industrial revolution and its subsequent innovations were responsible for the despoliation of nature". (Long 19) What is really disturbing for those protecting law and order is however the self-imposed responsibility of the likes of Ra’s al Ghul to stop the all-devouring progression of the civilized

world: “Every time a civilization reaches the pinnacle of its decadence, we return to restore the balance.” (*Batman Begins*) This notion of the inevitable restoring of law and order of Mother Nature, at the cost of the artificial law and order constructed by humanity, sounds very appropriate. This is also in tune with some eco-terrorists, motivated by other aspects of deep ecology, like the goal to return the environment to its "natural", i.e., pre-industrial, state. (Leader & Probst)

This idea of ‘inevitability’ will inevitably lead one to the philosophies of Thanos, as expressed in the movie *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and its somewhat formulaic sequel *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). What Thanos believes in, or at least preaches, is not much different from the extreme ideas of Ra’s al Ghul; although the scale of destruction is now “hitherto unheard of” (as Doctor Strange calls it). (*Infinity War*) Before setting his eye on the project of ‘purging’ the earth of the burden of overpopulation, Thanos has already administered genocide in other planets which he justifies thus to his adopted daughter Gamora:

"Going to bed hungry. Scrounging for scraps. Your planet was on the brink of collapse. I was the one who stopped that. You know what's happened since then? The children born have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies. It's a paradise." (*Infinity War*)

In his consideration, murdering half the planet is but “a small price to pay for salvation.” Once again, he can easily convince anyone attempting to contradict his genocidal measures:

“Little one, it's a simple calculus. This universe is finite, its resources, finite... if life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction.” (*Infinity War*)

The ‘we’ that Ra’s al Ghul kept using to refer to the League of Shadows, has now been replaced by the undisputable ‘I’ of this intergalactic despot who claims to be capable of shaping the future of this universe: “Dread it. Run from it. Destiny arrives all the same. And now, it's here. Or should I say, I am.” (*Infinity War*)

Once again it is the collective force of the Avengers (chiefly comprising American superheroes) which will fight Thanos to thwart his grand design of wiping out half of human race. Thanos’ seeming impartiality has been beautifully projected in the randomness with which the destruction will be conducted. The chief point of departure from Ra’s al Ghul is however the fact that Thanos is an alien who, ethically speaking, does not have the right to intervene in the ‘homely’ geo-political affairs of earth. Ironman’s witty repartee thus immediately establishes this despot as a confirmed enemy of the entire human race: “Sorry, earth is closed today!” (*Infinity War*) One can smell here the typical xenophobic, white, American intolerance with outside forces intruding into their homely affairs; although the exact opposite measure, as history has evidenced, is perfectly permissible. Also there is the ever-continuing American agenda of relegating ecological concerns to the background in order to promote industrial and technological advancements. Is it a mere coincidence that Greta Thunberg’s environmental activism became a global phenomenon in 2018 and 2019, coinciding with the years of the release of the two *Infinity* movies?

Ra’s al Ghul’s plan (both in the book and in the movie) was thwarted due to the amazing resourcefulness of the Dark Knight, his own disciple. But even the combined force of the Avengers, aided by alien forces like the Guardians of the Galaxy, seems inadequate to meet the sheer force and scheme of the grand despot Thanos. The battleground, as opposed to hundreds of apocalyptic movies produced in Hollywood in last few decades, is Wakanda, a fictional, highly-developed African nation, and not somewhere in the USA. The members of League of Shadows would better fit into what the Americans would consider as ‘terrorists’ (even more so in the post-9/11 world) – a group of black-clad anonymous radicals, physically and ideologically trained in some Oriental country to fight the monstrous lies lurking behind the sham of the Western civilization, convinced in their role as the agents of retribution and change, and like elemental forces working for centuries. Thanos’ Chitauri armies, in contrast, are not ‘terrorists’ in the strict sense; they are a race of grey-skinned, six-fingered reptilian humanoids with a bio-mechanical physiology and superhuman attributes. (Wiki_Chitauri) As Thanos deploys his alien forces against the Avengers, it is an all out war with no obvious concern for the ecology of earth.

According to the comic books, Ra’s al Ghul is immortal; he was reborn several times after death. Even in the movie, the somewhat normalized depiction of Ra’s al Ghul makes it clear that his name is a kind of designation (not unlike that of the Batman) which will be passed on to deserving members of the League of Shadows. In the third installment of the trilogy, Ra’s al Ghul *does* make his comeback; but only in Bruce Wayne’s delirium. He is

thus immortal, although not as a flesh and blood human being, but as an imperishable idea. Similarly Thanos, who has his control over the flow of time since he defeated Doctor Strange, the keeper of the Time Stone, can die multiple times too. His characteristic cynicism is partly due to his knowledge of the exact role he has to play in the vortex of past-present-future. The death that he offers by his snap of fingers is painless. It is in a way eco-friendly too, as the bodies concerned just dissolve into the elements of nature, without causing any harm to the eco-system. His claim for being the Inevitable is thus justified, and despite being the despotic eco-terrorist that he is, he manages to deliver earth from her toxins to a considerable account.

Escaping a near-death, as the Infinity War ends and he comes out victorious, Thanos retires in a non-localized Eden-like planet with a pastoral setting, where the once despot now devotes his days to farming and living a plain life. He has visibly left aside his armours (now being used as a scarecrow), and he soaks in the new rising sun in the new horizon that he has designed with a snap of fingers. Joe Russo, the director of the *Infinity* movies, stated that after Thanos is successful, he is now "done. He did it. He's retired." He has succeeded in giving the universe its promised state of plentitude; but at the cost of 'Everything' (i.e. his own daughter's life). The Avengers have already been accused of bringing destruction upon the surface of earth (see *Captain America: Civil War*). Thanos' warfare is however for a larger cause; to give Mother Earth a lease to live for a few more years perhaps. He has been a mass destroyer for a reason; and his ends once achieved, he can live in peace without any remorse. It is rather the pointless aggression of the Avengers which brutally kills the helpless Thanos in the *Endgame* movie. There is not a single viewer who does not get swayed by the philosophies and ideologies of this seemingly 'insane' eco-terrorist. Eventually a younger version of Thanos will emerge in *Avengers: The Endgame*, but his portrayal there will be closer to that of a typical super-villain. His victory by the end of *Avengers: The Infinity War* is thus important in raising many pertinent questions regarding the mindset of the global audience.

IV. Conclusion:

Thanos, just like Ra's al Ghul, has been firmly established as the necessary evil, the Inevitable. Of course *The Endgame*, the grand finale of all the Marvel movies running for over a decade, will announce the ultimate victory of the anthropocentric worldview in the defeat of Thanos. Mother Nature's cause has thus been defeated, and the age-old patriarchal, androcentric view has been re-established with all its glory. Eco-terrorism has thus succeeded in finding its firm footing in the global mainstream movie industry. It has definitely succeeded in making the viewers re-consider its basic propositions, and even though its chief proponents are now gone, their seemingly radical ideas have been treated by viewers all across the globe with sympathy, if not approval. The civilized society, due to the desperate attempts of its guardians, has survived the blows for the time being. It has however already received its wake-up call, and it must now act accordingly to mend its ways before Ra's al Ghul and Thanos defy death once again to strike the final blow.

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