

Reclamation of History: A Tryst with Subaltern Studies, Marxist Criticism and Chaos Theory in the movie *Joker*

Sreelakshmi M

Research Scholar

Dept. of English and Comparative Literature

Central University of Kerala

Abstract

It has always been an instinct in human psyche to be strong like a superhero, to possess the virtues of a superhero, and throughout the history of movies and comics; these qualities were implanted into the minds of people which ensured that superheroes are ones who should be always kept high up on a pedestal. This paper tries to subvert the hero worship of Batman by bringing in the Joker who is represented as the villain in the movie *The Dark Knight*. The aim of this paper is not a review of the movie *Joker*, but takes it as a masterpiece that has managed to unveil the illusion and ideology propagated by the *Dark Knight Trilogy*. *Joker* gives voice to the suppressed and the oppressed, with its protagonist being a member of that group. Apart from the subaltern perspective, the irony is that it reclaimed its history as an individual origin movie against the *Dark Knight Trilogy* which manifested the heroic deeds of Batman, a billionaire, who was apparently trying to re-establish the order in the city of Gotham with both physical and economic power in collaboration with the department of police [Repressive State Apparatus]. This paper also takes the joker as an agent or a variable that induced a small change into the deterministic dynamic non-linear system [Chaos Theory] that is, the city of Gotham by just persuading one person to see the social reality [unveiling of false consciousness] which resulted in ultimate chaos and downfall of Batman and Gotham city. That is, it is possible to lift the illusion by just a “flap of a butterfly’s wings” [Butterfly Effect] (Sim 89-.103). This paper thus brings in Chaos Theory, Subaltern Studies and Marxist criticism to lift the false consciousness and ideologies that have been propagated by superhero movies by focusing

on the movie *Joker* and the character Arthur Fleck who belonged to the common class, struggling to make a living, whose dreams were stripped off, who was “alienated” or “de-skilled”, and also his psychological transformation into Joker who was disillusioned by Capitalism and phony society.

Keywords: *alienation, butterfly effect, subaltern, chaos theory, overt and covert, fetishism, false consciousness, Capitalist ideology.*

Introduction

“Too much sanity may be madness and the maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be”- Miguel de Cervantes.

Why did the society call them- revolutionaries, philosophers, poets, ambitious dreamers- insane? There is no surprise about the fact that they were, of course, different from the major sect or the ‘normal’ sect. It is ‘madness’ that liberated these people from the monstrous clutches of ‘normal civilized’ life which was apparently governed by the dominant power structures.

Madness marks a breakdown in the self’s relation with the community...It is a rupture in the individual’s connection with the institutions. Madness tries to figure out, challenge and transform the values and the meanings of the tribe/community/state that produces it. It is an extreme form of individual dissent. The mad person is the disruptive conscience of the society, hence needs to be contained. (Madness 147)

So the society branded the people who thought differently as insane and chose not to listen to “life as a tale told by an idiot” (Shakespeare, p 65) instead they chose to look up to extraordinary beings who guaranteed safety and resources that fulfilled the consumerist expectations of the lot. This ‘extraordinary’ being flaunting massive amounts of false consciousness can perhaps be a capitalist masquerading as a superhero. It does not has to be superhero always, it can also be politicians who are rather indifferent and corrupt, or

psychiatrists and physicians who wanted to keep the ‘insane’ disciplined in the asylums, or a social media figure [as Murray in *Joker*] who endorses capitalism, or any kinds of “State Apparatuses” (Althusser, 9-12). But history is not just the stories of these ‘extraordinary’ people, history does belong to the underprivileged or the other or the ‘insane’ just like the “mad woman in the attic” (Gilbert and Gubar, 339-443) who had her own side to the history which was apparently for a while recited from the perspective of Rochester. But with the emergence of Subaltern Studies, a new arena was opened to give voice to the oppressed.

Why the concept of madness was given importance in the introduction was because the central character in the primary movie taken for analysis, that is *Joker*, is suffering from a health condition which people later brand as madness. From the title itself it is obvious that this paper would deal with the other side of the mainstream history or “the history from below” (Bhattacharya 3-9). In order to reclaim the history, *The Dark Knight Trilogy* is taken as secondary material to substantiate the subaltern, Marxian and Chaos theories with respect to the *Joker*.

The methodologies employed in this paper include comparative analysis and ontological method. In the comparative analysis, *Joker* is compared and analyzed against *The Dark Knight Trilogy* and this paper also explores how the protagonist of *Joker* unveils the reality by deducing it in the terms of the above theories through ontological method.

The movie *Joker* was released in the year 2019, directed by Todd Philips, featuring Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck aka Joker. The movie falls into the category of DC comics and can be taken as the origin story of the villain Joker and a prequel to *The Dark Knight* series. Arthur Fleck cannot be just taken as one of the representatives of the ‘have nots’ in a capitalist divided society, instead he belonged to the poorest of the poor section where the other two groups, that is the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, exploited him. He falls into the category of a subaltern which in terms of military is a person who was ranked the lowest.

The British word “subaltern” means someone of inferior military rank; it combines the Latin terms for “under” (sub) and “other” (alter). Having gained wider connotation with time, it is now used for the oppressed, the exploited and the discriminated who are subject to dominance on the basis of race, gender, caste, colour, rank, region or in any other form. (“Introduction”, 3-4)

In *Joker*, Arthur is a poor man struggling hard to earn a living by playing a party clown in the streets, bars, hospitals etc. He could barely afford the medicines for his mother and we can see the utter poverty of by having a look at his skinny body as well as his small apartment. Even his payment is not regular, yet in this grave condition Arthur aspires to become a famous standup comedian. Also, the folks of the Gotham City do not carry a slight ray of humanity and Arthur was beaten up by a group of young men just for fun since he was dressed as joker. There was no law or police to take actions against the group and Arthur was too poor and weak to fight for his rights and himself.

Arthur Fleck was not only poor and desperate; he also suffered from Pseudobulbar Affect which caused him to laugh hysterically at inappropriate situations. What makes Arthur unique from the mass is that he actually had eyes to unveil the false consciousness and pseudo-reality and he even says that the worst part of having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you don't have any illness. In the beginning of the movie, he tries to cheer up a boy in a bus but just because he looked odd and different, of course, of his poverty, the mother of the child asks him to stop bothering them. This movie was set in 1980s and racism existed in that social situation along with unemployment, poverty and Capitalism. The woman who admonishes him to be ‘normal’ is a black woman and though he tried to explain his health condition, she could not care less and this instance can be taken as another feature that makes Arthur a subaltern. Also Arthur falls in love with a black woman which shows his love for humanity and yearns for their love back. But the society and its people betrayed and denied Arthur from his rights and hope.

It is the socio-political surroundings that shape the personality of beings and Gotham city is infested with phony and corrupt people. The only space where Arthur 'talks' is to a social worker about his health condition about which she never gave attention. The entire movie is a cry for attention, Arthur works as a party clown to cheer people up to notice him even though they hurt him. This movie enabled its audience to be sympathetic with Arthur by picturing the society that indifferent to people like Arthur. The reasons why people are indifferent to Arthur are unemployment, mob uprising, and the influence of Capitalism.

The unemployment in Gotham made people to be desperate and they even tried to snatch jobs from the colleagues even for the lowest paying jobs like Arthur's. In the name of support, his colleague offers him a gun for protection but in reality he was actually plotting against to fire Arthur from his job. While performing, the gun falls down from his pocket and making the boss to fire him. While the poor degraded in poverty and unemployment, the rich reveled in their riches and power. It is obvious that one of the effects of Capitalism is unemployment. It deskills and alienates individuals from their potentials and productions. In *Joker*, Arthur aspires to be a standup comedian to cheer people and to not remain as a ghost to people. Not only he was ridiculed in the media by Murray, played by Robert de Niro, he was given the name joker since his life itself was a comedy rather than his comedies, this is an example of de-skilling. Murray's television program was a piece of entertainment for people especially for the elitists. Under the fair façade of sympathetic and warm demeanor, Murray, and in a wider spectrum, the privileged ones ridiculed the misfortunes and the helpless state of the poor.

In *Joker*, there is a scene where Arthur is bullied by three corporate men in suits and it turns out to be the men working for Wayne Industries and they hurt, humiliate and harass the under privileged. They were rude and savage monsters dressed in suits without a pinch of humanity and how educated and wise they claim and appear to be, they were insensitive to people like Arthur and his health condition. In order to defend himself from the

corporate bullies, Arthur accidentally shoots two people. This made him feel more alive and kills the other person because according to him, they deserve death for what they have done.

The importance of media in the city of Gotham is significant and in the previous paragraphs the impact of the Capitalist agent Murray was stated. Another aspect is that Capitalist control over the news medium. The news rather than focusing on the degrading socio-political situation, it propagates a sympathetic picture of the three corporates killed by the local criminal sect of Gotham. Even Thomas Wayne referred the have nots as clowns and that they are envious of the rich. Rather than focusing on the question of why, the media just propagated the preconceived view of the elitists on the non-elitists that they rob and kill the rich cold bloodedly. They not only strip off the talents and potentials of the individuals, that is de-skilling and then alienating the individuals, they deprive them of their rights by exercising control over the state forces and continue to brand the lot as vigilantes.

In *Joker*, Thomas Wayne gives an interview to the news where he states that he is running for mayor to save the masses from the grave situations, to empower them, to bring them to the forefront where there is no chaos. Thomas Wayne is a well-known rich business man who was glorified in the movie *The Batman Begins*. It was Bruce's father who inspired him to face his fears and become brave. But in *Joker*, the other side of the story is presented. In *Batman Begins*, it is shown that Thomas Wayne and his wife were robbed and killed by a ruffian and the reason is not stated in that movie. The *Joker* ends with the killing of Mr. and Mrs. Wayne after the uprising of the common. In *Joker*, Thomas Wayne says to the media that there is a need of ordering and organization in the city of Gotham from the chaos. What is actually chaos for businessmen like Thomas Wayne and Bruce Wayne? They need a society in which people agree with their agendas, where there is no uprising against them.

By joining hands with the power structures, in this case, the department of police of Gotham city, Bruce Wayne, in *The Dark Knight* tries to establish order. When the Joker unleashed chaos in *Dark Knight*, Bruce Wayne tried to establish order through false consciousness that Joker has failed to destroy the city by hiding the reality that he had actually won. People never have to know the truth, because once people realize that they tend to rebel against the organized system that benefitted the elite groups. In *Joker*, Arthur was the only person who realized the reality where life of the oppressed is not a tragedy but a comedy to others. In *Joker*, Thomas Wayne appoints policemen to find the murderer of the corporates because once it is not stopped, more people would continue to question the order and it would result in the extrication of the class differences. By having the State Apparatuses under control, the order can be maintained. The capitalists want the society to stay divided.

According to Michel Foucault, prisons, hospitals, schools etc. were the institutions that ensured discipline. In *Joker*, the opening scene of Arkham hospital is overwhelming that it creates an atmosphere of mystery where all the truths are hidden from the public. In *Joker*, Arthur goes to find out about his birth and the illness of his mother. The security does not give away details about his mother that he had to snatch it away from them. But in the report it is stated that Penny Fleck was suffering from mental illness that she had hallucinations and that she adopted the kid which is ironic that Arthur suffered from the same health condition as his mother, hallucinating about things that did not take place in real. This is not mentioned in the movie but there can be a chance that Arthur can be the illegitimate son of Thomas Wayne. In this perspective, Arkham can be taken as a disciplinary institution which has the power to erase the birth information about a person to serve the capitalists.

So these are the socio-political situation in the city of Gotham and all these contributed to Arthur's descent into Joker. In terms of subalternity, not only Arthur but also the movie itself is an example of subaltern since it represented the other side of the heroic

deeds of Batman. Joker as a character can be taken as the agent or a variable of chaos both literally and figuratively. The root of chaos cannot be determined, it can be the smallest of variables except the system has to be dynamic and non-linear. In *Joker*, the city of Gotham was already at the edge of chaos and it only needed “a butterfly to flap its wings” (Sim 89-103) to descend into chaos and Arthur can be taken as the butterfly, figuratively. The angry mob in the streets of Gotham wearing the masks of joker, following and supporting Arthur, the joker as the Messiah who brought out ‘order’ by unleashing chaos to the underprivileged of Gotham signifies how reality can be discerned at the times of chaos where the power structures are unable to exert domination because in a non-linear dynamic deterministic system, the actions or the processes are irreversible. In the *Dark Knight*, the joker unleashes chaos again by unveiling the reality to one person by persuading him to observe the relationship between the police and the Batman and how position as the mayor is a trump card for the capitalists to establish the order where the rich stays as rich, where the poor stays as poor, where the lives of common people including that of Rachel’s did not matter to the power structures.

To conclude, this paper merged the concepts of subaltern, capitalism and chaos theory into the movie *Joker* and carried out a comparative analysis of these concepts to substantiate its points by bringing forth the *Dark Knight* series. Films are the most influential of all the media and apart from entertainment it can be widely used to interpret the discipline of cultural studies. Literary and cultural theories can be applied in movies to open up new dimensions into its understanding as well as can be used to create awareness among people to decipher reality. Even though Joker and Gotham city are fictional, the theories employed to interpret reality in this setting can be taken as mirror of the world, where people still face discrimination, where their rights are curtailed, where the hegemonic power structures impose their ideologies upon the common people to maintain ‘their ideal state’.

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