

FALCON, JOHN WALKER AND SHANG CHI AS THE REMEDY OF RACE ISSUE IN THE UNITED STATES

Deswandito Dwi Saptanto

English Literature Department
Ngudi Waluyo University
Ungaran, Indonesia
deswanditodwi@unw.ac.id

Abstract

Superhero is the creation from a dream of an author, and also based on the expectation of every single person in this world. Superpowers above the human's capability are the main pivotal point, and then the origins of the characters are other main important factors. This research is a literature study that uses comparative literature approach focuses on the concept of adaptation of a work from the comic book to the movie and sociology of literature approach to analyze the main important purpose of the occurrence of the superheroes in order to conciliate the political tension related to racism toward African-American people and Asian people recently happening in the United States of America. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method by explaining the concept of adaptation from the comic to the movie and emphasizes the existence of superheroes that actually symbolizes the representation of common American people, African-American people and Asian people in the United States of America. This study takes and divides three different hero characters from the Marvel Universe to be the sample of the symbols from three different races, Falcon represents African-American people, John Walker represents common American people, and Shang Chi represents Asian people. Their existence appears to boost up the patriotic and heroic story; moreover it reduces the tension of racism in all over United States of America these days.

Keywords - *Superheroes, adaptation, comic, movie, racism*

Introduction

The United States is a country that has its own charm with its multicultural uniqueness in it. This is due to the presence of various immigrants from all over the world and settled there. The existence of this country has become the center of world attention so that it becomes a special interest for anyone to come and settle in this country. Datesman, et al (2005) stated that in the 21st century, the United States has become a country that has the greatest ethnic, racial, cultural and religious diversity compared to other countries anywhere in the world. The diversity that exists in the United States has come a long way from the arrival of immigrants to the United States. The jargon of 'the land of opportunity'; which leads to the concept of 'American Dream'. The diversity of American society in real life also occurs in the world of comics and films. Marvel comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe have succeeded in bringing this real-life portrait into the fictional world. Starting from the world of comics and then being adapted into films. Everything is done with precise depictions in the frame of the author's imagination. The concept of narrative in comics and films in the Marvel world focuses on the existence of superheroes who have complex characterizations. Barthes (1977) provides a statement that narrative is created by language which is then spoken orally or in writing, pictures or videos, body gestures. Narrative appears in various forms of literary and artistic works, including comics.

This research is a literature study using a qualitative descriptive method by using a sample of three superheroes from the Marvel universe in comics and films, namely Falcon (Sam

Wilson), John Walker and Shang Chi. This study aims to find clues and evidence that these three superheroes are symbols of the three main points of the problem of the racism issue that is heating up in America. The presence of these three superhero characters in Marvel comics and films is a 'medicine' to relieve the tension of the problem of racism as well as to show that all races have equal rights in America.

Methods

This research is qualitative. Data collection techniques were literature study. According to Corbin & Strauss (2008) Qualitative method is a research method that produces data that can describe a human behavior, habit and attitude that has certain meanings that can be learned. This research uses The comparative literature approach focuses on the concept of adaptation of a work from the comic book to the movie. Damono (2012) states that adaptation is a change in form or acculturation, and of course it cannot be separated from the existing initial concept but there will be another complexity appears. The adaptation process requires more than one medium to be transformed into another form.

Moreover, this research uses sociology of literature approach to analyze the main important purpose of the presence of the superheroes in order to ease the political tension related to racism issues toward black people and asian people recently happening in the United States of America. Adereth in Damono (1978) also support Howe's statement by presenting the idea of *engaging literature* (literature involved), this means that there is always involvement between writers, the work, politics and ideology. Political ideology influence is the implementation of modern ideology on literature. Adereth states that Political issue can be the background of the creating process of literature.

The analysis carried out is to reveal the moral message of the existence of superheroes such as Falcon, John Walker and Shang Chi as three figures from different races, very humanist, no superpowers, just pure skill and technology. Their presence is to show that there is no racial discrimination in this world. Anyone can be a hero, and anyone has equal rights in America.

Data Finding and Discussion

Superhero is always synonymous with a muscular body, beautiful face, strength above the average human and fully costumed with a mask as its main characteristic. One of the biggest comics giants in the United States, Marvel has succeeded in creating a fictional universe that depicts the complexity of characters from various backgrounds from across this universe. The origins and races of these superheroes are very diverse, ranging from extraterrestrials, gods, other dimensional beings, monsters to humans. Humans are described as very ordinary figures but their existence plays an important role in storytelling. Humans as super characters are also described as figures who have backgrounds like normal humans in general.

Race, Fellowship and the Depiction of Equality

African-American Hero as the answer of George Floyd's case

Stan Lee as an American comic book writer emphasized that the process of human creation in superhero comics is an adaptation of humans with the problems of their daily lives which shows that the human side of the human figure in comics is a reflection of humans in real life. One of the problems that became the main concern of Stan Lee in the 1960s to 1970s was the issue of racism. Stan Lee considers racism a very sensitive issue in the United States. The existence of multiculturalism from the many immigrants from outside the United States and the history of slavery in the dark past have made the issue of racism an issue that most often arises in society.

The fictional character named Captain America is considered an ideal figure and a metaphor for American perfection, from which Stan Lee thought that this character could be a ‘media’ to reduce racism conflicts. For example, the fictional character by Stan Lee and Gene Colan named Falcon, who is the embodiment of the African-American superhero from Harlem, has appeared in the comic Captain America #117 as a friend and partner of Captain America.



Figure 1: The first appearance of Falcon in Captain America’s Comic

Falcon’s closeness as a partner to Captain America is shown clearly when the Captain America comic has changed to Captain America and the Falcon in issue #134 (January 1971).



Figure 2: The depiction of ‘fellowship’ between Captain America and Falcon

In the comic version, their very close friendship is shown by the situation where once upon a time Sam Wilson (Falcon) has been slandered as a murderer by a criminal, and Sam is then chased by the police. Instantly Steve gave his Captain America costume to Sam so he could sneak and escape from the police. The friendship of Steve roger as Captain America and Sam Wilson as The Falcon becomes very intense. This is a picture of the harmony of racial equality in comics.

In Avengers: End Game, a scene is shown where Steve Roger bequeaths Captain America’s Shield as a ‘legacy’ to Sam Wilson. The existence of this moment also illustrates the existence of a very strong friendship from a white American figure to an African-American hero who became a symbol of the new American hero.

A clear message that emphasizes the existence of ‘to elevate’ the dignity of African-Americans in the United States, parallels its existence that they (African-Americans) are also entitled to the same rights in this multicultural country. We can also see a narrative concept that

is very thick with a moral message to anyone not to discriminate against race and anyone can be a hero for their country, this is shown in the story *The Falcon and The Winter Soldier*.

The Falcon character (Sam Wilson) is not the First Black Captain America, but Isaiah Bradley is a character who should receive the same portion of honor as Sam Wilson. Isaiah Bradley is not just a fictional character, but himself and Sam Wilson are symbols of the existence of African Americans who are also fighting for their country. Isaiah Bradley is a black character who feels ‘wasted’ because he has become an object for the American government and Hydra to be injected with super soldier serum in order to duplicate the power of Captain America (Steve Roger) in World War II.

Sam Wilson as The Falcon is not a superhero with superpowers from serum, but he is able to fly thanks to the bionic wing technology created by Tony Stark. These two symbols of African-American characters are very clearly shown, and are similar to the existence of African-Americans in the film *Red Tails* (2012) which shows the heroic story of a group of African-American pilots (Tuskegee Airmen) who fought for the United States in World War II. Its main goal is to eliminate the perception of racism and provide equal rights for African-Americans in the United States.



Figure 3: The depiction of Falcon saves Karli Morgenthau, as the metaphor of heroic action of African-American superhero. It sends the message that every race can be a superhero.

The emergence of African-American characters in works of fiction (comics and films made by Marvel) is a very effective breakthrough. The idea of spreading good influence to eliminate issues of racism through fiction is a real form of conveying a message that can directly affect the reader or viewer.

John Walker as the depiction of White American People

Stereotypes of superheroes who are always oriented towards a burly body, have super powers, are handsome or beautiful, and have white skin (a characteristic of Caucasoid descent) have formed the concept that superhero characters must be perfect. In the creation process of the storytelling of the superhero universe, the majority of characters are dominated by characters who have the characteristics of the Caucasoid race. For example, John Walker, a character present in Marvel comics and films, is an anti-hero with unique characteristics.

He is a super patriot figure who has a heavy burden of responsibility on his shoulders. John Walker must be able to realize the dream of the American people, which is to become a super hero figure replacing Steve Roger’s departure as Captain America before. His background as a member of the military and the stigma he had against Steve Roger as Captain America previously had driven him out of control. John Walker is shown as an anti-hero character,

fighting crime in his own way and against the rules and protocols that have been set. John Walker’s character often commits acts of violence to achieve his goal, which is to become the ideal figure of a new American hero.

John Walker is a figure who represents American society, a picture of American society and a description of American society today. John Walker is synonymous with violence, rude and very uncooperative. The star symbol and the uniform colors he wears are symbols of America, but the existence of this character is the exact opposite of the expectations of American society. In his journey as the character of the American dream, he has tried his best to crush the Flag Smasher and capture Karli Morgenthau. At one point, during the process of ambushing this separatist group, John Walker found a super soldier serum that had fallen from the hands of the Flag Smasher group. (According to the comic version is called U.L.T.I.M.A.T.U.M, the abbreviation is The Underground Liberated Totally Integrated Mobile Army to Unite Mankind. First appeared in Captain America Volume 1 #321).

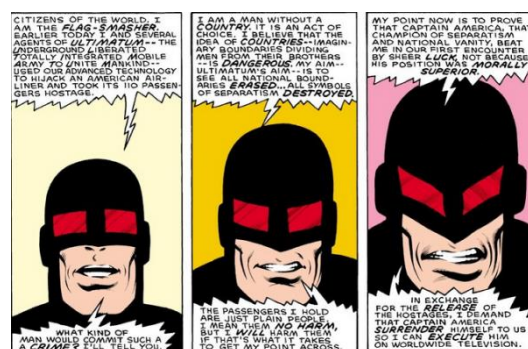


Figure 4: The depiction of Flag Smasher from the Marvel comic

John Walker experienced an ‘id’, and ‘superego’ conflict within himself after finding one of the small tubes containing the super soldier’s serum. This inner conflict made him waver, but in the end John Walker decided to inject the serum into his body and made him a very temperamental and uncontrollable antihero. This act of arrogance has made him fight against evil in his own way. John Walker also crippled and brutally killed a member of the Flag Smasher. The semiotics shown here is a critique of the current American legal apparatus, which is far more arrogant and synonymous with violence.



Figure 5: John Walker as an antihero in Falcon and the Winter Soldier in TV mini-series

Alluding to the problem of law enforcement in America which is identical to violence, the character of John Walker is a representation of a social critique of the heartbreaking incident, namely the tragedy of George Perry Floyd, Jr. who sparked the African-American movement ‘Black Lives Matter’ simultaneously in all states in the United States. This movement strongly opposes all forms of violence and repression based on acts of racism against African-American society. The tragedy of the death of George Floyd, Jr. provoked a strong

reaction from African-Americans which led to demonstrations and riots in most parts of the United States. This tragic incident was later adapted into a film through the representation of John Walker who killed a member of the Flag Smasher (U.L.T.I.M.A.T.U.M).

Based on the scene above, it appears that John Walker is a symbol of law enforcement officials in the United States who act arbitrarily. Another symbol that appears is the existence of a very contrasting description between the symbol of the American public idol, Captain America, as well as the icon of the United States flag on his iconic shield which is then combined with blood marks that symbolize violence. The presence of John Walker's character seems as a representative figure who symbolizes the security and legal authorities in America who are 'vicious' and 'brutal'.

Falcon (Sam Wilson) is here as an 'antidote' that can ease the violent tension caused by the freedom-fighter called Flag Smasher and his group. Moreover, Falcon also silences the brutal antihero action, John Walker. The presence of the Falcon is the most monumental thing that can arouse the patriotism of the American people through the representation of the iconic American flag-patterned superhero costume combined with African-American superheroes.

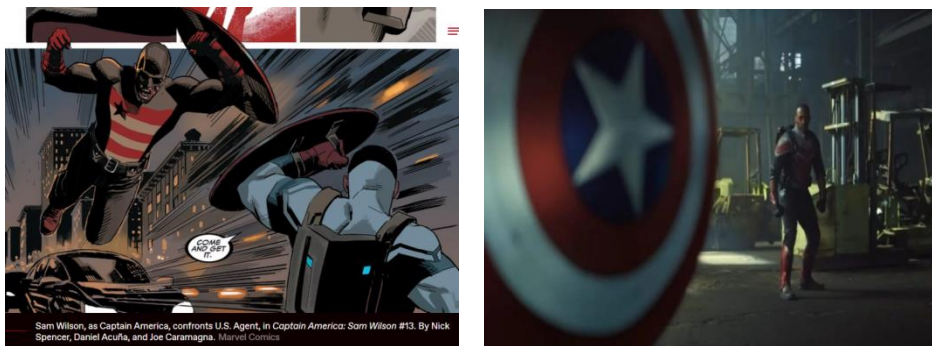


Figure 6: Falcon (Sam Wilson) fights with John Walker in Comic version and Movie version

Shang Chi is the Hero to Stop the Asian-Hate Movement

The representation of multiculturalism in Marvel comics and films is a picture of the heterogeneity that exists in the United States. 'Melting pot', is a metaphor for the mixing of people from various countries and diverse cultures into one area which gives a unique impression on the United States. Asia is one of the elements of the race that often appears and is told in the journey of the Marvel universe. One of them is Shang Chi, a hero who represents Asia's presence in the western world.

Apart from Shang Chi in the Marvel universe, of course we must not forget the presence of several characters with an Asian background, namely Wong as Dr. Strange partner, then a former member of S.H.I.E.L.D who was later recruited to become a member of the FBI, namely James Woo (Jimmy Woo / Woo Yen Jet), next is a character who has a Chinese mythological background, namely a dragon named Fin Fang Foom, and also a character named Mandarin who has the power, who can turn himself into a superhuman. Some of the characters with Asian cultural and racial backgrounds (China in particular) are the effects of the adaptation effects of Asian culture that entered the western world.

Shang Chi is an ordinary character; he does not have superhuman powers or magical abilities. Shang Chi only has Kung Fu martial arts abilities. This character is very interesting, because his abilities are only limited to humans in general but ironically he has to fight against super-villain enemies with abilities above ordinary human abilities. Steve Englehart and Jim Starlin created Shang Chi as a form of his interest in Chinese culture, especially super hero

characters with martial arts abilities, namely Kung Fu who is also proficient in using melee weapons (nunchaku, shuriken, toya, spear, etc).

Shang Chi is a very controversial character because of his existence as an Asian character in the American superhero universe. This certainly invites a reaction of pros and cons among connoisseurs of the entertainment industry. Some people think that the emergence of these Asian characters is an attraction to introduce Asia on the world stage, but not a few also think that the process of creating a fictional character, Shang Chi, is a form of western business (Marvel and Hollywood) to make a profit. in the Asian market with the presence of this Chinese-blooded figure. This cynical thought even emerged from the Chinese government and society itself, this was due to the lack of harmonious relations between China and America along with business and economic competition that occurred. The Chinese consider that the presence of Shang Chi and Fu Manchu are characters made in the western world which are full of racism.



Figure 7: The representation of Fu Manchu that actually identically to the Chinese mythology of Chinese Vampire with the suit that has characteristic of the Qing Dynasty era. Chinese people consider this as a racist insult to stereotypes of Chinese people

The existence of Fu Manchu, which has received a lot of criticism because it is associated with the issue of racism to the stereotype of the Chinese people, has made the name Fu Manchu increasingly known along with the existence of Shang Chi. The adaptation process from the comic to the film has undergone a change in the detailed description of the embodiment of the Fu Manchu character, which is much more modern and futuristic. The character details displayed are no longer full of symbols that seem to demean the stereotypes of Chinese society and culture.

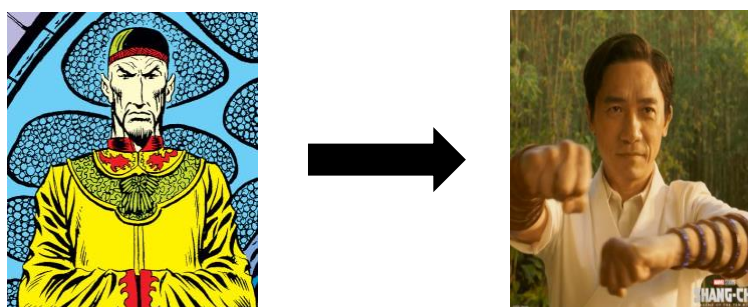


Figure 8: The representation of Fu Manchu in the first issue of the Shang Chi comics (“Special Marvel Edition” No. 15, published by Marvel Comics in 1973) and compared to the representation of Fu Manchu in the film version (Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings)

Shang Chi is a representative figure from various races around the world, who merge with other races in a league of superheroes. The presence of Shang Chi in the universe of comics and films is actually not a form of racism repression carried out by the United States because many Marvel characters come from various countries and unite to save the world such as T'Challa as Black Panther who represents Africa, Natasha Romanoff as Black Widow and Collosus represents Russia, Baron Zemo represents Germany. These superheroes are an illustration that the United States is a multicultural country, various immigrants from various countries with cultures and traditions fused into one.

The fame of the character Shang Chi who is currently coming to the western world is following in the footsteps of his predecessor 'Bruce Lee'. Asian culture has been brought and acculturated with the popular culture of the western world. The process of adaptation and acculturation is certainly experiencing many obstacles in its journey. Although Shang Chi's presence in the western film world has sparked a lot of controversy, in fact this character creates a different atmosphere compared to other characters of Chinese blood. Shang Chi is considered a 'remedy' for the existence of the Asian-Hate movement in several regions of America. The Asian-Hate movement emerged because of the Covid-19 outbreak that spread throughout most of the United States. A lot of violence has occurred in the United States of America against Asian nations and is carried out by Americans who hate Asian nations because they are considered to have spread this terrible plague. Shang Chi seemed to come as an 'agent of change' and gave the message 'Stop Asian-Hate'.



Figure 9: (Left) in the first issue of the Shang Chi comics ("Special Marvel Edition" No. 15, published by Marvel Comics in 1973), (Middle) Shang Chi Versus the Marvel Universe in 2021 edition, (Right) Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings movie poster in 2021.

Conclusion

The presence of various races in the universe of Marvel comics and films is a multicultural representation that occurs in real life in the United States. The emergence of these superhero alter ego characters is a symbol of the diversity of society and culture that exists. Three superhero characters from Marvel, namely Falcon (Sam Wilson), John Walker and Shang Chi, are three different forms of elements and represent diversity in the United States. The presence of these three figures also serves as a critique and motivation for the turbulent issues in the United States lately. The Falcon figure was created to address the issue of racism, the John Walker figure was created to criticize the government and security forces in the United States for being harsh, while Shang Chi was present as a figure to address the issue of 'Asian-Hate' in the United States due to the emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak. associated with Asia.

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