

# The Urge for 'X-treme': Super-Human Syndrome Followed by the Morality of Viciousness

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## Abstract

X-treme is considered to be a new popular phenomenon which brings out the hidden fantasy of any normal human being, to test every possible limitation till the ultimate extent. Though the practice of extreme is considered as villainous and not easily acceptable by the society, it is the human fantasy to go to X-treme in order to be included in the minority of being superhuman. In our postmodern world aesthetics get more priority than ethics when media visualize the inner fantasy of violence in reality as a spectacle for the audience. This media increases the urge of being superhuman, while being human is too cliché. Now, X-treme has become so important to bring every possible limit out of people that they do not bother whether it is related to morality or not. It is obvious to find a superhero against the features of postmodernism because he is unmovable from the fixed convention of being good and not allowing the X-treme. That morality makes a superhero limited and stereotyped with all cliché traits of being inside the boundary. On the other hand, villains or anti-hero can possess the X-treme power and exhibit the extremity desired by the audience. So, villains are more appreciable than heroes because they become the example of living larger than life in this lifetime. The clean line of being good or bad is dead – thanks to postmodernism which justifies the practice of going to every possible limit of X-treme. When the postmodern ethics is already compromised, a new kind of ethics emerges in human mind. That ethics is more than personal which does not bother to maintain the universal ethics that is predetermined or enforced social ideology and silences the moral impulse of the individuals. When that personal ethics might also be the result of the enforced ideology, a free mind can create its own morality by stepping out of the influence of any kind of social ideology.

Key Words: X-treme, superhuman syndrome, post-humanism, superhero, supervillain, postmodern ethics, cyborg, fantasy, normality, individuality, consumer society.

## Introduction

By definition, the extreme limit of the “possible” is that point where, despite the unintelligible position which it has for him in being, man, having stripped himself of enticement and fear, advances so far that one cannot conceive of the possibility of going further. (Bataille, 1988, p. 39)

This definition of extreme suggests the possible limit of going to a level from where there is no possibility of going further. When people find no meaning in remaining under the rules and regulation of the society, he moves further to achieve something to satisfy his desire of testing every possible limit. Being human is not enough anymore when everyone is tempted by the media to be different than any other person in every way. When everyone around us seems to be normal human being, the extremists search for a space where they can be more than human; because that will make them superior than the human kind. This can be considered to another level of 'X-treme' desire to be extreme. According to Boothroyd (2006), extreme is a widely used cultural phenomena and it brings the most popular cool shorthand 'X-treme' which is conceptualized in consumerism to instigate a widespread fascination and obsession with everything that is extreme (p. 277). On the other hand, superhuman and superheroes possess “some extraordinary capability or skill” which usually exceeds “physical and perceptual abilities of people” who are both deemed

and represented normal (Johnson, Leah, & Freeman, 2013, p. 230). This urge of 'X-treme' is generally triggered by superheroes and it creates an unsatisfactory desire inside normal human being to get out of the territory of normalcy and reach to the highest peak of extremity. It eventually activates the need of being superior by possessing those refined and extraordinary abilities. With the word 'superhuman syndrome', this paper suggests an anxiety or obsession of being exceedingly more than any normal human being. This paper discusses that when people try to reach somewhere beyond their normal capacity as a human it becomes an obsession which can put them in a situation where they do not bother about being right or wrong; hero or villain.

### Superhuman Syndrome to Post-humanism

This section combines the two words 'super' and 'human' to explain the urge to become superhuman which takes human towards post-humanism. While being only human is not enough, they feel the inferiority of having no extraordinary quality or power as a normal human being. And this kind of anxiety or inferiority among the mass is created by the media by representing these examples of superheroes with X-treme power. They start to believe that their desire is not impossible when they are introduced with someone in the media who can have superhuman power without having any supernatural power. In that case Batman can be the perfect example who turned towards post-humanism without having alien power like Superman. He did not need to be superhuman. He enhanced himself with the help of technologies which enabled him to possess extraordinary powers and skills that took him to X-treme. He exceeded from the state of being normal by being a 'cyborg' with the help of technologies.

As Fowler (2009) said,

Batman captures our imagination because he is an uncommon superhero. His methods don't conform to established practices. The Caped Crusader is incorruptible but no choir-boy. For example, Batman uses enhanced interrogation techniques and global cell phone taps in *The Dark Knight*, the latest Batman movie from Warner Bros. Pictures. He lives somewhat on the dark side. What's more, he possesses no super-human powers. Yet Batman effectively fights chaos and crises with a commitment to the ultimate good of society. (p. 10)

He captures our imagination more than any other superhero because in him we see the possibility of being a superhuman with the help of technologies. Any normal human being can be superhero when we are living in a post-human era. We can consider Donna Haraway's concept explained by Lauro & Embry (2008), "becoming cyborg is not purely a material experience but involves a discursive transformation: we become cyborgs when we decide to be cyborgs" (p. 105). People find it more possible to fulfill their imagination into reality. This endorsing attitude towards post-humanism makes it possible to possess the power that could let someone to exceed the human capacity and establish himself/herself as more than human or 'super'. On the other hand, this state of being more than human through the help of technologies can be seen from Donna Haraway's (1999) proposition of a post gendered world where both the 'god' and 'goddess' are dead when people can deem for something more reliable than God which she mentioned as cyborg (p. 282). Through the help of technology people can blur the difference between man and women which is more liberal. So, people can become more able by being cyborg instead of having some limitations in their physicality. In most contemporary science fiction or superhero novels or movies, we can easily notice countless characters who go through technological enhancement which makes them more powerful than any ordinary hero to fight against the odd. To add to this, Ironman can be brought here, who is a 'cyborg' by choice. Being cyborg did not make him disabled rather it increased his power through his suits.

## Imposed Normalcy: Easier than the Fear of Extremity

It is the urge of every human to be more than human which is not possible if they live under a dominated limitation. In Patrick D. Hopkins's (2009) essay, "The Lure of the Normal: Who Wouldn't Want to Be a Mutant?" he brought this argument that who would want to be ordinary? (p. 5). He brings a disagreement about being 'normal' and asked,

Is it true that just because something is normal, it should be our goal, our yardstick for how things should be? Does normality give us any guidelines? Or, is "normal" merely the way things statistically happen to be? And can we think of ways to make things much better? (p. 6)

It might seem logical to be normal and act as we should act under the law and ideology of our society. But does this make things better for us if we cannot think out of that normality? People has the right to think above their limitation of biological power and when they do, they can think of additional attachments like science, technology and knowledge which makes them different from any other normal human being. Being a minority, this might seem like a curse to others but who does not want to test the X-treme power even after being a minority? So, it might give them guideline to achieve something by getting out of the comfort zone to be the super-human.

According to Kavadlo (2009), "If Superman is a wish, then the X-Men represent what Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) understood to be every wish's flipside: fear" (p. 44). Everyone would want to be a superhero with extreme power and superhero films are made for people to fantasize about them. It suggests the same thing what is proven in the previous chapter that, it is normal to see a superhero with X-treme power even if he wears ridiculous cloth. But it cannot be taken normally if anyone in real life exposes the X-treme power. It will terrify the society. Just like that, in the X-Men film, there were some human who were in the side of mutants to support them and others were afraid of them. The fear is their desire to be Superman because, every single person is not allowed to have powers like those mutants in X-Men film otherwise it will become available or possible for everyone. Without the mask these X-Men are the reminder of being a normal human being and they seem closer to reality than the Superman. In fact, they tend to take superheroes normally when they find something out of the concept of reality. But the truth is in front of us when Superman exhibits his red undergarment upon his costume which makes him ridiculous but at the same time different from others, this indicates his not being normal like others. His cloth defines his identity about being extra-ordinary; otherwise superheroes did not have to take shelter under these ridiculous costumes. On the other hand, the new version of Superman in the film *Man of Steel* (2013), does not exhibit this kind of X-treme clothing. So, superheroes need mask to hide their true identity so that everyone can idealize them as symbol but never attempt to compare a normal human being with X-treme power. As if going for the X-treme is only allowed for superheroes.

## Private or Public Fantasy?

Todd McGowan's (2007) book explains the film theory of psychoanalysis where he suggests that, for psychoanalysis, fantasy is an imaginary scenario that fills in the gaps within ideology and creates a way for the individual to imagine a path out of the dissatisfaction produced by the demands of social existence (p.23). Fantasy creates an opening to the impossible or inaccessible enjoyment by distorting social reality through an imaginative act and films help to translate private fantasies into public which creates dissatisfaction inside the audience (McGowan, 2007, p. 24). From this perspective it is customary for any normal human being to fantasize about superheroes or feel the necessity of dissatisfaction to go to X-treme like them. Their inner urge to go to

X-treme to be the superhuman seems possible for them through this fantasy. Their fantasy of becoming superhuman comes true through these superhero films which can satisfy their dissatisfaction created by the same media which created the masochistic urge inside them. But in Žižek's (1997) concept, our fantasy cannot be free from ideology. That is the reason why people like to fantasize the superhero who serves from the same side of the society and it is inside every human that they cannot break the rules of society. So, a superhero is not questioned when he ultimately uses his superpower to fight the odds but a normal person would be questioned if he tries to test his possible limits by not being a superhero.

### Upholding the Structure of Ideology

Herman (2013) said that, the relationship between ideology and myth can be found within the Superhero narrative (p. 10). As superhero narrative is inspired by myth, it combines all the structures of mythical ideology. In Roland Barthes's (1993) concept, we always understand the 'Sign' which bears the meaning of ultimate ideology and this meaning is already established by the practice of myth in every culture. There is always a hidden politics inside the ultimate message because message is not free from knowledge of discourse. Barthes followed the theory of Saussure which explains the way language and parole works. In the same way superhero myth making works and that is, everybody believes that, they cannot be bad even if they have X-treme powers (p. 115). They will always follow the social norms by being the savior and always doing the right thing. In the film, *The Dark Knight* (2008) the 'Joker' says to Batman, "This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you?" (Nolan, Roven, Thomas, & Nolan, 2008, 2:13:31). Here, 'Joker' compares himself with Batman who is an immovable object, while the 'Joker' being a villain is the unstoppable force. This is where extremity of a villain finds the limitation in a superhero that can never change the sign of goodness inside a superhero. Even he could not let any other hero cross that line and go to X-treme. In this film, Harvey Dent wanted to kill a schizophrenic who worked for Joker but Batman did not let the bad come out of him. He controlled the extremity inside a hero, because according to the social norm a hero cannot go to X-treme. According to Batman, "Gotham needs a hero with a face" (Nolan et al., 2008, 46:5). Without wearing a mask Harvey could be that hero who would show the example of being good. Batman wanted to inspire people by being the symbol and anyone can be the symbol. That concept made it available to everyone that they can also become Batman. After all he does not have any supernatural power. But he could not let any normal human being be the Batman. In this film at the beginning some people were seen to copy the clothing of Batman to save the world, which he did not like. He could not let any other human being go to X-treme because that will be against the law or rules of society. That is why he wanted Harvey to be the example who could inspire people to be like a hero by not going to X-treme.

Instead of having X-treme power superheroes cannot surrender to the total extremity while supervillains can. There is a reason behind it and the reason is clear in front of us that is, ethics and morality which are considered to be the essential part of a superhero. They cannot entirely go to X-treme otherwise people will learn to practice the negativity from them. The storylines of the battle between good and bad feed off the ideal rule of 'Sign', that good will win over evil. To establish the continuation of this mythology, the hero is saved at the end by having the victory of killing the villain. To show the good's triumph over evil the final result has to be destructive and severely punishable for the evil. That is why every time the death or punishment of the villain is shown devastatingly. No matter how powerful or immortal a supervillain is, the ultimate result will leave him to tragedy. If this rule of demolishing the evil is not shown as an example in the society then the hope will die inside the audience and they will go back to the same great frustration of the aftermath of World War II. Again, there will increase the urge to do wrong things and go away with it, if there is no display of the punishment of evil. However, the hero can

never die no matter how close he goes to death because of the villain. There is a reason behind this reappearance of the hero; because if the hero dies, the society will get the wrong message from this and it will break the rule of ideology.

### Myth of Individualism: Deconstructing the Traditional Concept of Hero

Superheroes represent a completely different concept than postmodernism. Where Fredric Jameson's (1988) concept – death of the subject suggests that individualism is only a myth, it never existed at the first place (p. 17); superheroes try to represent their uniqueness and individuality through their costume and unrecognizable identity. They are still living in the era of great modernism which believed in a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique version of the world and forge its own unique, unmistakable style (Jameson, 1988, p. 17). When this individualism is a matter of past and all individualism is dead, why would these superheroes try to maintain their uniqueness? On the other hand, if we consider those superhero films then we will find postmodernist element of no uniqueness. All these films present the same thing over and over again. "In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson, 1988, p. 18). So, ultimately no matter how hard these heroes try to be unique, they fail to establish a new style when their characters are established long ago through comics. At the end, they end up with cliché performances that are very predictable in this postmodern era. But with the emergence of a villain we get to see another new X-treme which brings the new level of action and creates a scope for the superhero to entertain people with his new extremity. Every time a villain is killed at the end of the story and for another story they create another new villain with a new kind of extremity. So, when superheroes turn into cliché characters, supervillains bring the new excitement with another X-treme power; it was mentioned before that, with the death of one X-treme the necessity of another X-treme increases. But superheroes do not seem to fulfill these criteria of X-treme and they end up showing the same action with the same kind of power until they are challenged by the new kind of X-treme supervillain. That might be the reason that nowadays we see more popularity of villains than the hero. When media brings X-treme violence available in the spectator of the audience, the scope of fantasizing violence becomes explicit. At that time when people cannot show their inner violence and cannot go to the ultimate X-treme in reality, X-treme films help them to fill in the gaps of ideology. So, villains seem more reachable and exciting than the superhero while villains teach them to go to the possible limit without any hesitation. That might be the reason that Alan Moore has developed a new kind of concept of superhero in a face of villain through *Watchmen* (1987). This story is created to deconstruct the concept of contemporary superhero films and to critique the superhero concept. But the motif remains still the same which is the greater good of the world but in a different way. They cannot come out of the concept of greater good and refuse the personal interest in every case. In the film *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) there is a question about the superhuman power, that is – "Will it be for the greater good or will it be used for personal or for destructive ends?" (Arad, Donner, Winter, & Ratner, 2006, 00:12:29). A superhero will be at the question of misusing his power if he uses it for personal motif. As if his power does not belong to him, as long as the greater good is concerned. In spite of having the X-treme power a person is forbidden to use it the way he wants. In some way *Watchmen* are seen to use their X-treme power for destructive ends. It might deconstruct the conventional idea about superhero films but they are also at the same duty as the superheroes to watch over the world. When they are doing the wellbeing of the world, they are seen to go to X-treme by refusing the conventional ideology of the existing society. They might not be proven to be the typical superhero, but they have the courage to break the limitation and go to X-treme. Through these

Watchmen the world would learn the necessity of X-treme when being normal fails to fulfill the motif, whether it is personal or universal.

As mentioned before, we are living in an X-treme culture, for children or teenagers; violence is the new mainstream which creates adventure in their minds and they do not feel any domination or control in that. That is why children are seen to be more interested in villains who expose the extremity; not like any conventional stereotyped superheroes who only maintain the rules and boundaries of their power. Superheroes seem more cliché where villains are appreciated for being outrageous by showing extremity. In the Bollywood mainstream this example is given in Anubhav Sinha's *Ra-One* where the child actor shows his excitement about villains, "Villains are awesome. They have no rules. They just win" (Khan & Sinha, 2011, 00:17:15). But his father says, "Hero always wins. That is why he is hero. Truth and goodness win" (Khan & Sinha, 2011, 00:17:32). But the child is obsessed with the Xtreme power of villains for which he named himself 'Lucifer' (the original name of 'Satan') in the virtual world where he can show his inner extremity by playing videogames. This mainstream film promotes the villain as more powerful and important than the superhero which is proven by its name 'Ra-One'. This name came from Hindu Mythology where 'Raavan' was the villain against the god 'Ram'. That mythology told the story of the defeat of an undefeatable villain by the good modest godlike hero. Every year people in India celebrate 'Dussehra' where they kill and burn the symbolic replica of 'Raavan' to kill the evil inside every human being. In this film the virtual character "Ra-One" the villain, says, "You burn him every year because he never dies" (Khan & Sinha, 2011, 01:48:17). If the 'Raavan' is dead long ago then what is the point of killing him every year? "Those who die – don't need killing again and again" (Khan & Sinha, 2011, 01:48:37). In reality burning the replica is a reminder to the human kind that the devil has to die; so that people cannot fantasize about the extreme. That is the reason why every time a villain is shown to face cruel death to maintain the sign of ideology. But this postmodern world denies accepting this kind of devastating threat which is represented through the shattering destruction of villains. If ideology was successful to create the fear of destructive end of extreme villain in human mind, then there was no need for the reminder every time; neither through visual media nor through rituals. Besides, the popularity of villains is increasing.

#### **Personal Ethics: No control of the authority**

To understand the popularity of villain more than superheroes, we need to have deeper understanding about postmodern ethics. There is always a contradiction between personal ethics and universal ethics. For example a dialogue of the professor from *X-Men: The Last Stand* can be taken – "When is it acceptable to use our power and when do we cross that invisible line that turns us into tyrants over our fellow man?" (Arad, Donner, Winter, & Ratner, 2006, 00:12:45). This dialogue raises the question of ethics which decides the use of power and tells people that they cannot cross the invisible line. "But Einstein said that ethics are an exclusive human concern without any superhuman authority behind it" (Arad, et al., 2006, 00:12:52) – that was the reply of a student. But the professor rejected that personal concept of ethics. Because according to him ethics is a concern of the society not a matter of personal realization. In *Man of Steel* (2013) the supervillain says to Superman that, "the fact that you possess a sense of morality and we do not, gives us an evolutionary advantage" (Nolan, Roven, Snyder, Thomas, & Snyder, 2013, 01:33:37), "And if history has proven anything it is that evolution always wins" (Nolan, et al., 2013, 01:33:55). So, the villain bluntly expresses the limitation of a superhero who is limited and conventionally old and that need to be changed by evolution. This dialogue already proves that the Superman does not belong to this post-modern world. His character still lives in the modern world which follows the strict rule of modern ethics. Here rises the necessity of postmodern ethics which does not need any kind of outer force to control human ethics. Before going to postmodern

ethics the understanding of modern ethics is necessary, because that will show the contradictory idea of two different eras. According to Jacobsen and Poder (2008), "Modern ethics was a 'Law-ethics'. What was less successful at a sociological level was the idea of autonomy" (p. 62). In the modern idea ethics was a question of obeying universal laws. Modern philosophers rejected the idea of metaphysical foundation of ethics and rather established a new understanding of ethics which was an outcome of human rationality. On the other hand, some of them contradicted this idea of universal law. According to Kant's 'ethics', moral agent is not questioned of obeying any laws of religion and tradition, rather he is free to be ruled by a universal law that he had formulated himself. Here comes a problem in sociological level that whether they are capable of ruling themselves or not. So, the modern era could not become what Kant dreamed of autonomous morality (Jacobsen & Poder, 2008, p. 62). This concept is appreciable in the postmodern era which believes in individual and cultural uniqueness in reverence for ethics. According to Bauman (1993), postmodernism breaks the concept of ethics of modernity and if modernity promoted ethics to shape moral behaviors according to law, then postmodernity offers a morality without ethics (p. 31). Again, Jacobsen and Poder (2008) said, postmodern morality is not a universal law but the infinite responsibility in front of other or in a particular situation (p. 63). So, there is nothing absolute or pre-determined in terms of postmodern ethics rather, it seems logical to create an individual morality according to the situation demand or in the case of dealing with another person. Postmodern ethics rejects the universal understanding of ethics as long as cultural difference exists to allow everyone to practice their individual ethics in their own way. Ideology and society created ethics which influence every social human being. But postmodern ethics do not allow any authority beyond the self. Now, it does not matter what other thinks; if anything matters then, that is the self.

As postmodern ethics rejects any kind of outer authority, it rejects the ideology which controls our fantasy so that people can be free to fantasize anything they want. When being good or bad is not the main concern, being superhuman is; then nothing can stop humanity to test their every possible limit that can be in the face of either villain or superhero. For Bataille (1988), common knowledge or knowledge gathered from all experiences arises from the rules which they follow – to the extreme limit of the "possible". Each bit of knowledge is worth something and it is necessary to know what is worth the ultimate experience that is, the extreme limit. Extreme limit of "possible" would give way to everything in an instant of insane courage; nothing resists the necessity of going further. If it had required madness would have been the payment (Bataille, 1988, p. 40). Most of the superhero narratives include a villain inside a mad scientist as if knowledge destroys the morality inside a scientist. This clearly suggests that gaining too much or knowing too much can be a curse. In that case Doctor Faustus's character can be brought to clarify the idea of being cursed for being X-tremely knowledgeable. People always had the urge to be wild and evil and they liked the temptation of extremity which was controlled by ideology. That is why Christopher Marlow had to show the fall of Doctor Faustus but made him the tragic hero. The popularity of villainous X-treme was visible even that time. That is because people seem to fantasize. In Žižek's (1997) word, "an indulgence in the hallucinatory realization of desire prohibited by the Law" (p. 17). So, anything that is forbidden by the law attracts our human mind quickly. Even the fall of Adam and Eve resulted from the choice to disobey in order to retain the erotic rapture of Eve (Žižek, 1997, p. 19). So, going against the law can be adventurous at the same time dangerous but desirable for the extremity of human mind. People are tempted like a child towards the negativity or whatever is forbidden. This human nature came from their very first ancestor Adam and Eve who could not resist the temptation of forbidden fruit. That is why, Faustus wanted to achieve that X-treme by living every bit of his life when he knows he will have to die someday. In that sense Doctor Faustus's dialogue can be quoted from Christopher Marlowe's

(1965) tragedy,

Faustus:

“Jerome’s Bible, Faustus, view it well:

[He reads.] “*Stipendium peccatimorsest.*” Ha!

“*Stipendium....*”

The reward of sin is death: that’s hard.

[He reads.] “*Si peccassenegamus, fallimur,*

*Etnullaest in nobisveritas*”

If we say that we have no sin,

We deceive ourselves, and there’s no truth in us.

Why, then, belike we must sin,

And so consequently die.

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.” (p. 5-6)

## Conclusion

When life has so much to gain then why would anyone be in the control of ideological limitation like superheroes? While the ethics of being good makes someone limited, freedom from any kind of traditional ethics can make one X-treme. Personal morality is much better than the universal ethics. At least it gives the satisfaction of deciding something by concerning only self, instead of any outer supernatural source. In that sense people are free to fall for villainous X-treme if their post-modern ethics allows them when they think that villains are more powerful and successful in testing every possibility in this life and bringing the X-treme out of the normal human being than the superheroes; because they do not have any bindings to test the ultimate X-treme.

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