

SUPERHUMAN MARXISM IN MARK MILLAR'S *RED SON*

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**Abstract:** The object of this research is a Graphic Novel entitled “*Superman: Red Son*” by Mark Millar. Telling a story about a Superman in a different universe who lives amongst society of communist and raised by communist Ideology, involving issues of social nomenclature. The basis of this research resides in Marxism Theory and Graphic Novel. This research aims to determine the message conveyed behind the book as either critique or support towards the ideas of Communism. This research applied Qualitative Descriptive method, and Marxist Literary Criticism as its Literary Approach. The Research Result pointed out that the book significantly showcased how far the success of Communism could go, especially with a Superhuman leader by their side. Simultaneously, the results also indicated that this work also represents critique upon Communism failures, specifically over the downfall of a utopian state the Super-powered leader had worked so hard for. This research revealed how Marxism could ideologically endure and survive, despite being overpowered by relentless Americans. It also shows that despite having a Superhuman leader, several problems that became the factor of Communism failure in both the book and in reality remains unaverted.

**Keywords:** *Marxism; superhuman; graphic novel*

## INTRODUCTION

Most of the studies that involved Marxism have targeted famous novels such as “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain. The study was conducted by Lauren Wright in terms of analyzing the Marxist approach towards different social classes of the character, unlike this paper, the backgrounds from the works of Mark Twain does not involve the Soviet Communists nor criticizing the state of classlessness, unlike how the way *Superman: RED SON* did as the object of this research. The researcher sensed that the object of this research was intended to represent a darker, cynical, and edgier tone to the comic book representation of Superman as a communist, who was raised with the ideology of common workers and uses his superhuman capabilities for the purposes of Soviet Union. This version of Superman became a force of nature amidst the cold and hard realities of the communist society, the idea is based upon the character’s unworldly efforts to achieve the vision that is deemed incapable to be fulfilled by a mere communist human.

The existence of a communist Superman was suspected as a symbolized

imagery to the ever-enduringness of Marxism, which is an idea that represents Marxism diminutive-but-apparent existence in today’s world and a possible form of hope to future Socialism endeavors (Galdorisi, 2017). Another idea is that despite its ever-enduring nature, Marxism could never thrive due to systematic flaws, that will be discussed in this paper as it rotates around many factors of contradictory between Marxism ideals/goals, and the effort to achieve such results (Paul, 2017). Hence, this study proceeds under the notion of questioning what is the idea that the writer truly wanted to share by means of Literary Criticism. Based on the overview as stated above, this study was aimed to understand the presence of a superhuman being within the *RED SON* graphic novel can become either an interpretation of Marxist symbolism of endurance and to critique Marxism flaw instead

Marxism, as cited in its titular book *Critique of Marxism* (Williams, 1977) which is a settled book of economic theory or doctrine that is based on the value of wage labor. For Marx, the capitalist system was doomed to failure; due to the landowners

making profit on the basis of the laborers work. The landowners' profit is from an oversupply of goods that can no longer be purchased by the laborers. This would bring about a collapse of capitalist system (Gunn, 2011).

According to Marxists and to other scholars in fact, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism: think how often the quest for wealth traditionally defines characters.

This means that Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams, 1999).

Meanwhile, Marxist as a criticism itself is a type of criticism in which literary works are viewed as the product of society and whose practitioners emphasize the role of class and ideology as they reflect, propagate, and even challenge the prevailing social order. Rather than viewing texts as repositories for hidden meanings, Marxist critics view texts as material products to be understood in broadly historical terms. In short, literary works are viewed as a product of society and hence of the realm of production and consumption we call economics. To put it simple, Literature reflects an author's own class or analysis of class relations, however piercing or shallow that analysis may be (Delahoyde, 1987).

In one of Scott McCloud's book entitled *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993) defines that Graphic Novel, as per definition of comics, is a juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. This research would also rely on this definition as its theoretical ground to help data collection and analysis, by only focusing to the text of material for the

purpose of the research. This idea is based on the second volume of McCloud's regarding comic science, implying in subtlety that without the presence of a text to clarify an image displayed, the meaning would not be conveyed.

Based on Will Eisner's thesis on comics, Graphic Novel itself is a form of sequential art, bearing a common trait to comic books, which is the basis of why the theory of comics may apply to graphic novel. The major difference between comic books and graphic novels lies in the contents, whereas the concept and the tone of contents in graphic novel departed from the common grounds of concept and tone within the contents of comic books.

In *Comics and sequential art* (Eisner, 1985) explains a certain parameter of structure in Graphic Novels that would allow readers to dissect into the elements of the book as a whole, this structure is represented by visual and textual information; such information utilizes a series of repetitive images and symbols in unison, becoming a form of arbitrary language on its own.

This form of unison is the key of this research because the text as a prose and image as illustration is a montage that cannot be separated; this is due to the fact that the text represents the image and vice versa. Meanwhile, analyzing the written text of the graphic novel as a form of the prose requires the process of minding the illustration through the method of document analysis; this can be done by interpretation of verbal aspect (written text) and visual aspect (illustration) of the graphic novel using the particular scope of the comic book theory.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method and collects descriptive data from the texts through panel by panel observation of the book displaying the text of the book as the object of this research. The data will be

collected by conducting panel-by-panel textual analysis on the document, which will break down into several process of data, comprised of basic reading, documents contextualizing, and information summarizing. The technique of analyzing the data is one of the most important aspect in research.

As it was mentioned before that in this research qualitative method is applied After the panel-by-panel data collecting steps were done, the data analysis can be conducted by adhering these following principles to: (1) Offer one or more thesis or topic sentence indicating a basic observation or assertion about the text or passage as a part of the findings; (2) Offer a context for the passage without offering too much summary; (3) Cite the passage and enclose the picture containing the text (using correct format); (4) Follow the passage with some combination of the following elements; (5) Discuss what happens in the passage and why it is significant to the work as a whole; (6) Consider what is said, particularly subtleties of the imagery and the ideas expressed; (6) Assess how it is said, considering how the word choice, the ordering of ideas, sentence structure, etc. contribute to the meaning of the passage; (7) Explain what it means, tying the analysis of the passage back to the significance of the text as a whole; (8) Repeat the process of context, quotation and analysis with additional support for your thesis or topic sentence.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using Marxism as a scope of criticism, this paper would discuss several points of interpretation or tropes, to identify several values that would indicate the existence of Marxist ideas within the graphic novel. The following are several tropes that comprises the Marxist interpretation of *SUPERMAN : REDSON* graphic novel:

Despite the fact that the character of Superman lived amidst a Communist

Society, there was never truly a common ground of equality for every men that is described in the book. Since not only they are divided by occupational strata, but also by their interaction with Superman, who has so much influence that his existence enhanced the already-stark-contrast between several classes within the community. Looking at a glance, the characters of this graphic novel are distinguished into two fundamental roles based on their economics, which are influenced by the existence of Superman and his vast array of deeds. Due to Superman's interactions with different characters from different social stratum, several classifications were made between the ruling class with higher economical and political influences, and the lower class which gave Superman his aspiration to achieve communal prosperity through totalitarian order.

Totalitarianism is defined as an installation of absolute authority to a government over the people as its principal subject (Merriam-Webster, 2018) and such authority that Superman's characteristics of governance bears resemblance to, which was mentioned several times in the *RED SON* book. Superman's Totalitarianism rule is the result of his shift of conviction, from being a hero who simply wishes to inspire people with his heroics ascending to the Soviet's highest position for the sake of providing more apparent and definite help to the people. The trigger to such shift of conviction would be none other than his Childhood friend Lana Lazarenko, who struggled for food as Superman flies by. Superman's form of Totalitarianism proves to be staggering, as he is able to convert almost every nation on the fictional globe into Communism, all the while improving prosperity to the Soviet Union. Superman oversees all his state and political affairs with ease.

It is important to acknowledge that Superman would qualify as a totalitarian ruler based on several following traits,

consisting of; (1) Superman as a representative of government, takes control over every aspect of public and private life. (2) Employment of indoctrination, propaganda, censorship, and dissidents' persecution. (3) Embodiment of Stalin's vision of a perfect communist state. (4) High goals of infrastructural development. (5) Provide sense of security and direction for future prospects (Quizlet, 2015). All of these traits were displayed by Superman as the story progressed, which was showcased alongside the characters and setting that surrounds him. This would identify Superman as a fictional Totalitarian and Communist Ruler.

In the fictional universe of the *RED SON* graphic Novel, Superman's form of Totalitarianism had manifested into several actions, which takes form in Superman's interactions with the variety of characters from the Ruling Class. In the second volume, it was displayed that Superman entrusted several positions into different characters to assist his already-capable hands in terms of state affairs;

Lana became a person in charge of leading the entourage of Superman's museum of indoctrination, while international affairs and communism ambassadorship was bestowed to Wonder Woman as well as the overseeing of national security by Commander Pyotr Roslov. This structure would later change near the end of the second volume after Batman's attack on Superman, due to Wonder Woman's loss of power (sacrificing it to free Superman from Batman's trap) and Commander Pyotr's treason from his involvement in Batman's effort to depower and dethrone Superman.

Superman's Totalitarianism as a Superhuman Marxist had undergone several different phases, which signifies several changes in Superman's character. Superman's character originated from a family of collective farmers to a global Superhero of Socialism, he would went on to become a totalitarian ruler who displays

paranoia against his human allies and received his inevitable defeat as he faced another realization that breaks down his conviction to pieces. Despite being accomplishing, Superman's totalitarianism faced challenges and tribulations that proven its concept as a botched design/ This also weighs down the value of Communism, as it was the inadvertent cause of Superman's Totalitarianism because it shows how much of a flaw Marxism is in spite of having a Superhuman Leader.

The Glass-Ceiling is defined as "a situation in which a certain progress appears possible, but restrictions and discriminations creates a barrier that prevent s it." In terms of social classifications, it inadvertently separates the lower class from the upper class. (Harper Collins Publishers, 2006). One of several characters whom are subjected to injustice by this barrier includes Batman, who strongly opposed Superman for his totalitarian rule. Batman was subjected to a life under the glass-ceiling ever since he was just a kid, growing into a terrorist he is as he continuously resents anyone who is above him and any other Communist in terms of social class.

A character who was able to transcend the glass ceiling because of her connection to Superman was Lana Lazarenko (who has an American counterpart named Lana lang in Superman's Mainstream comics) because she was also a subject to poverty at the end of the previous volume of the graphic novel, a state that drives Superman's motivation to bring prosper to the starving Proletariats who lived under the glass ceiling. As Superman raised her status, she overcame the glass ceiling with ease, and she was accepted to be a part of a higher class with Superman's power and influence. Being the example of a person who transcends the Social Barrier, Lana is another prime example that a glass ceiling could actually exist within a society that was based on Marxism. (Frost, 2016).

This would assert that Superman's relationship and influence over a character decides their very fate. Lana who was once a poor woman has become a person with a position that Superman bestowed upon her, while Batman who was just a child at the beginning of the story had to grow up as a masked terrorist and martyred his life of notoriety rather than being subdued by the humiliation of brainwashing by Superman. These facts would propose the idea that being on the opposite side of Communism and its embodiment is somewhat a disadvantageous status in order for human beings to live lives properly. While Superman was a heroic character in a glance, his existence did not represent tolerance towards all human beings unexceptionally and only interests the people who displays supportive trait towards him and his position as The World's Supreme Communist Leader.

While the ideology of Communism and Soviet Union manifested into the character of Superman, the embodiment of Liberalism and the American Ways takes form as the ingenious Doctor Luthor. He is a workaholic, marriage-neglecting scientist and later the president of the United States who is hell bent on Superman's downfall. Doctor Luthor worked so hard to defeat Superman from facing numerous failures and humiliation not only for the sake of America and its ideology of liberalism, but to prove his own individual supremacy as a representative of human race, against the intergalactic might of a communist that is Superman.

This trope indicates the correlating nature between ideology and its practitioner, represented by Superman-Luthor Rivalry. As for Doctor Luthor's symbolism in this trope represents persistency of a movement by mankind's indomitable will, fronted by the United States of America.

The end of the graphic novel revealed that the story was a perpetual cycle of time, where the character of Superman who turned

out to be Doctor Luthor's descendant in a future millennium, was sent back in time to relive the story all over again. Landing back in the Ukrainian field within the final pages, the book reveals the origin of the Superhuman Marxist who escaped earth's demise in the far future only to become the very character he portrays in the first volume of the book.

In the scope of Marxism, Superman's return to the starting point of the story gave the idea that translates Superman's existence as the symbolism of Marxism itself. Marxism believes that Socialist ideologies are prophesied to take place even in modern societies, this would occur whenever an individual or a group of people believed that the answer to an injustice system was held by Marxism (Illing, 2017).

Before the existence Marxist Literary Criticism, the Socioeconomic theory founder Karl Marx and Frederick Engels had already perceived the signals through climactic conflicts in literary depictions. That class struggle is the root of all problems, and that Liberalism is the failing ideology wherever it stands as it will be replaced by Communism. Superman's character and the plot development solidify this idea as a possible message in the graphic novel, that Marxism as an ideology that is merely dormant and completely perpetuate.

The findings shows how Marxism as an ideology may be considered as a force at work, with the purpose of survival through time. Marxism has the potential to even intimidate, breed, constitute, or federate its way out of perdition and endure changes of the world. While literature works can become a very suggestive media to convey this message, Marxism as an ideology itself would persevere as long as one or more person cling on its ideas.

In another substantive argument based on the findings from Superman's existence as a hero and then a monarch, further confirmed that the idea of Marxism is still a

futile concept of life and that it is in fact systematically flawed to begin with. Superman's existence did bring a manifestation of differences, in terms of what the Russian Communists and Socialism would have become by having an indestructible guardian (and later president) by their side. Despite having Superman, Socialism was not enough to sustain the world.

The so-called fairness of its system still faced a lot of disapproval from both inside and outside the Soviet Union. This can be seen from the graphic novel where dissidents and revolts still lurks amidst the society, and the Americans were able to withstand by not converting to Communism despite most of the earth's surface already did.

The possibility of critique as a message to be conveyed by *Superman: REDSON* also came from its plot, where Superman Utopian infrastructure was aborted by his untimely defeat. Superman's defeat and change of conviction would interpret a determination that is not strong enough to be upheld, compared to what would change his mind later. Superman as a major symbol of Socialism and Marxism in this book was swayed by the fact that his ways did not bring good, more than it bring harm to humanity.

This is a very fascinating notion to be analyzed as an answer to the question of this research, because a change of heart to a conviction that could convert almost the entire earth to Communism surely has a very powerful reason, which must be reckoned as a fatal argument from the Marxism point of view.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis over the findings and discussions, it can be inferred that the Graphic Novel entitled *SUPERMAN: REDSON* emphasized over two ideas: the flaw of Communism and Marxism enduringness. It is necessary to point out

that these two interpretations may actually coincide, despite being contradictively different as implied within the graphic novel. Over the course of analysis based on the findings in the previous chapter, concludes that the graphic novel represents the idea of Marxism enduring symbolism while also signifying Marxism as a failed system. Based on the previous chapters of this paper, this study implores for the educational and literature community to pay more attention and employ awareness to the seriousness and relevance of Graphic Novel contents. Further, this study and its object is also recommended as a relevant source and object for future references.

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