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**DOMESTICATING FANTASY: A STUDY OF DILEMMA IN  
 SAM RAIMI'S SPIDER MAN**

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**Abstract:**

*The movie “Spider Man” a superhero movie, popular Hollywood film became the first film to earn the \$100 million in the first week belongs to the sub-genre of 'Popular Culture'. Directed by Sam Raimi, “Spider Man” is a fictional movie created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, appearing in American comic books, published by Marvel Comics appeared in anthology comic book Amazing Fantasy. The movie “Spider Man” also set an all time record for the highest earnings in a single day with \$43,622,264 on its second day, a period later surpassed by “Shrek 2” in 2004. Generally the movie “Spider Man” is considered as a fictional 'superhero movie' which is also a chief source of enjoyment and entertainment for children basically. Traditionally people think that such movies feed the children with fantasy the superheroes are preternatural, non-terrestrial and mysterious creature who possess supernatural powers and protects the universe. But the core concern of the paper is to reflect the mundane aspects where a man is caught within the web of strife, alienation, struggle, ups and downs of life.*

**Key Words:** *Fantasy, superhero, preternatural, strife, alienation.*

Film study becomes popular among research scholars. The movie “Spider Man” also set an all time record for the highest earnings in a single day with \$43,622,264 on its second day, a period later surpassed by “Shrek 2” in 2004. Generally the movie “Spider Man” is considered as a fictional 'superhero movie' which is also a chief source of enjoyment and entertainment for children basically. Traditionally people think that such movies feed the children with fantasy the superheroes are preternatural, non-terrestrial and mysterious creature who possess supernatural powers and protects the universe. But the core concern of the paper is to reflect the mundane aspects where a man is caught within the web of strife, alienation, struggle, ups and downs of life.

Peter Parker suffers a dilemma an anguish to sublimate his persona amidst the topsy turvy world of twenty-first century perplexing anxieties caused by the dilemma stimulates Peter's “defence mechanism”, a natural strategy which is imbibed by the humans to overpower the nervous impulses. An orphan, the protagonist is brought up by his uncle and aunt, suffers from inadequacy unemployment and loneliness as an ordinary human being. As film critic Roger Ebert reviews,

*The film tells spidey's original Story\_ who Peter Parker is, (italics mine) Who Aunt May and uncle Ben are, how Peter's an outcast at school, how Burns with unrequited love for Mary Jane Watson, how he peddles Photos of Spider Man to cigar Chomping editor J. Jonah Jameson.*

The adolescent protagonist is caught by the fever of love, a natural phenomenon of youth, and his obsession leads him towards destructive path as he wrestles to gain money in order to win his lady love's heart. As he grew up he had realized the value of the responsibility towards humanity as learnt from his uncle, “with great power comes great responsibility”. Yet the emergence of power and its relation to responsibility enhances his dilemma, unable to prefigure the duality initially he had turned into a submissive creature. Though, apparently the movie “Spider Man” seems like a fictional superhero movie but it is also a didactic story, a journey of a man who not merely protects his widowed aunt but also

dedicated to accomplish his responsibilities towards civilization.

The discursive domain of knowledge geared by literary and cultural theories, has shaken man's notions about language and established the changing parameters of its contour. In the novel *Reef*, Romesh Gunasekera asserts, "A novel is like a reef. A structure of words, nourished by the imagination of readers who renew it and keep it alive". Similarly in a way, a film is nourished by the imagination of the audience who renew it by their indigenous outlook. Beyond the contour of literary texts, Hollywood superhero movies, such as "Spider Man", "Superman", "Batman" are part of 'Popular Culture'. Popular culture highlights the multiplicity of approaches, perspectives and ideas of a mainstream culture which began in early twentieth century. 'Pop' Culture or Popular Culture involve sports, movies, news, music, fashion, technology, i.e. vastly connected with mass media and quotidian lives of society. Earlier, in the nineteenth century, Pop Culture was mainly associated with subordinate class and their culture which is antagonistic with that of aristocratic class or Official Culture. The word 'Pop' also refers to the pop music of 1950s. Popular Culture is often criticized by multiple non-mainstream sources which recognizes it as sensationalist, superficial, shallow, flat and narrow. It is mainly associated with 'Western Culture' but later on with the process of globalization, it became an integral part of every culture around the globe. In a way Popular Culture is also synonymous with 'mass culture' which is also seen as commercial culture.

The superhero films revolve around the unearthly power actions of superheroes, who possess inhuman strength relative to a normal person and protects the universe. They protest against the anarchy, social prejudice and fights with socially and politically corrupted authorities and the most abominable super-villains. These superheroes were first appeared in comic books and adapted for film serials aimed at children, *Mandrake the Magician*. Fantasy, science-fiction, Feature films are the valuable aspects of such superhero films. There are several superhero serials in the market, "Adventures of Captain Marvel", "Batman", "Captain America", "Superman", "Spider Man" etc. Around the year 1975, there was a riding wave of a new interest in the fantasy and science-fiction films with success of "Star Wars", "Robocop", "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle" etc. After the success of several comic book adaptation films in 1990s, the first decade of twenty-first century brought increased interest in the genre and some of the most profitable superheroes franchises, many from Marvel Enterprises. After the success of "Men In Black" (1997), Columbia picture licensed the film rights of "Spider Man". Twentieth century Fox's "X-Men" became a film franchise by its super hit. Among several superhero movies, "Batman" is a fictional superhero appearing in American comic books published by *DC Comics*. The character was created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, and first appeared in *Detective Comics*. "Superman" is also a fictional superhero, appearing in *American Comic Books*, published by *DC Comics*. The character is created by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, high school students, living in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1933. "Spider Man", another superhero works in ways very similar to those of fellow superheroes, is that he does not kill his targets. His main object is to help the police authorities of New York City and to help bring justice to those who have been wronged.

In the movie "Spider Man", the very opening speech of the protagonist Peter Parker, highlights that he belongs to domestic category, "Who am I? You sure you want to know? the story of my life, somebody says it's a happy little tale. . . somebody told that I was average ordinary guy . . . somebody lied but let me tell you, *it's all about a girl* (italics mine), the girl Mary Jane Watson, *the woman I love* (italics mine), loved since before I liked girls". A growing soul is hovering in search of his own identity, comparing and relocating his presence to justify and propagate his morals and vices. The movie was a critical success. The review aggregator website *Rotten tomatoes* calculated an 89% overall approval based on 216 reviews with the site's consensus stating, "Not only does Spider Man provide a good dose of web swinging fun, it has also a *heart* (mine italics), thanks to the combined chance of a director Sam Raimi and Toby Maguire." Peter is a student and also very fond of scientific researches. Harry Osborn, son of Norman Osborn, a scientist of Nano technology, is Peter's intimate and only friend. Peter possess a wider

range of knowledge of science as he informs Harry about a scientific type of spider which changes its colour, according to environment, a 'defence mechanism', psychoanalysts defines this perspective as a human strategy unconsciously used by the people to refrain and protect oneself from the harmful anxieties. One denies the repressive ideas to secure himself from anxiety, building a defensive strategy to overpower it. While roaming around for a project work in Columbia University. According to *BBC Review*, Peter Parker, who is bitten by a spider in a class field trip to Columbia University, relates the year 1962, the year of the Cuban missile crisis, the spider was radioactive. Now to reflect more contemporary technological anxieties, it is a genetically super-species. Peter is an orphan who grew up under the supervision of Uncle Ben and aunt May, his mentor, guide and philosopher in life. Chasing their sweven, Peter confronts to Mary Jane Watson that he “wants to move into the city, hopefully get a job as photographer”, while Mary Jane wishes, “I want to act on stage”. Peter's complement in this regard, mirrors his infatuation about her, “perfect, you are awesome in school plays, I cried like a baby when you played sindrella...” All these traits - infatuations, relationships, institutionalised education system, friendship are ample proof that Spider Man is a fruit of mundane existence. A mad scientist Norman Osborn is an emblem of menace, jeopardy, contemptible, obnoxious creature, a threat to society. The contradiction arises regarding scientific researches- whether it is a boon to mechanical invention and strategical invention or a bane to psychological as well as physical violence. Norman is the 'bad angel' who disrupts of society. Scurrilous and vituperative by nature, Norman Osborn is a symbol of menace in society whose whim geared the evils. Norman's scientific project is discarded by Oscorp company and as for vengeance Norman transformed into a serial killer. *New York Times Review* reports,

If I may borrow a time honoured Comic book formulation- an ambitious scientist named Norman Osborn is undergoing a similar *Identity crisis* (italics mine) . . . About to lose a big contract, so Osborn performs an experiment on himself and becomes a Green Goblin, Flying through the sky in a Rocket . . . wrecking all manner Of havoc.

Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* had mixed feelings about the casting, particularly Toby Maguire, “Maguire winning as he is, never quite gets the chance to bring the two sides of the spidey - the boy and the man, the romantic and the and the anger together”. Peter's capricious nature compelled uncle Ben to have a powwow with him, “We need to talk . . . I don't even know who you are, you have all those weird experiments, and your room, you started fight at school . . . Pete look, you changing. . . *Peter these are the days when a man changes into man he is going to become for the rest of his life* (italics mine), just be careful . . . *remember with great power comes great responsibility* (italics mine)”. The very statement is philosophical, rational, an essential part of doctrine, needed to be followed by a person. Peter's reply to uncle Ben in this regard is an ample proof that he is fanciful, full of whim, undeveloped and an immature lad, “are you afraid I am going to turn into some kind of criminal, don't worry about me. Okk”.

The illusion gets broken as uncle Ben is murdered and he realizes the responsibility and the unique power he possess. Theorist B.F.Skinner avers, “Peter's encounter with the robber that eventually lead to his uncle's murder and the birth of Spider Man. His actions directly caused a major consequence that changed his life forever”. It is not merely a physical change, an evolution occurs within him that certainly changed his views and the dilemma reconstructs the 'new man'. The 'birth' of spider-man refers the birth of a responsible man, apparent ending of childhood and whimsical adulthood with the resurrection of a preserver.

The power in him is not any preternatural, extraordinary or supernatural power, its the *spiritual power* of a person. According to *New York Times Review*,

Peter is a crude prototype of the Spidey costume, enters a wrestling Competition, hoping to win enough money to buy a used sports car that will make Mary Jane take notice. Such childish indulgence is quickly Put aside when peter's beloved uncle Ben is killed in a carjacking, and the young man's new talents are turned to higher purpose.

This event justifies that struggle and suffering propels as well as compels humans to realize their responsibility.

The life story of Peter Parker and his alter-ego Spider Man, also foregrounds the perennial conflict between 'holy' and 'evil' power, a natural clash in domestic society. The evil scientist Norman Osborn, a perverted, a snobbish character, isolated by society entangled within a *web*, is inflicting wounds to the society. Norman's unconscious mind instructs the surreptitious, foxship methods, as he utters, "instruct him in the matter of loss and pain, make him suffer, make him wish he could dead. . . the cunning warrior attacks neither body, nor mind, the heart". The arrogant psycho killer scientist's futile attempt to transform the sacred man into a villain proves a failure as the protagonist rejects the offer. The perverted scientist proposed, "you and me are exceptional. . .I am offering you a choice, join me, imagine what we could accomplish together, what we could create, or we could destroy". Unavoidable temptation of serpentine scientist is hard to resist, breeds the dilemma within Peter whether to opt or deny it. Peter was tempted not Spider-man whose inner psyche forbids him to taste the forbidden fruit. Spider man is an emblem of saviour, one who beshield the society from such contemptible enemy of society and their evil spells.

Spider Man is not merely a preternatural creature rather a vulnerable, broken-hearted forlorn persona. He mourns and recounts his uncle Ben's death as her aunt May nourishes him with consolatory words. Peter says, "I missed him a lot today . . .I can't help thinking about the last thing I have said to him, he tried to tell me something important and I threw it in his face. . .", as aunt May mends his wounds, "I know, I miss him too, but he was there. . .you loved him and he loved you, he never doubted the man you will grow into". As a responsible grandchild, Peter nourishes aunt May while hospitalized and traumatized by the evil blow of the super villain perverted scientist.

The protagonist is a highly dignified man, have faith in his own ability as he rejects Norman's help in the career making proposal. Norman Proposed, "I will make few calls", while instantly Peter replied, "No, I appreciate but I will be fine. . .I could not accept it sir, I will find my own work". Peter is no Mosca, a parasite exists upon his master's will lacks his own existence rather an ambitious man, a believer maker of his own fate. Unemployment issue has emerged even in world's most progressive nation The United States Of America. Asian countries do suffer such financial crisis yet the so called Europeans are not even free from it. Peter is confronting the crisis though conscious of his own dignity.

Even if, the protagonist is considered as a superhero, his emotion and romanticism discards such facts, an ample proof that he is an ordinary man of flesh and blood. Peter finally unfolds his emotions in a riddle to Mary Jane, "*when you look in her eyes and she is looking back yours* (italics mine), everything feels not quite normal because you feel stronger, weaker at the same time, excited sometime terrified. . .truth is you don't know what you feel". *Entertainment Weekly* reports, 'the kiss in spider man' on its end of the decade 'best of list', saying, "There's a fine line between romantic and corney. And the rain soaked smooth between Spider Man and Mary Jane from 2002 tap dances right on that line. The reason it works? Even if suspects he's Peter Parker, she doesn't try to find out. And that's sexy". Mary Jane is a gracious lady-her reddish hair, her dark eyes and flamboyant personality allures Peter's attention. Peter's romantic soul is titillated as he visualizes Mary's smile transcends him into a bitter-sweet world of juvenile ecstasy. Throbbing emotions are continuously aggravates his impulses.

The movie "spider Man" won several awards ranging from "Teen Choice Awards" to the "Saturn Awards", "BMI Film Music Award", "British Academy Film Awards" and was also nominated for two Academy Awards. It also took home the "People's Choice Award" for "Favourite Motion Picture". Such widening range of success is an outcome of the cognitive blend of natural and supernatural, fact and fantasy, ephemeral and eternal, degeneration and regeneration, familiar and alien facts. It's not merely a childish fantasy, a fairy tale, a ghoul, paranormal concept, rather profoundly rooted in the humdrum life of physical world.

The paper aims at the justification of the social significance of such movies which are

interconnected with day to day social milieu. *Rotten Tomatoes Review* by William Arnold implies,

The surprise of the movie is the *humanity of the script* (italics mine) : how skilfully and effortlessly it works. Off the stories of Peter's. Smouldering, unexpressed love for the girl next door, and Osborn's desperate business and family conflicts.

Even a superhero is an orphan, haunted by teasing and ragging of classmates, a teenager obsessed with adolescent love, lunatic as well frenzy, timid and reluctant, unemployed and disappointed but also dedicated, devoted and dutiful, a responsible citizen. *New York Times Review* finds, Peter Parker was a crucial in the evolution of Marvel Comics Because

he was fallible and had *recognizable human traits* (italics mine). He was a nerd, socially inept, insecure, a poor kid being raised by relatives. Maguire gets all of that just right, and I enjoyed the way Dunst is able to modulate her gradually increasing interest in this *loner* (italics mine) who begins to seem attractive to her. I also like the complexity of the villain... a cackling *psychopath* (italics mine). Osborn's son is a rich kid, embarrassed by his dad's wealth, who is Peter's best and only friend, and Norman is affectionate towards Peter even while their alter egos are deadly enemies.

At heart, Shakespearean comedy invokes the humour, the conflict between two opposite social groups, topsy-turvy elements in which society is flipped around, overreaching theme of love, the philosophy of life, discards that comedy is merely a figment of imagination, fanciful whim, laughter provoking thought. Tollywood films, “Gupi Bagha Phire Elo”, “Heerak Rjar Deshe” apparently seem comic in nature, foreground the conflicts, political turmoil, and discrimination in society, are interwoven in social milieu. Animation movie, “Spider Man” can't merely be depicted as a fancy, comic element, a merely entertainment tool of children, it foregrounds all the core traits of terrestrial phenomenon and explores the human psyche.

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