Fighting Separatism with Afropolitanism: A Reading of the Politics of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018)

Debaditya Mukhopadhyay

Abstract

Despite being a film about an imaginary community living in the utopic land of Wakanda, Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther* achieved a great success throughout the world. The way the film managed to strike a chord with black people of both African and African-American origin, appears interesting in particular, as it features a serious antagonism between characters representing these two groups as its main crisis. This article will offer a study of the film's politics for explaining how the film managed to find acceptance by tracing its similarities with the ideology of Afropolitanism. The study will explicate these ideas by way of a close reading of significant sections of the film and referring to the concept of Afropolitanism as well as the real-life conflicts between the Africans and African-Americans.

Keywords: black panther, african, african-american, antagonism, afropolitanism.

Contrary to popular belief, commercially successful films do not always stereotype the groups typically found in the margins for their gender, race, sexuality, etc. A number of recent superhero films belonging to the Marvel Cinematic Universe or M.C.U. certainly appear to be proper examples of the aforementioned category of commercially successful films. For instance, these films have presented female characters like the Black Widow, Captain Marvel, Wanda Maximoff, Gamora etc., who are anything but the passive, dumb, hypersexualized heroines that this particular genre of films had presented bluntly for decades. M.C.U. films of the third phase in particular seem to embody this subversive approach in a notable manner. Interestingly, even these subversions are mostly designed with the aim of winning acceptance by striking a chord with various progressive discourses. In the words of Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, a key concern of the Marvel Cinematic Universe has always been, "the development of teenaged and youthful characters that would fulfil a need for identificatory figures for young readers" (6). The large popularity of M.C.U. in general seems to owe a great deal to the inclusion of this identificatory concern and these subversive films are no exception because the subversive content they feature is nearly always designed with a target audience in mind. Hence, the use of powerful women characters in the third phase films like *Captain Marvel* (2019) ultimately turns out to be M.C.U.'s attempt to win popularity by producing a superhero film that is imbued with the progressive notion of women empowerment. which. In short, popularity of these subversive M.C.U. films depends mostly on roping in progressive notions that are bound to have a large acceptance.

Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), however, looks significantly different from this aforementioned trend of the third phase of M.C.U. The rave reviews from black people all over the world testify that the film did achieve acceptance in a pan-black community basis. This phenomenal response however, calls for critical attention, particularly because of the film's pitting of an African hero and an African-American villain against each other. Conflicts within the black community and the defeat of an individual who represents a significant section of the African-Americans form the very crux of the plot and yet it gets lauded by Africans as well as the African-Americans. To put it simply, instead of making an attempt to win over the black audience in general by adopting the safe choice of celebrating the heroic deeds of a single black superhero figure, the film chooses not to shy away from showing the conflicts between the black people of African and African-American origins and yet it manages to find an overwhelming response from nearly the entire community of black people across the world. This success makes it appear unique amongst the majority of subversive M.C.U. films because unlike superhero films featuring powerful women characters, Coogler's film does not seem to bank on a single progressive notion. Rather, its portrayal of an African-American as the antagonist makes it appear problematic to a significant extent and creates a need for critically analyzing its massive popularity amongst black people in general despite the presence of such problematic character portrayals. Besides, this film's superhero appears to be an important departure from the central characters of Black superhero films by other production houses. Prior to *Black Panther*, there was a trend of highlighting the presence of questionable features in Black superheroes. For instance, the superhero Hancock (played by the famous African American actor Will Smith), from a Black superhero film by Columbia pictures was shown to be a foul mouth and alcoholic. Presentation of T' Challa (known as Black Panther amongst people of Wakanda) in Coogler's film is clearly different from such portrayals.
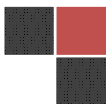
Critical assessments of the film so far have chiefly highlighted its portrayal of Agent Ross (played by Martin Freeman). As suggested in a review published in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Ross "holds the place of the majority of the film's white viewer" (Žižek) and the film's popularity is explained largely as a result of the assurance the covertly portrayed supremacy of Ross in the film which informs the white viewers that "It's okay to enjoy this fantasy of black supremacy, none of us is really threatened by this alternate universe!" (Žižek). Such observations are seconded by Julian Paul Merrill's article as well that finds Ross to be "representative of the big Other" (15). Only JacoBeyers's article focuses on the significance of the black characters to a greater extent and explains the film as an instance of an "ongoing attempt for establishing an authentic black identity" (1). Though Beyers makes an attempt to connect the film with the existing notions regarding black identity by tracing parallels between the film's plot and M.J.S. Massango's ideas (7), he does not explain the significance of the clash of the African hero T'Challa and the African-American antagonist Erik Killmonger, nor does he close read the film showing how exactly does the narrative reflect Massango's ideas, thereby generating a significant gap in the ongoing research on this film, which this article will attempt to further by addressing these aforesaid gaps.

The film makes it clear from the beginning that, its eponymous hero is a symbol of unity not an individual with exceptional and exclusive superpower. It is important to carefully examine the narrative offered as a prologue at the beginning of the film. It says that Wakanda used to be a place where five different tribes used to fight over the controlling position and the use of the alien material called Vibranium that had arrived there with a meteorite. This clash ended when a warrior-shaman got visited by the goddess Bast who instructed him to use the power of a heart-shaped herb that grew in Wakanda since the arrival of the meteorite and unify the fighting tribes by ruling as well as protecting them as the Black Panther (*Black Panther* 00:00:18-00:01:43).

Through this tale at its very beginning, the film shows its connection with the issue of tribalism in Africa. In fact, it tries to bust the faulty image of Africa as a homogeneous unit right at the beginning by mentioning its multiple and conflicting tribes. Such a portrayal of Africa as a homogeneous unit is intimately connected to the colonization of the Africans and therefore needed to be countered. In an article published in *The New Yorker* it is argued that the fictitious account of the birth and growth of Wakanda, is "no more or less imaginary than the Africa conjured by Hume or Trevor-Roper" (Cobb) but just like the Africa imagined by the Western people, Wakanda too has a larger purpose to serve. This article also mentions that Wakanda is a manifestation of "a redemptive counter-mythology" (Cobb). The film presents Africa as a land of various tribes by showing the colorful presence as well as ethnic uniqueness of each of the five communities that live around Wakanda but interestingly, it does not engage in endorsing tribalism and the separatism that it causes. As stated in an article on the ethnic identification in Africa: 'Ask an African "who she is," most people assume, and you will get an ethnic response: "I am a Yoruba," "I am a Kikuyu," "I am a Buganda."'" (Bannon). If the conjuring of an imaginary Africa was a serious problem for the Africa of pre-independence era, the separatism that immediately followed its independence, resisting the very idea of Africa as a single nation, was no less problematic. Charles G. Thomas analyses this post-independence crisis of Africa calling it a "social fracturing" caused by a severe lack of "historical or cultural connections to bind the state together" (729). The central myth of the warrior Black Panther in
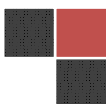
Coogler's film addresses this issue by celebrating the rise of an ideal African nation through the unification of the five divided communities.

Wakanda is such a developed and strong country, because under the leadership of the first Black Panther the five tribes agreed to create a nation that consisted of diverse ethnic groups and yet was not uncomfortable with moving en masse. The Black Panther is accepted by the tribes because the ritual of selecting Black Panthers does not create a hierarchy amongst the tribes. Though the succeeding generations of that Shaman warrior become Black Panthers, a scope for challenging these successors is always given. Besides, the royal family is never shown to be disrespectful or imposing when dealing with other tribes. The Jabari tribe did seclude itself from this union but the film shows that their objection is at the rejection of primitive traditions by Wakanda, not at the very concept of the unit of Wakanda itself. These five tribes of Wakanda basically represent the ethnic diversity of Africa and its varied response regarding the question of tradition. If Wakanda has Shuri, the technical genius who is always engaged in making things newer, then it also has M'Baku, the leader of this primitive tribe Jabari, who would rather stick to his animal skin outfit and pre-historic lifestyle but the most important thing is, they co-exist in Wakanda. This difference does not lead to the dismantling of Wakanda.

If the myth of Black Panther and Wakanda has a significant appeal for the Africans, its use of an African-America as an antagonist enables it to reach out to black people beyond Africa. The plot places a brief but crucial meeting of King T'Challa, the Black Panther with his brother N'Jobu in between the sequence of the prologue and the enthroning of T' Challa. The scene opening in Oakland, California 1992 has a significant connotation to it. According to an article in billboard, Coogler starts his film in Oakland for "making an important connection to Black Panther Party" (Penrose). A book on the Black Panther Party describes the founding of this group by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton as "a global revolution against American imperialism" (Bloom and Martin Jr. 2). To quote the book: "The Panthers saw black communities in the United States as a colony and the police as an occupying army" (Bloom and Martin Jr. 2). In their article, tracing the possible connection between this Marvel character and the Oakland based organization, Schulte and Frederick point out that the year Bobby and Huey founded the group, the character of the superhero "Black Panther was introduced as an exotic supporting character and a storytelling vehicle for the Fantastic Four in 1966." (2). According to them the Black Panther comics bore a number of ideals "consistent with cultural nationalism"(17) that was basically born out of "a desire to reconnect with Africa and create agency and a culture separate from Western norms" (2).

The director of the film in discussion, originating from Oakland seems to have consciously given the Oakland reference for rising above the limitations of the Black Panther comics and beginning a dialogue between Wakanda, a utopic unit that resulted from union of the tribes in Africa with the African-Americans who were certainly living in a dystopic situation in the 1960s. N' Jobu's reliance on the possession of arms is quite akin to what the Black Panthers of the 60s did and it is through him that the film states an important issue, was it right for Wakanda to simply ignore the plight of the black people outside? N'Jobu dreamt of bringing the world together, beginning a peaceful reign all over, just like it was in Wakanda. He wanted Wakanda to be the initiator of this procedure and for that he wanted Wakanda to be a conqueror. As the film proceeds, this very desire that was first mentioned by N'Jobu and thwarted by T'Chaka, comes back to
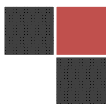
hunt and haunt Wakanda and its new king T'Chala through the figure of Erik Killmonger, who is none other than N'Jobu's son N'Jadaka. Erik, through his twisted scheme accomplishes several things at once and soon he manages to win support in Wakanda and challenge T'Chala for the throne.

The origin of Erik makes him a justified avenger and his hatred of the colonizers, as shown in the scene at the Museum of Great Britain where pointing at showcases filled with African artifacts he asks with sarcasm whether the white Curator thought that the British collected these artifacts only after paying a "fair price" (00:16:37-00:16:42) all make him a man fighting for a proper cause. In fact, the moment he gets engaged in a combat with T'Chaka, one finds it difficult to decide whether to support T'Chaka or Erik. The antagonism between the two initially should have come as a complex element for the black audience as beginning with the image of a hero who unites; the film gradually seems to show that this hero unites by erasing. At least such is the case of Erik. Despite Erik's Royal lineage, T'Chaka his own uncle decided to leave him alone in Oakland after orphaning him. He ensured the prosperity of Wakanda at the expense of the suffering of a child who was absolutely innocent. T'Chaka's wish to take N'Jobu back before having to kill him makes the case even more problematic as it seems for T'Chaka, Erik did not matter at all just because he was an African-American. Similarly, the present rulers of Wakanda are shown to follow this policy of exclusion. When Nakia, the scientist sister of King T'Challa insists that Wakanda should share its resources telling him how other resourceful countries always help the world and to what extent Wakanda can help the world even better than these nations due to its incredible technological excellence, he replies that Wakanda should remain hidden to the world because the moment the other nations find out the treasures of Wakanda, the Wakandans will lose their hassle-free life. Similarly, W'Kabi (played by Daniel Kaluuya), who eventually supports Erik too says that the moment people of other countries are allowed to enter Wakanda, their beautiful nation will become just like other struggling countries. Rather according to W'Kabi, Wakanda should use its powers to set things in the right order by conquering the world which is exactly what N'Jobu and Erik wanted.

Plot elements like these make the film a really significant portrayal of some vital and nuanced debates about the future of African-American liberation. Arguments of W'Kabi, N'Jobu or Erik in favor of conquering the world seem to reflect problematic elements of Pan-African ideology. P. Olisanwuche Esedebe defined Pan-Africanism as: "a political and cultural phenomenon that regards Africa, Africans, and African descendants abroad as a unit" (5) and adds that this movement "seeks to regenerate and unify Africa and promote a feeling of oneness among the people of the African world" (5) by glorifying "the African past" as well as "African values" (5). This apparently acceptable discourse gradually became problematic as it attempted to produce strategies that were none other than imitations of Eurocentrism that insisted that the ultimate goal of Africa should be to prepare for becoming the ruler of the World just like Europe and that is reflected in the words of certain characters of this film. Tunde Adeleke points out:

> A critical look at the crucial nineteenth century will illuminate the contradictions within black American nationalist and Pan-African thought. While black diasporans espoused Pan-African ideals and expressed a desire to identify with Africans, their activities betrayed their cultural alienation from Africa. Their expression of cultural identity was unambiguously Eurocentric they opted to shape Africa according to the images of Europeans. (511)

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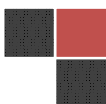
Immediately after becoming the King of Wakanda by defeating T'Challa, Erik orders that Vibranium must be exported outside in order to give black people all over the world weapons for overthrowing white rulers and he adds that he will be paying the white people back by their own coins in order to establish the Wakandan Empire, which just like the proverbial British Empire would never have the Sun setting on it. Such words clearly indicate what exactly was wrong with the aggressive ideals of Pan-Africanism and by showing these; the film concretizes the otherwise abstract critiques of Pan-Africanism in an impactful manner.

The subtlety of the film's plot is further shown by subsequent scenes that save the film from being an over-simplified narrative that finds easy resolution by vilifying an aggressive African-American rebel and glorifying the true-blue African hero as a patriot. Instead of such oversimplifications, the film shows T'Challa criticizing his father and all the ancestors severely for abandoning Erik and keeping the door of Wakanda bolted shut for all the African-Americans out there during a dream sequence which is also the meeting of their souls. T'Challa asks T'Chaka why he refused to bring the orphaned Erik to Wakanda and in reply T' Chaka confesses that Erik was like a dreadful truth about the selfishness of Wakanda that he decided to omit which enrages T'Challa and he shouts criticizing his father and other ancestors' faulty policies of separatism. This powerful exchange of opinions shows that this film was far from supporting the exclusionist policies that Wakanda used to rely on for sustaining its utopic setup. The last speech of defeated Erik too criticizes the decision of denying of the due support to African-Americans by Africans. Erik refuses to be saved by T'Challa and while explaining his choosing of death over a life as a prisoner comments that he would like to be buried deep inside the ocean instead because he wants to be engraved with all of his African ancestors who had chosen death by committing suicide amidst the sea over slavery during their forced migration to the worlds of the white men. The film uses a very subtle politics while resolving the crisis and showing the fall of Erik, it casts him as an African-American rebel who wanted to do a wrong thing for a right reason. He had become a killing-machine that runs its course by killing mercilessly. In the film his killing of Linda who loved him beyond everything shows his misdirected nature but at the same time, his grudge against Wakanda was a justifiable one.

The strained relationship between Africans and the African-Americans in the film is certainly not an imaginary one. In their write-up in the *Washington Post*, it is argued that: "A big part of this film is the relationship between Africans and African Americans, and it's probably the most complicated relationship in the film." (Attiah), to which Larry Madowo is quoted to suggest that: "in creating 'Black Panther,' Africans and African Americans came together to create art that black people around the world are proud of. But in everyday life, there is no such unity. I think it's a vision for what can be possible when the two groups work together" (Attiah).

The film therefore uses a plot that can be described as a filmed version of a crucial debate about the ideal way for connecting the Africans with the African-Americans. By showing the faults on both sides without taking sides, the film manages to raise a fellow-feeling amongst its black audience. It poses as a narrative of healing instead of a narrative of blaming. It would have been quite unfortunate if such a nuanced narrative had stopped at being just a narrative that shows how black people across the world can connect with each other as it would have created a binarism of us and them between these blacks and the rest of the world. The ending of the film takes care of even
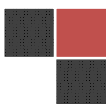
this by showing T'Challa initiating an outreach program and announcing the same to the world saying that Wakanda will no more remain detached from the problems of the world. Instead, they will treat people across the world as brothers of one single tribe because they have realized that the entire world is threatened by divisions and in this moment of crisis it would be foolish to create barriers instead of building bridges.

Analyses of the above mentioned scenes of the film indicates that the film's politics is based on countering the separatism based on ethnic differences in the world through a cosmopolitanist ideology which interestingly has something essentially African about it. T'Challa can confidently suggest the world to start thinking everyone as one single tribe because his Wakandan experience of seeing five tribes co-existing and getting stronger everyday, which in reality is basically an idealized version of the unity Africans are attempting grow. Such ideals enable him to have faith in embracing the foreign as one's own. This cosmopolitanism, which has its base in the unique experience of the African people is called Afropolitanism by Achile Mbembe. In his seminal essay Mbembe defines Afropolitanism as:

> Awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness, and remoteness, the ability to recognise one's face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites. (28)

From the discussion above, the connection between the ideology of Coogler's film and Mbembe's ideal of Afropolitanism becomes clear. When T'Challa addresses not just the black people but people of all races as his brothers, he literally embraces their foreignness which is what Mbembe's notion of Afropolitanism is all about. Although the film is definitely not just a literalization of Mbembe's ideals, its global appeal is intimately linked to this politics of countering separatism that has the resonances of Mbembe's words to a notable extent. Such an impressive sub-text empowers the film with a remarkable potential for furthering the existing research on the representations of Black people in popular Superhero films. Offering a comprehensive study of the Black superhero films released until 2014, Tyree and Jacobs identified the Black superheroes' fight against "their longstanding archenemies," that is, "White men," (20) to be the key feature of this sub-genre of superhero films. By representing the Black people's struggle with White men and their unresolved separatist issues with equal importance, *Black Panther* creates a notable scope for further studies about the superhero films in general and Black superhero films in particular.

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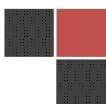
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