

## Race and Borders in Marvel Studios' *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*

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**Abstract:** Though Marvel Studios sets its movies in the USA, the themes discussed are universal with great relevance in the contemporary age. Race, boundaries, stereotypes, politics and patriotism have always been important topics for academic discussions. However, the narratives around these topics usually spark controversy. Marvel Studios makes the discussion of such issues under the guise of entertainment palatable and educational for the masses, especially in the recent releases. This article is structured thematically, and a socio-psychological framework is used to analyse the mentioned themes in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (April 2021). In the process, the article probes into how some of the characters in the series develop their self-concept through their interactions with others and the world around them. Additionally, it explores how these ideologies reflect society through the medium of a web series using the seven functions of bardic television as delineated by John Fiske and John Hartley.

**Keywords:** Marvel Studios, media, racism, thematic analysis, semiotics, web series

### INTRODUCTION

Though the films by Marvel Studios are set in the United States of America, the themes discussed are universal. Moreover, the events of 9/11 drastically changed the mainstream cinema in the decade that followed (Gruenewald 2018; Kilgore 2017). Marvel Studios found a way of addressing the trauma of the real world by associating them with fictional alien invasions and “linking it to the more optimistic romance of salvation by superheroes. Through the super-invasion genre, popular filmmakers solved the challenge of mounting spectacles resembling the 9/11 disaster while avoiding direct reference to its painful reality” (Kilgore 2017, 160). Since then, Marvel Studios has

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consciously tried to represent real-world problems explicitly or implicitly through their characters or plot.

In the present era, they have attempted to voice the issues people from different ethnicities face. However, the representation of different ethnicities in popular fiction is always under scrutiny. Marvel Studios has faced criticism for their portrayals of their female characters or characters from other ethnicities. However, Marvel continues to question popular notions. They create entertaining and educational stories through their movies or web series. Marvel deliberately touches upon many socio-political issues. Their web series, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (April 2021), is no different. The creator, Malcolm Spellman, and the director, Kari Skogland, have adapted two Marvel Comic characters, the Falcon and the Winter Soldier, into a six-episode web series. The plot of the series revolves around the characters of The Falcon (Sam Wilson) and The Winter Soldier (James ‘Bucky’ Barnes) as they try to resolve the conflict between the Flag Smashers and the Global Repatriation Council (GRC). In addition to this fight, some characters also fight an internal war, leading to their self-discovery. Racism, stereotypes, helplessness, and divisive power politics are among the many themes this series addresses. Social psychologists analyse similar themes in their research. This article adds to the existing discourse by taking a socio-psychological approach to study how these themes and ideologies are represented in the show. Additionally, it analyses the medium of the web series using the concept of “bardic television” by John Fiske and John Hartley.

#### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Social psychology is a field that studies individuals and their relations with society. It focuses on “what people think, what they feel, and what they do - the latter includes physical movements, but also what people say and how they say it” (Hogg and Vaughan 2010, 2). This article looks at patriotism, race, stereotypes, helplessness and self-concept through a social psychological lens. Though enacted by individuals, these concepts are an intricate part of society as a whole. These social concepts directly affect individual psyche and self-concept, thus making them the focus of this study.

These social concepts are also looked at through what John Fiske and John Hartley call the “bardic television.” They suggest that television performs seven functions in a modern society that the bard performed in a traditional society. These functions aim: To explain the

main lines of setting up a social agreement, involve individual members of the culture into its dominant value systems, explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture's representatives, assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies/mythologies. The functions also aim to expose any practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself, convince the audience that the culture guarantees their status and identity as individuals and to transmit a sense of cultural membership (Fiske 1990, 75). These functions are performed by all television messages, as noted by Fiske and Hartley (Fiske 1990). They are appropriately performed by broadcast codes in a mass society and by restricted codes in a subculture or a local community.

### POLITICS AND BOUNDARIES

*Avengers: Infinity War*, released in 2018, witnessed the character Thanos causing 'the Blip' that resulted in the disappearance of half the World's population. After a few years of mourning, people come to terms with their loss. Gradually, the walls around nations came down. People even migrated and settled in their new homes as the borders were blurred. However, the Blip got reversed after five years in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), bringing back those who disappeared. The sudden return echoed worldwide chaos, and The Global Repatriation Council (GRC), representing different nations, was formed to help control the situation. However, all of their decisions were not accepted, especially by a rebel group, the Flag Smashers, which aimed for a world without borders.

The idea of boundaries encompassing countries is an overarching one in this series. When the lost population returns after the reversal of the Blip, the existing migrants are labelled as refugees, and rounded into camps set to be transported back to their countries of origin under the Patch Act of the GRC. The re-establishment of boundaries is vehemently opposed by The Flag Smashers, a movement led by Karli that gains fast and widespread support. In a discussion with her followers, Karli makes a striking statement, "How many times do we have to pay with our lives just to be citizens of this goddamn planet" (Episode 5). Sam draws attention to this argument when he speaks to the GRC members (Episode 6), for he asserts that there is a strong reason for such a movement to gain its support. When the GRC takes its decision, it does not consider the enormous arching consequences on most of the population. The Flag Smasher's ideology of "one world

one people” resonates with Arjun Appadurai’s conception of the “locality,” which moves away from the traditional ideas of bounded territories to encompass a more inclusive vision of “lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world.” His ideal welcomes a more fluid sense of group identity rather than a “tightly territorialised” or “spatially bounded” one (Appadurai 2005, 198; 48).

Unfortunately, politics in this post-truth era involves a lot of dissonances. What the authorities are expected to do and what they claim to do are at odds with reality. The leaders and their political agendas are displayed as catering to the benefit of the people, whether it is formulating the GRC to help people find their homes and resources or the government experimenting with the super-soldier serum. What they portray as truth to the public is manipulated facts mixed with subjective emotions. People take what they are given as the truth and remain blind to the numerous cover-ups. In his commentary, Steve Tesich (1992) urges people to look clearly at the consequences of conforming to political manipulations. In the series, the GRC advertises itself as a group that helps “you find your way... back into your homes and jobs,” which helps “you navigate changes to society, laws, and borders,” and “get back to the way things were” (Episode 3). However, they are “helping” a limited population; and at the cost of others who are forced to relocate without enough facilities. The crowd is also kept diverted by other issues like John Walker being embellished as the new Captain America.

## PATRIOTISM AND REPRESENTATION

The idea of a nation is primarily seen as either of two main strands of thought: modern and primordial. The former considers a nation to be socially constructed. At the same time, the latter understands the nation to be constituted by ethnic groups that occupied the territory before the conception of the nation. The creation of national identity results in drawing up boundaries of inclusion and exclusion based on “cultural, linguistic, historic, or even racial elements” (Rembold and Carrier 2011, 363). Consequently, this process also creates an “other” that falls outside the gambit of this national identity (Smith 1996, 107). The idea of patriotism and concepts such as the “other” is prevalent in the series. Isaiah Bradley’s sacrifice and pain for the country were wholly forgotten and “erased” because of the colour of his skin (Episode 5). Like Steve Rogers, he too was given the super-soldier serum while enlisted in the US Army. He lived the life of a soldier and saved many

lives. However, he did not fit into the framework created by his society to be called a superhero, and certainly not that of Captain America.

The notion of Captain America is celebrated as a social symbol. A social representation is a collective elaboration “of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating” (Moscovici 1963, 251). Further research adds that “[t]he elaborated object becomes social reality by virtue of the object’s representation which the community holds” (Wagner et al. 2002, 96). The title of Captain America represents wisdom, honour, courage, kindness, and empathy. If there ever is another Captain America, he needs to have the qualities Steve Rogers possessed, for he held people’s hearts for years. However, for some others, it is a gross understatement of his appearance, that is, of blonde hair and blue eyes.

Isaiah turned bitter as he felt betrayed by his country and repressed for his colour. He tells Sam, “they will never let a Black man be Captain America ... no self-respecting Black man will ever want to become that symbol” (Episode 5). But Sam Wilson challenges these notions and becomes the first Black Captain America. He counters all the judgement and stares by proving what the symbol actually stands for. He says, “I’m still here. No super serum, no blond hair, or blue eyes. The only power I have is that I believe we can do better” (Episode 6). He reminds everybody what Steve Rogers stood for and what the symbol of Captain America truly represents. He also affirms his love for his country when he states, “[w]e built this country, bled for it. I’m not gonna let anyone tell me I can’t fight for it [*sic*]” (Episode 6).

## STEREOTYPES AND RACE

Stereotypes are oversimplified generalisations held about others. These stereotypes could be based on someone’s race, age, nationality, and other such factors. This series represents both positive and negative stereotypes. John Walker was officially made Captain America, reinforcing the notion that Captain America must have “blonde hair and blue eyes.” However, Walker stains the symbol with his attitude and actions. This is an example of the consequences of partial positive stereotypes, wherein a person is preferred because he fits into the stereotyped notion. On the other hand, there are many examples of negative stereotyping. When Sam and Bucky have a verbal argument on the street, the police interfere. In this scene, it is notable that both policemen are white. One of them belittles Sam by asking him to show

proof of his identity. He asks Bucky, who is white, if he is alright and if Sam is “bothering” him. The first officer calms down only when the other police officer interjects by recognising them as the Avengers.

Additionally, the Flag Smashers are termed “terrorists” without understanding their motives and arguments. They are looked at as inconsequential rebels led by violent and shallow teenagers. When the GRC continues to refer to Karli and others as terrorists, Sam questions them, “Your peacekeeping troops carrying weapons are forcing millions of people into settlements around the world, right? What do you think those people are gonna call you? These labels, ‘terrorists,’ ‘refugees,’ ‘thugs,’ they’re often used to get around the question, why?” (Episode 6) Presuming Sam’s inability to understand the depth of the situation, the senator reiterates the authority of the diplomats, which further widens the gap between the government and the governed. Knowing that the officials would hold on to this attitude, Karli takes a violent approach. Moreover, she also views Sam as an agent of the government and hence unsympathetic to her cause, and consequently, herself. When Sam tries to reason with her, she questions him continuously for serving those who do not care about him or those like him.

Race is commonly understood as categorising people according to the colour of their skin, places of origin, and physical characteristics. Discrimination based on race happens when one race considers itself superior to others and fosters a competitive attitude. Ridley shows prejudice can lead to racist behaviour. He adds that prejudice may or may not lead to racism. Hence, it is the outcome that determines racist behaviour and not prejudice in itself. In the United States, people fall into a racial social hierarchy, with whites at the top as the dominant group, and people of colour (Kirkinis 2021, 2) and other nationalities at the bottom. Because of the violent past, racism was and continues to be a sensitive topic. Isaiah Bradley was imprisoned and experimented on because he was Black. He was made to feel that his life mattered less, and letting himself be tested was a way to make a noteworthy contribution. Additionally, racism seems to be embedded so firmly through implicit teachings, that it is seen even amongst people of the same race. When a young Black boy recognises Sam walking past him, he calls him the “Black Falcon.” When Sam says, “It’s just Falcon,” the child replies, “No, no. My daddy told me it’s Black Falcon.” Sam laughs and asks, “Is it because I’m Black and I’m the Falcon?” The boy agrees, to which Sam asks sarcastically, “So are you, like, Black

kid?" (Episode 2) This scene, though simple, is powerful because it is clear that the notion of racism, in some cases, is not learnt through personal experiences but transferred through generations.

### HELPLESSNESS AND REBELLION

When people accept that they cannot contribute to a situation that is out of their control, they tend to accept their helplessness. Learned helplessness in humans is associated with those unable to adapt, react or respond (Hiroto and Seligman 1975). Sarah Wilson, Sam's sister, feels helpless as a single Black mother with regard to her family business. When Sam tries for a loan, the bank denies their request due to their race, and her feelings intensify. Karli feels helpless when her mother figure, Donya, dies of pneumonia due to their horrible living conditions. Despite being a super-soldier with enhanced abilities, she cannot do anything for her loved ones in that situation. Even Isaiah Bradley, the erstwhile super-soldier, accepts his helplessness when imprisoned and declared dead to the public, and his enhanced strengths are experimented upon. Unable to comprehend his situation at first, he finally gives in and complies with the same. Even after he comes out, he chooses to live in isolation while continuing to keep his 'dead' status because there was nothing he could have done otherwise. Even in these situations, however, helplessness cannot be generalised without considering various parameters, including interdependence and depression (Peterson 1991).

When people are tired of unjust restraints, they rebel. Over the centuries, people have revolted against discrimination based on class and racism. Unfortunately, even in today's world, people continue to face such unfair treatment. Sarah is tired of her partial treatment for being a Black single mother. Fortunately, she has her brother and sons to help her with her circumstances. While this does not change her feelings towards those who treat her wrongly, she does not feel absolutely helpless as she receives help. On the other hand, Isaiah gives in and accepts his situation. He isolates himself in his own house and does not talk to anybody except his grandson. It is only when Sam gets Isaiah marked in history through a monument at the museum that he feels like a person again, one whose past gives meaning to his present. This depicts the role of others in an individual's psychological wellbeing. At a social level, when a group starts to feel tired of being helpless in the face of injustice, movements are initiated; and if that does not work, people resort to violence. The Flag Smashers are a

group of young people tired of waiting for help. They are also rebelling against the fact that only a few get to make decisions for the many.

### SELF-CONCEPT AND IDENTITY

Knowing one's identity and self-concept pillars the thoughts and behaviours of everyday life. Michael Hogg and Graham Vaughan (2010, 64) state that "knowing who you allow you to know what you should think and do, and knowing who others are allows you to predict what they think and what they do." When Sam meets Karli to reason with her, he also tells her she was called "a supremacist." Shocked at such a statement, she responds, "Everything I do is to end supremacy. These corporations and the beasts who run them, they are the supremacists" (Episode 4). Karli developed her self-concept based on her experiences, and she believes she is in the right as she is helping the needy. Understanding that self-concept keeps developing and changing with different experiences is essential.

One character who develops his sense of self over the series is Sam. He comes a long way from who he was at the beginning of the series. Grappling with insecurity, self-doubt and the burdensome legacy the shield symbolises, Sam hands the shield to the US government for safekeeping. His shock and disgruntlement at John Walker being made the new Captain America is echoed by Bucky, who unhesitatingly vocalises Sam's inner feelings regarding the shield. Steve himself had given the shield to Sam, the act symbolising his retirement from the superhero life and projecting Sam as his protege and successor. Sam takes the duration of the series and the various events within to realise that despite his race and the way others perceive his identity, or rather, precisely because of those reasons, he is capable of representing the ideals of the shield in accordance with the times that he is living in. The contrast between Sam and John's interactions with Karli shows how Sam is much more suited to be the empathetic hero envisioning a progressive world. His willingness to work with the shield and adorn a superhero suit modelled with the stars and stripes motif reminiscent of the American flag shows him embracing the Captain America title as his own. The final rescue sequence in the last episode shows a segment wherein an onlooker calls him "The Black Falcon," to which another person responds by saying, "nah, [*sic*] that's Captain America" (Episode 6), thereby solidifying his presentation of that aspect of his identity.



## THE SEVEN FUNCTIONS OF BARDIC TELEVISION AND SEMIOTICS

Steve Rogers chose an 'ordinary' life after returning the infinity stones out of his personal decision. The world needed a hero to replace him, especially during the times of chaos they were in. The fact that Steve handed over the shield to Sam meant that he approved of someone like Sam to be the one carrying forward his legacy. Steve Rogers was worthy, as he even wielded the *Mjolnir* (Thor's hammer). Similarly, the way Sam tries to negotiate with Karli and the Flag Smashers, and how he tries to bridge the gap between the real-world idea of the Flag Smashers and members of the GRC, proves that he is everything Steve's successor should be.

When John Walker was officially appointed as the new Captain America, he was selected not just because of his quality service in the defence sector but also because of his looks. On the other hand, even though Isaiah successfully withstood the super-soldier serum, he was turned into an 'object' of the laboratory experiments under the government rules. Though the series points its fingers towards such discrimination, it is worthwhile to note what the series did is in the name of the American government. This situation involves an individual like Walker, who typifies the stereotypical white American, being brought into its value system to protect the American values under the guise of Captain America. This complies with the second function of broadcast codes. During the time of a world war, the very need of Captain America was solely to defend the territory. However, the need for a Captain America in the present times is to uphold the values of the territory more than to defend it. Assuming the government is a representative of American culture, the very act of choosing John Walker as a new Captain America thus becomes a way to explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture's representatives. The explanation, interpretation, and justification come under the third function of broadcast codes.

When Sam and Bucky argued in front of Isaiah's house, the police officers were keen on knowing whether Sam was bothering Bucky. However, being a white man, Bucky did not face any such suspicions from the white police officers. While Sam was called the "Black Falcon," Karli and the Flag Smashers were addressed as terrorists. Such scenarios aired by the series, in turn, denote the sixth and seventh function of broadcast codes. Nevertheless, it remains a question of how a sense of cultural membership is transferred to the audience through

such dialogues. It is imperative to note here that the series does not ascertain anything. It simply features such scenes, leaving the interpretation to its audience. The sixth function of broadcast comes into play as the series tries to convince the audience that the culture guarantees their status and identity as individuals.

Finally, it is the function of broadcast codes to assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world. It also functions to expose any practical inadequacies in the cultural sense of itself resulting from changed conditions in the world. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, thus, on the one hand, try to show the dominance of white people throughout the series. On the other hand, it challenges and questions this white dominance by pointing out the obvious discriminations. The discriminations, thereby, become the inadequacies faced by American culture, and this series exposes them as it resulted from the changed conditions of the world.

## CONCLUSION

It is axiomatic that people have been sharing their experiences and learnings through stories. Today, there are also many academic discussions on stories related to race and boundaries. Though the narrative seems to have evolved over time, the fact remains that such discussions continue to be sensitive. The way Marvel Studios reaches out to the masses about sensitive topics is very palatable. Marvel has a wide audience across the globe as its stories are made of not just science fiction and superheroes, but it takes inspiration from the real world. By creating *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, Marvel Studios plays an important role in creating awareness about the current issues. This article attempts to add to the existing discourse by showing how such conversations bring out intuitive knowledge about people and the society they form. Social psychological analysis helps in understanding the intrapersonal, interpersonal, positional, and ideological levels of a situation. Karli, Isaiah, and Sam struggle against racism. Their individual struggles vary according to where they stand in life. Karli decides to take a violent approach to be heard. Isaiah is too tired to continue his fight, so he gives up. Sam learns to hear them all, and understand the situation in its totality. He learns that “we can’t demand that people step up if we don’t meet them halfway” (Episode 6). Sam develops as an individual and takes a step towards creating a better world. The concept of “bardic television” adds to the analysis of how the series is in accordance with its seven functions in modern society.

Adherence to those functions thereby proves that the series tried to impart the ideas it shared effectively with its intended audience. As this article is limited only to the themes that explore race and borders, it does not look at the other aspects; for instance, it portrays the effects of trauma on soldiers and issues of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental health, which is another crucial area to be explored.

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