

Why is a fat, grieving superhero funny?

SARAH ANJUM BARI

This article contains spoilers about the movie- Avengers: Endgame

As far as grand finales go, *Avengers: Endgame*—the curtain call on this batch of the Marvel cinematic saga—gets a lot of things right. There are the greatest hits flashbacks for one, courtesy of the time travel-driven plot, which lets a nostalgic audience revisit pivotal moments from the past *Avengers* movies. There are moments of sheer exhilaration—Captain America finally picking up Thor’s hammer and Captain Marvel not even flinching at a headbutt from the mighty Thanos. And there’s the controlled pacing of the screenplay—a dialogue-driven, subdued first half serving as a build up to the final battle (or aftermath to the previous one from *Infinity War*, whichever way you look at it), coupled with impeccably timed action—the way nearly all of the cinematic universe drops in and assembles for war in a Battle of Hogwarts fashion, for instance. The plot ties up loose threads from past movies (we finally know why Dr. Strange handed over the Time Stone to Thanos in *Infinity War*, and watch as Captain America finally keeps his promise to go dancing with his lost love Peggy Carter), yet it’s simple enough that we can make sense of it amidst all



avengers 2

Even Thanos feels and wears loss. He takes a moment to mourn the destruction of his entire army, an entire alien race.

theatrics. You have all of that—humour, adventure, surprises both exciting and heartbreaking—and then you have a grieving Thor in a fat suit, with a bulging beer belly, a clear target of the audience and his friends’ ridicule.

The issue isn’t that Thor is fat. If anything, it was refreshing to watch an action-packed superhero movie address the aftermath of trauma, and to witness these heroes wading through their grief in real, unglamorous ways. Having lost their friends and families to Thanos’ genocide, the Avengers’ pain appears in ways beyond typical superhero rage.

Bruce Banner finds the opposite of rage as he learns to coexist with his green friend in the same body. You see the hulking green figure, but the angry scowl and tension in the muscles are absent. He’s powerful but visibly more at peace, and so he looks more like both Bruce and the Hulk. Tony Stark (Iron Man), stranded

in space for over 20 days and drowning in guilt over losing young Peter (Spider-man), arrives at the stage skin sagging, pale and thin as bones. His resentment, his absolute unwillingness to rejoin the Avenger life feels as real as Natasha (Black Widow)’s inability to let the fight go. Her face, too, is marked by misery lines; her blond hair is showing roots, almost unkempt.

Even Thanos feels and wears loss. We first see him in *Endgame* in a dirt-smudged garb, half of him burned from the impact of the infinity stones. He barely puts up a fight when Thor chops his head off, having fulfilled his cosmic duty. Later towards the end, just before he withers away, Thanos sits down in silence, just like he had after wiping out half the human population in *Infinity War*. He was victorious then, but now he takes a moment to mourn the destruction of his entire army, an entire alien race.

The movie thus does a remarkable job of highlighting both the physical transformations caused by grief, and the ability of loss to touch even the mightiest. The scope for empathy is right there; whether we reflect on it, whether we choose to feel it not just for heroes but also the less righteous and familiar, is up to us.

Amidst all this, it was a brilliant choice to show Thor as the one hit hardest emotionally. “It’s like his muscles are made of kryptonite fibres,” Gamora says of Thor in *Infinity War*. That this Norse god—commander of thunder, wickedly handsome, and the most superhuman of them all (before Captain Marvel comes along)—

can struggle with trauma, succumb to binge-eating and drinking, bulge out of his perfect body, and be privy to surprise crying jags: it certainly sends an important message about body image and the inevitability of mental health issues for many. Instead of offering a nuanced or honestly even halfway responsible portrayal of PTSD, however, *Endgame* literally makes a joke out of it.

The camera zooms on his pot belly as Thor first enters the scene after the five-year time leap. The others struggle to keep a straight face as they take in his size, because getting fat from grief is somehow funnier than getting thin and losing one’s highlights. Also, now that he’s of a larger physique, he must by default be cheerful in his misery. When he pulls Rocket in for a happy reunion hug, the latter is grossed out about the prospect of getting in contact with his wobbly belly. Scene after scene, we’re all but ordered by the screenplay to laugh at the idea of a fat Thor.

But it goes even beyond fat-shaming. Over the remainder of the movie, we watch as Thor struggles to rise to action, particularly when he’s forced to step into his destroyed former home and meet his dead mother in another time. Hilarious, isn’t it, that the encounter should bring him to tears? Funnier even that he has to take a break from the mission and run away to regain control over his emotions. The solution to the problem? Rocket thwacks him across the face and orders him to essentially suck it up, because he isn’t the only one who has lost loved ones. Apparently, this is a reminder that

couldn’t have been delivered without an outburst of irritation.

The one thing the movie does right, however, is to keep Thor in this shape. He joins the fight as his overweight self, unresolved rage and guilt packed in. But at no point does it stall his ability to kick some serious intergalactic ass. By the time he gets busy pulling his weight in the war, his flabby physique is no longer relevant. You practically forget that he ever even became unfit.

The hype following *Endgame*’s release these past weeks has been proof of just how massive a following the *Avengers* franchise commands. People disabled Facebook accounts to avoid spoilers, jumped through water fountains and theatre porch steps in mammoth throngs, and queued in line from 5 am to catch the first show just in Dhaka. Worldwide, the movie has made USD 282 million and counting. *Avengers* fans, therefore, aren’t just many. They’re also passionate and committed and incredibly emotional about what the movies put before them. This makes the franchise all the more answerable for the messages it conveys to its cult following, particularly with as sensitive an issue as PTSD and body image. As a devout *Avenger* fan myself, I haven’t stopped raving about the wild ride it took me through over its three long hours. But within my tear-soaked, awestruck goodbye to my favourite superheroes lay a hint of disappointment.

The writer can be reached at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com