



Gender Presentation in Marvel and DC Comics

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ABSTRACT

From short comic strips in newspaper, to graphic novels, comic books have come a long way. But comic writers and graphic novelists have been intentionally drawing superheroines smaller and less muscular so as to maintain a sort of femininity of these women. These artists are said to ‘capitalise on the eroticization of the body’ as well as ‘visually emphasizing both on their musculature and gender differences. These female characters are not only drawn as feminine but are given the heteronormative roles. Throughout these comics male superheroes are deified, the female characters are reduced by the gaze to mere objects in short clothes.

Key words: comics, masculinity, femininity, gender stereotypes

From short comic strips in newspaper, to graphic novels, comic books have come a long way. Superhero comics, popularized in the 1940’s with the Superman comics that were published to lift the morale of the people going through the rough times of the Second World War, paved the way for comics and comic books to become an integral part of the popular culture. They have been a source of entertainment and fantasy for readers from seemingly times immemorial. Superhero comics, since then, have gained popularity and spawned graphic novels, television series and movie franchises that have dominated pop culture. Take, for example, the Avengers series or the Dark Knight trilogy that have been cinematic superpowers and box-office blockbusters over the last decade. The scale is more impressive as these movies are still being considered as Phase One and Two of the Multiple Comic Universe (MCUs).

Despite this success, comic books have also come under great scrutiny; one of the biggest controversies that have ever surrounded comic books began as early as the 1950s. Dr. Frederic Wertham, in his books *Seduction of the Innocent*, talked about the graphic depiction of sex and violence built into the comics of the 1950s. This was then attributed as one of the primary causes for the rising population of juvenile delinquents in America. As a result, the Comics Magazine Association of America was formed to fend off any pressure that could be applied to the comic book industry by the U.S. Senate in the name of juvenile delinquency.

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musculature and gender differences. This super sexuality has been created based on the binaries that already exist in the society. (Taylor, 2007 345). These female characters are not only drawn as feminine but are given the heteronormative roles. They are always shown as more comparable to normal women and therefore the alter-ego of female characters had very normative lives. Now these female characters are hypersexualised with a greater emphasis on their breasts, flowing hair and buttocks (Wright 2001). Female characters, as powerful as they may be, still had to suffer sexual advances from their bosses as Wonder Woman, or Diana Prince her alter ego, have endured or have children and retire for motherhood like Black Canary.

Women are shown as slight and slender because it's considered unfeminine when female characters have any visible muscle on their body. These muscles are not drawn because they make the women appear ugly and women, as a spectacle, is more a visual pleasure than most of the male characters. This establishes that the gaze of the reader is a heterosexual male gaze (Avery-Natale, 77) which makes the female character an object, thus objectifying her. Throughout these comics male superheroes are deified, the female characters are reduced by the gaze to mere objects in short clothes. The female superheroes are categorised as either, their alter ego who is a submissive woman, or the hero who is out saving the world. Their two alternative worlds never meet, never completing the woman, always leaving one half out, as the two sides to these superheroes are completely different from each other. Their roles as women are performances that these female superheroes are to carry out to remain a part of the society.

The hegemonic masculinity exists in comic books through the male's super identity and their secret identity. This hegemonic figure is imposed on the readers due to the fantastical representation of these male bodies. These male bodies thus become product of male fantasy, a fantasy as the alpha male or the epitome of manhood or the American macho as Klein called it in his work. (Avery-Natale, 95)

These male superheroes become physically unattainable male ideals for the male readers. But these ideals are fictional in nature and are extremely out of reach. These images of male superheroes are a positive ego ideal for these men (Harvey 1983, 319). So, young readers fantasize about both, the female and the male body, both unattainable to these readers in the forms presented to them. The artists draw out these characters to play out or rather perform the ultimate heterosexual male fantasy by presenting perfectly gendered bodies, which have concretised an image of what gendered bodies are like and thus etching roles to be played out and ideals to reach. This way, the male readers cannot accept fully covered female heroes, and raise questions when artists like Meredith Finch produce Wonder Woman in full armour, which is stylistically more of a warrior outfit, which her character needs.

The DC Universe revamp, which was named the New 52, attempted to attract the attention of a new generation of readers. However it brought on the ire of many readers because of the controversy it generated. The new Catwoman #1 depicted Catwoman and Batman in amorous positions on top of a roof. Among other illustrations, Starfire, who began as a main superheroine from the Teen Titans television series, was depicted as being extremely promiscuous. This was a complete role-reversal as such behaviour was against her morals and ideals in her original depiction. In an essence, this revamp reflects a more sexist portrayal of women than in the past generations of the comic books.

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This paper attempts to explore the way female characters have been portrayed in the past which used the female body as an object and placed them in secondary roles and was always subjected to the male gaze. The paper will use Simone De Beauvoir's concept of immanence and transcendence as well as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity which talks about how the body is used to perform the roles that are assigned by the society.

"Gender is a social construction of differences between men and women, also used when an individual's sex category constitutes a basis of classification and differential treatment." Gender is hence established as a construct that enables a dialogic relationship and not a binary opposition. According to Judith Butler, Gender is defined by performativity, a social construct which is defined by one's performance of his/her identity.

Therefore, there are certain notions that are inherently masculine, feminine and cross culture practices though coming into vogue now, but were looked upon with discriminatory eyes through the ages. This notion of binary opposition, of establishing male as opposed to females or vice versa and the assignment of roles or performance according to their sex is noticed in the graphic novels also. Graphic novels are a form of storytelling technology in the way that they create a particular way of understanding stories with the help of interplay of texts and images. So the graphic novels portray the cult of an individual with supernatural powers and with the ability to win over evil. The omnipresence of the psychomachia factor through the introduction of men with unimaginable prowess and muscle power who defeat the evil superpowers in a battle with someone of equal power to them. Words like mighty, powerful, victor are given masculine identity whereas those like desirous, lustful, dreamy, fancy, callous and abased are associated with the feminine gender. Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* has mentioned this appropriately as to how,

History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy's earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the other.

There wasn't much agency given to women characters in graphic novels. Each woman character who was portrayed in these graphic novels played supporting roles and were more prone to wearing revealing costumes. Female characters started wearing as little as possible so as to appeal to teenage and adult male readers. One of the earliest and most infamous examples of this double standard came when Ms. Marvel was introduced back in the '70s. As an offshoot of Captain Marvel, she wore a similar costume. But whereas Mar-Vell's costume was a full bodysuit that revealed only a portion of his face, Carol Danvers dashed onto the scene with a bared midriff and most of her legs exposed. This comes in to stark contrast when the reader comes to know that this woman isn't some drunken floozy, but a decorated Air Force captain whose adventures often take her into space and other worlds. On a more seemingly mundane but logical level, the costume becomes unfeasible considering the frigid temperatures out there in space. At some point it becomes difficult to take a heroine seriously when they are dressed like that. But Carol was just an indication of a growing problem in the superhero genre, especially as the 'Bad Girl' craze began to take hold of popular culture in the 1990s.

Historians and critics have also conjectured that Americans are notoriously obsessed by physical appearance, as noted by anthropologist Horace Miner in the satirical *Body Rituals of the*

Nacerima (Miner, 1956). They use physical appearance partly to verify and identify our sexuality. Thus, comic books earn their revenue selling a graphic image of the female body.

Women have had very limited agency in comic books and essayed only very small roles in comic books. In the late 1930s, super powered heroes like Superman and Captain Marvel dominated the stage while the women had very scarce to no presence at all. Specifically, they were depicted as dependent ‘damsels in distress’— victims that needed to be rescued by the male protagonist; or they are a prize that is to be won by either the male villain or hero. For example, in the first issue of Superman, news reporter and future love interest, Lois Lane, is kidnapped by criminals and is eventually rescued by Superman. While the iconic relationship doesn’t get its beginnings here and nothing else is revealed about who Lois is — the fact is that Superman simply saves her, flies her to safety, and then flies away.

Women were also otherwise portrayed as the “girl-Friday...seductive vamp, or perhaps, the long-suffering girlfriend” (Lavin, 1998). The stereotypical gender roles were quite obvious: men alone are capable of succeeding independently and being courageous, while women are subordinate figures in the background. These early attitudes towards women in comic books are implicative of common gender role stereotypes where women are thought to be less intelligent than men and only have a place in the house as a caretaker and/or source of emotional support. As New York cartoonist Jules Feiffer states, “the ideal of masculine strength, whether Gary Cooper’s, Lil Abner’s, or Superman’s, was for one to be so virile and handsome, to be in such a position of strength, that he need never go near girls. Except to help them.”

But despite these new portrayals of strong and powerful female characters like Wonder Woman, they were also being depicted as sex objects. As stated by Michael Lavin “powerful superheroines like DC’s Wonder Woman or Marvel’s She-Hulk may easily overcome the most overwhelming threats and obstacles, but they are invariably depicted as alluring objects of desire, wearing the scantiest of costumes.”

The images of women with large bust sizes, slim figure, bare legs, and half-naked appearance became enormously popular after the success of Wonder Woman. Comic books were filled with sexual images of women that they were known as ‘headlight comic books,’ a crude and stereotypical reference to the female anatomy. Comic book historian Ron Goulart writes: “In the days before the advent of Playboy and Penthouse, comic books offered one way to girl watch” (1986). A prime example of “headlight comics” was in Bill Ward’s “Torchy,” a series that ran from 1946 to 1950. The comic books focused more on the figure of Torchy who was a tall, blond who was often depicted walking around bare-legged and in her underwear rather than on storylines. She was often portrayed as “the stuff of male sexual fantasy: a push-up bustier, panties, and high-heel boots, all in white” (Lavin, 1998). In her book, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes how females are always cast opposite the males to complement their existence. They get recognition only as the object, the extra and the other. She is forced to find her reality in the immanence of her man and hence like how a child adores a doll, she immortalises the image of her man and tries to become equal to him, in order to attain the status of a subject. She dreams to be “everything” from “nothing” and become her “own heroine” as has been expressed by Maria Bashkirtsev.

She has also mentioned how her education has prompted her to identify herself with the body, which is passive and desirable. She in solitary pleasure assigns herself roles of both males and females thereby attaining to do acts that are conventionally masculine where she tells herself “I am going to have intercourse with myself” or “I am going to impregnate myself”. The portrayal of strong and bustier women in graphic novels hence is also an attempt to show their urge of equality. It’s her way of losing herself in reflection where she can rule over time and space alone, supreme with her rights over men, fortune, fame, physical strength and superiority and on everything that’s inherently masculine. This is how she declares that she wasn’t born a woman, but she becomes the woman.

However, as figures and ideals of the body have been made the primary focus of character art in comic books, it is noteworthy that the male figure has been brought under similar, if not as drastic, a scrutiny. Dr. Tanveer Ahmed states, of hypermasculinity, that “(hypermasculinity) is an emerging force within global, social trends and is most pronounced where gender relations have transformed dramatically”. (Ahmed, 2015)

Hypermasculinity is a simple exaggeration of male features and qualities such as overly muscular figures, brute physical strength, overwhelming aggression and emphasis on the male role in society (Ahmed, 2015). Such is the role taken by men in most, if not all superhero graphic novels, comics and comic books and their adaptation in various other media platforms.

For decades, male superheroes have been known to rescue the “damsel in distress” which is usually played by the girlfriend/wife of the superhero concerned. This has also been reflected in cinema prominently; an example being the character Mary-Jane Watson being held by the Green Goblin, Dr. Octopus and Venom in Spiderman, Spiderman 2 and Spiderman 3 respectively.

In fact, the first edition of Action comics released in 1938, famous for introducing Superman as readers know him today, depicts Superman holding up an entire motorcar above his head to save a person from squashed underneath it. This scene has been hashed and rehashed countless times over the past few decades to emphasize the strength of Superman. Some instances have him wading through fires while other men stand back and shield themselves, some show him flying away from explosions while holding onto a lady that he rescued and very often, he is depicted as having saved someone from being crushed from something heavy. In the opening scene of the Superman: The Animated Series television series, these three scenes are present because they showcase the strength, figure and even his personality to some extent.

In addition to exorbitant feats of strength, male figures have bodies that are so muscular that they are almost unrealistic. This is to show the intimidating and domineering side of the hero even before a physical fight ensues. But this figuring of the superhero male, coupled with the dainty and unrealistic figure of the female characters, are not without reason. Stephen Jones goes on to say that women characters, with their slender figure and physique, have been drawn as such to complement the male figure and vice versa (Masculinities101, 2013). For example, if Batman was to be drawn more slender and Catwoman more bulky, it would throw off a certain balance between their illustrations. Similarly, the iconic picture of Superman carrying Lois Lane off into the sky would look clumsy if Lois was more bulky than she appears. This not discounting the fact that some females are given unimaginable figures in only certain comics.

The figures used in graphic novels and comic books, mostly by DC and Marvel make use of these physiques to raise the standards of both men and women; probably because the first superhero franchise (superman) was designed to inspire the American troops and citizens during World War II (Comicmix, 2009).

Stephen M. Jones, in an interview with masculinities101.com, apart from emphasizing the importance of wit and knowledge in a superhero, states that despite “reeking of hypermasculinity...” superheroes are not all brawn; Ironman is a gifted computer engineer, Batman is a master detective well versed in the sciences, Superman possesses Kryptonian intellect that far exceeds that of mankind, Mr. Fantastic is a master of chemistry and so on (Masculinities101, 2013).

Over time, comic books have seen a shift in depictions as comics essentially reflect society as opposed to influence society. Comics are seen, by most readers, as a portal into fantasy and the ideals that are to be appropriated are to do with character and conduct rather than physique and feats of strength. Such is the point of many stories where superheroes are often left to use wit and knowledge in dealing with foes who are usually more powerful than themselves; such as the use of sound waves by Spiderman to stop Venom (Spiderman 3, 2007), the use of logic by Superman in dealing with the 5th dimension imp Mxyzplkt (Superman: The Animated Series, 1997) and the use of opponent’s seeming strength against them as in Batman tricking Azrael into getting caught in a cave too small to house his weapons and body armour (Knightsend collection, 1994).

Similarly, female characters are given similar roles where they are now contributive instead of a liability. Lois Lane, now married to Superman, is a well-known and respected investigative journalist as opposed to a beat reporter of earlier days, Gwen Stacy, girlfriend to Spiderman is a renowned scientist who is seen often teaching Spiderman the nuances of Applied Physics when facing enemies like Electro or the Hob Goblin and Arisia, a new female green lantern given her own chapter in the *Book of Oa* for her valour and courage that is deemed much more than that of other lanterns.

In accordance with comics acting as a reflection of the ideals of society, we have seen hypermasculinity undermined with the introduction of Northstar, the first openly homosexual hero. He is accompanied by Hulkling and Wiccan who are the first homosexual couple, recently married. Batwoman, the successor to Batman and an important and integral of the franchise is a lesbian. Finally, women are given roles that exceed the authority of most men and are drawn to proportions are anything like other more dainty figures.

While, the New 52 reboot of DC Comics brought in sexuality, there are positive sides to the new modern reboot of comics. Granny Goodness and Amanda Waller are two such examples. Amanda Waller appears in Batman Comics as well as the Suicide Squad and Granny goodness appears in the Justice League issues. These two women are portrayed as strong and controlling. They have an upper hand in how things are done in their particular space. This can be seen as a changing trend. But it can again be looked at as a problematic sphere. Both these women are shades of grey, portraying dark characters, and their appearance is masculine, not only in terms of muscles, but facial structure, and the voice over for the characters in cartoons and movies. These women perform their gender through the negative stereotypes that exist about

women or the character of a vamp in most popular culture media. But this has come a far distance from the seductresses that Catwoman or Poison Ivy were shown to be. Granny Goodness and Amanda Waller are depicted in bulky, more physically domineering figures that wield more power than the average character. Granny Goodness controls an apocalyptic scale army while Amanda Waller is the head of the Meta-Humans Division of the United States government.

Despite the strong physique and the independent portrayal, there is still a visible objectification and exoticization of these female characters. Despite the visible neutralization of characters like the inclusion of homosexual superheroes, the female are yet to be presented in a likable fashion where their strength and physique is matched. These characters perform their roles as expected by the male readers of these comics, which is far away from the expected reality of each of these characters. This idea thus creates a body image to which every female body is to adhere to, which becomes an ideal for not only the readers but every viewer of this body ideal, as these comics have been incorporated into other popular medias like cartoons and movies.

Gender portrayal has always been the talk of comic book universe as the body has always brought in to sell the book. Be it the male buffed up physique or the female hypersexualised body, it has always been the performance of their gender that has made these superheroes who they are in the modern era of comics. If Superman was not the great male he is, with his chivalry, his steely nature he would not be the most popular superhero. The same way if Wonder Woman was not the beautiful Amazonian that she is, the reception would not be so large of her character. So, these superheroes are playing out their gender normative roles that reflect the set rules, despite the powers they have. These characters are playing out their gender, and in the spirit of presenting them to the readers, the artists create an image that becomes the ultimate for the readers. The comic book universe has begun its journey towards a sense of neutrality, but how long a journey is left is unforeseeable for the time being. Looking towards the upcoming representation of these beloved superheroes and superheroines in movies, television and comic books themselves shows us the path in which the superhero genre is evolving, as it has been for almost 8 decades.

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