Discourse of representation and characterization of women in narratives of popular comics and fairy tales for children and their adaptations in audio visual media

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The scope of graphic narratives has remained immense since its inception as it successfully adopts the facade of being narratives of children. The oxymoronic playfulness provides a potent space for critiquing and commenting on socio-political scenarios and as well as building a dreamland. Fairy tales and comics are part of every child's childhood, they are a part of the growing up process of each and every child, often having deep impact on the young minds and effects on the mindset of the children. Children tends to relate themselves and follow the footsteps of the characters they read or watches on audio visual media. The women characters of popular comics and fairy tales are mostly portrayed as demure, helpless, pretty young girls often incompetent to fight for their own rights and justice. Problems starts from here as these characters have deep impact on the young minds and after reading and watching these tales and comics, an imagine often gets drawn in the mind of the children about women that is quiet improper and negative. The delightful humour of the comic panels or fairy tales lies in representing women in their extreme stereotypes. In comics we often find women in a distasteful role. Women are not only misrepresented, their identities being reduced to play the cultural stereotypes or commodified, but they are also not represented at all. With changing time and development in the field of audio visual media, the projection of female characters have also came a long way. With growing popularity of adaptations of fairy tales and comic characters for audio visual medium, new trends are developing in representation of female characters who are powerful and portrayed in proper and dignified manner. In this 21st century, it is extremely important to discuss what message we are actually catering to our future young generation, embedded in form of comics and fairytales.

This paper is an attempt to study the discourse of representation and characterization of women in comics and fairy tales for children and their recent trends of adaptions in audio visual media.

Keywords: *Fairy tales, comic, women, humour, stereotype, commodification, audio-visual media.*

Introduction:

'The graphic novel is a man's world, by and large…'

(McGrath)

Cartoons and fairy tales are part of every child's growing up years. The scope of graphic narratives has remained immense since its inception as it successfully adopts the facade of being narratives of children. Comics and fairytales provides a potent space for critiquing and commenting on socio-political scenarios and as well as building a dreamland for kids. They have deep impact on the young minds and effects on the mindset of the children. Children tends to relate themselves and follow the footsteps of the characters they read or watches on audio visual media. With changing time and development in field of audio visual media, recent trends have emerged where the age old fairy tales and comic characters are audio visually presented to children through television shows and films. There is a general view that the media acts as important agents of socialization, and therefore contributing to the shaping of gender roles. Children are particularly susceptible to the way in which genders types are portrayed on television and films, especially cartoons which make up the majority portion of children's television viewing practice between the ages group of two to ten years of age. Therefore, it can be assumed that children might learn a lot from the portrayals of males and females in cartoons. The messages conveyed through representation of males and females in fairy tale books or comic strips contribute to children's ideas of what it means to be a boy, girl, man, or woman. The disparities that they find point to the symbolic annihilation of women and girls often suggests to children that these characters are less important than their male counterparts and are weak. The women characters of fairy tales are mostly portrayed as demure, helpless, pretty young girls often incompetent to fight for their own rights and justice. Problems starts from here as these characters have deep impact on the young minds and after reading and watching these tales and comics, an imagine often gets drawn in the mind of the children about women that is quiet improper and negative. The delightful humour of the comic panels

or fairy tales lies in representing women in their extreme stereotypes, as if they try to implement the fact that girls are weak and incompetent to protect themselves and a male figure is always stronger than them, and hence should always be there to protect them. In comics we often find women in a distasteful role. They are often hyper sexualized. Women are not only misrepresented, their identities being reduced to play the cultural stereotypes or commodified, but they are also not represented at all. Critics have often noted that the roles of women as both supporting characters and lead characters are substantially more subjected to gender stereotypes, with femininity and or sexual characteristics having a larger presence in their overall character.

Aims:

This paper is an attempt to study the discourse of representation and characterization of women in comics and fairy tales for children and their recent trends and also their representation in audio visual medium.

Research questions:

The main questions that are to be considered in this paper are:

- Are female charactersmisrepresented in comics and fairy tales?

- If yes, then what is the reason behind this stereotypical misrepresentation?

- How and what changes can be brought in the field of representation of female characters in comics and fairy tales in today's age of audio visual media?

Research Methodology: To conduct the research and reach a conclusion, empirical approach will be done. Qualitative method of research will be followed and qualitative understanding will come through in-depth analysis of the contents of the popular fairy tales and comics for children and their recent audio visual adaptations.

Theoretical Framework: While doing this research work, reference can be drawn to George Gerbner's Cultivation theory. According to this theory a long ,

persistent exposure to media (audio visual specially, like television) is capable of cultivating common beliefs about the world.Gerbner highlighted through this theory that the powerful effect of mass media act as moulders of the society. To complete this research paper we will also refer to Freudian model of psychoanalysis consisting of the concept of Conscious, Pre Conscious and Sub conscious mind.

Analysis of Representation of female characters in comics and fairy tales for children:

"In conclusion, modern children's picture books continue to provide nightly reinforcement of the idea that boys and men are more interesting and important than are girls and women."(Hamilton, Broaddus, Niehaus, 2006). There have been controversies surrounding representation of women in the comic book worldwise since the very beginning of the industry, their gender roles, stereotypes, and unrealistic body type depictions. The women that have starred as leaders, supporting characters, have both succeeded and failed throughout each comic book age in justly portraying women representation. Patriarchal representations of women in comic books have not been positive from a woman's point of view. The creators and presenters of these characters often neglects the dignity and sentiments of the female readers and audiences. They are presented as beautiful but weak and incompetent characters.They have gone from damsels in distress, to sexualized objects, being drawn by men and created for the male audience, what is considered "attractive" to the male gaze. This portrayal often is a reflection of misogynist attitudes towards women in the patriarchal culture. "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. Believe it or not, comic books were filled with so many sexual images of women that they were known as "headlight comic books" — a crude and stereotypical reference to the female anatomy".(Jehanzeb, 2019).

The adults who reads out fairy tales and bed time stories to the children often transporting them in a fairy land tends to often forget about the long lasting effects of these characters on young minds.

Let us consider few popular fairy tale characters to analysis the portrayal and characterization of female characters in these tales:

Snow White is a 19th-century German fairy tale which is today very popular throughout the world thanks to Disney. The fairy tale features a young princess and such elements as the magic mirror, the poisoned apple, the glass coffin, and the characters of the Evil Queenand the Seven Dwarfs. The princess is typically portrayed as a damsel in distress, powerless who has to save by the Prince charming. Whereas the step mother of the princess is typically portrayed as the evil, self-obsessed queen determined to destroy everyone to gain power.

Cinderella – Tale of a poor teenage girl, living at the mercy of her cruel aunt and cousin sisters, who treats her like a slave, until one fine night when an angel comes and gifts her a pair of shoe so that she can go to a ball and meet her handsome prince charming, who can save her from her current misery, marry her and gift her a dignified wealthy happy life. The title character is a young woman living in unfortunate circumstances that are suddenly changed to remarkable fortune. Here again the lead female character is incapable of changing her destiny and is depended upon her prince charming to help her come out of her misery.

The Princess and the Frog - A fairy tale telling the story of a hardworking poor girl who dreams of living a life of dignity and wealth. After kissing a prince who has been turned into a frog by an evil voodoo sorcerer, she becomes a frog herself and but finds a way to turn back into a human before it is too late and also turns the prince back into human. Then they marry and live happily forever.

Thumbelina -is a literary fairy tale written by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen . Thumbelina is about a tiny girl and her adventures with marriage-minded toads, moles, and cockchafers. She successfully avoids their intentions before falling in love with a flower-fairy prince just her size, marrying him and living a happy life.

Sleeping Beauty - is a classic fairy tale about a princess, Aurora, who is cursed to sleep for a hundred

years by an evil fairy, where she would be awakened by a handsome prince with a kiss.

Rapunzel - Rapunzel is a classic fairy tale where a beautiful princess with exceptionally beautiful long hair is held captive in a tower by an evil witch, who is ultimately saved by a handsome young knight.

In all the above mentioned tales we can notice that all the female lead characters are represented as beauty, demure, powerless, fragile figures, and incompetent to fight for their justice and totally depended on destiny to bring them a prince charming who can save them from their nemesis and misery. The beautiful, innocent, abused maiden dutifully cleans the house or minds her cruel elders and does nothing to better her situation. The only way her situation in life changes is when a man, a handsome prince, who comes along and rectifies the situation, saving her, thus also satisfying the deep rooted patriarchal thinking of the society. The girls,they don't have any voice of their own, Marriage being the ultimate goal and destiny of every girl. On the other hand the negative female characters are always stereotypically portrayed as ugly, self-obsessed often stupid power hungry women. Either ways all of them are presented in a very distasteful manner.

The implications could be that when Children reads these fairy tales or observes television shows showing these characters, they might perceive from such tales and cartoons that it is not natural in society for women to have the main more domineering jobs in society and that the jobs which require a lot of strength are carried out by mostly males. Males are represented as more dominant and the females are very stereotypical in their colour. The females are also presented as being more passive and reliant on the male characters. From the debut of the first female superhero, Wonder Woman, Created by William Moulton Marston, the representation of women was always within the frame of gender bias. Marston created Wonder Woman to counter to what he perceived as an overly masculine-dominated world but unfortunately after his demise Wonder Woman went through a subtle standardization process that more closely mimicked typical female roles, appropriate for male gaze. The fate of most of the female super heroes have suffered miserably in the hands of the patriarchal representation of typical female characters.

With development in the field of technology, television is a part of every household today and several channels are dedicated only for children viewers running different programs meant for children, the most popular among them being cartoon shows. Earlier children used to read cartoon strips from books or papers but now television is the most popular medium for them.There is a general view that the media act as an important agents of socialization, and therefore contributing to the shaping of gender roles. Young children watching television from a very young age, finds difficulty telling fantasy from reality. Children are particularly susceptible to the way in which genders types are portrayed on television, especially comics and cartoons which make up the majority of children's television. Therefore, it can be assumed that children might use the portrayals of males and females in cartoons as real. But the problem is that the roles which women are given in cartoons are still stereotypical with women being portrayed as emotional, passive, frail, and feminine and they are less active and less domineering. The lead male characters tended to be more independent, assertive, athletic, technical, and responsible than the femalecharacters.

Representation of female characters in comics and fairy tales for children- Indian Perspective:

In India, the comic books were first produced with the intention of educating the children of the nation about the mythological and historical figures, which were predominantly male.India being a land of patriarchy, since the birth of the comics in India, the male characters have been given the central positions as it is a male dominated society where women are considered as subordinate and inferior to men.Women characters in comics were given mere importance, mostly they were assigned the profession of being housewives and they were sketched with stereotypical body types, loud and indecent attire like Bini chachi (wife of Chacha Chaudhary). Never did these characters motivate the readers to encourage the women in real life. All wit

and power were showcased through the male characters like Bahadur, Doga, Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruv, Chacha Chaudhary etc. It was in the hands of these characters to resolve the conflicts and bring end to the evil in the story. The few women characters present in these comics were supporting characters and were used for the development of the plot. They were portrayed as beneficiaries, they either played the supporting role or a powerless one. Even when they played protagonist, it was their dumb and confused quotient that raised the conflict in the plot. Their 'problem-solving' quotient was negligibly reflected in the early Indian comics.

In Indian fairy tales the female characters were primarily divided into two categories – the obedient, demure "good" girl, who werepredominately beautiful and dutiful towards their in laws and followed every order of their husband without uttering any questions. On the other hand there were the "bad" girl characters who were portrayed as naughty, selfish because they denied to follow the social order and were predominately ugly. These stories were narrated to the young children by the elders so that right from the young age with a tender mind the girls can be taught to be demure, meek and ever sacrificing self. Another important area is that the fairy tales had female characters beingportrayed as evil supernatural characters like "Chudrail", "Petni", "Sakchunni", "Dayan" and many other such characters. It is interesting to note that the number of male evil supernatural characters were much less than female evil supernatural characters.

More than often the female characters are projected in a disrespectful manner also. "On a darker side, the women are now portrayed as flaunting objects. Even though they have gained their identity in the Indian comic industry yet their depiction is not of a kind that earns respect. Firstly, the outfits imposed on these characters are completely out of the social context. Be it rebellious Shakti, intelligent Chandika or powerful Devi, the outfit is highly skimpy and revealing. The attire associated with Shakti is quite indecent with the flesh being flaunted from here and there. The same is the case with vamp Nagina. Newly established Virgin Comics are a step ahead as far as the salacious outfits of women characters are concerned. While Devi is always shown in skin tight lycra dress, the Snake Woman is seen exposing her skin in a femme fatale manner." (Siddiqui, Naz, 2015).

Recent development in the field of portrayal of women in comics and fairy tales for children in audio visual media:

With changing time there has been developments taking place in the depiction and representation of female characters in cartoons and fairytales for children. With development in the field of audio visual media new trends are developing where women are portrayed in much dignified matter unlike earlier. Now they are beautiful but not powerless and incompetent to fight for their justice like earlier. They are bold and have voice of their own and are not depended upon their prince charming solely. Though their advancements towards a positive progression have been slow, but there has been a positive change recently and that is pleasing to the industries' rapid growing female fans. The last few years showed a drastic change in the portrayal of women in Indian comics as well. More women characters are now created and recognized in the comic industry. The characters are moving away from their stereotypical portrayal. For example Raj Comic's "Shakti" is a symbol of sheer women power. She is an incarnation of Goddess Kali and has emerged out to fight unruly practices of men over women. Almost in every issue of Shakti, a satirical but motivational dialogue appeal is made to invoke the readers. Whether viewed as a superhero, a villain or simply the love-interest of Batman, "Catwoman" has endured many character transformations and is still holding strong today. She was never depended on any male counterpart and always bold and had a mind of her own. "Sue Storm", only female member of Marvel's, the Fantastic Four, was once a weak character always in need of rescuing, has grown into what is considered to be the strongest and most powerful character of the group, rather just being a dutiful wife and mother.

With development in the children film industry now a days, stories of fairy tales and comics are now adapted and made into films. Here changes are made in the storylines and the female characters are given new

twists and are presented in powerful manner like the animated film "Tangled" (2011) , based on the story of Rapunzel, where Rapunzel is smart , intelligent and competent enough to fight for herself , rather than waiting for her prince to help her out. A whole new series in being made on the character "Wonder Women" the warrior princess of amazon produced by the media giant DC. This series has a huge fan following, showing the swift in the mentality of the audiences, as they now prefer female sheroes, equally as male heroes. In films like "Snow white and the Huntsman", (2012), "Red Riding Hood" (2011) we could clearly identity the fighting spirit of the female protagonists , as they fight for their own rights and justice , sometimes even protecting others like a trained fighter and protector.If we consider the animated child film "Moana" (2016), we don't get to see any "prince charming" actually. The whole journey is that of our young female protagonist, her fight against the evil and her triumph over it.On a positive note, few female characters who were earlier portrayed as predominantly evil without any proper reason, have now successfully emerged as characters with dignified shades. For example the character of Maleficent from "Sleeping beauty" was originally crafted as a pure evil fairy causing destructions but in the recent film adaptions of the character – "Maleficent" in 2014 and "Maleficent: Mistress of Evil" in 2019, here Angelina Jolie played the role of Maleficent, she is given a proper dignified background story, where she is actually a tragic character than an evil one. She is strong, powerful, yet vulnerable and often being betrayed by the persons she truly loved and cared for, causing her to seek for revenge with vengeance, yet she is a loving motherly figure to Aurora and the protector of the fairies and kingdom of Moors.

These changes are happening for betterment because stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and underrepresentation of female characters contribute negatively to children's mental development, can limit their career aspirations, frame their attitudes about their future roles and even influence their personality characteristics. These powerful representation of female characters are successful in motivating the children and helps in building a stable and unbiased mental state for both the sexes.

Conclusion:

"How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!" Maya Angelou, African American Poet.

Gender stereotyping and under-representation of women characters have been documented in children's fairy tales and comics in the past, in the hope that one day improvements would follow. Though the truth is that depiction of female characters in the fairy tales and comics industry always had a complicated relationship with female characters, mostly presenting them in stereotyped undignified manner, the trend is fast changing. With growing popularity of adaptations of comic and fairy tale characters for audio visual medium, new trends are developing in representation of female characters who are powerful and portrayed in proper, decent and dignified manner.Improper gender portrayals in the comics and fairytales are cause for concern because of the importance of them in the socialization process for children and their impact on mental growth of children. Children tend to imitate same-gender characters more than opposite-gender characters therefore, the comics and fairytales plays an important role in modeling gender-specific behavior among young children. Realistic and varied portrayals of men and women can enhance healthy development while unrealistic stereotypical representations can negatively influence young minds. New style is also emerging in the field of writing fairytales and comics for children where there is no biasness towards a particular gender and female are given the same place of power and position like their male counterpart like in Rupkotha Samagra by Nabaneeta Debsen, who herself is an acclaimed Indian writer. This is a ray of hope not only for the better representation of women in comics and fairy tale, earning them their due respect and dignity but also will help in creating a proper mind set among the children when they will watch or read such unbiased, mature and proper female characters in books or on screen. To build a healthy society it is essential to develop proper sound mind set of young children from their growing up years as what they learn at this age have a lifetime effect on their mind and personality. Children should be able to draw inspiration from such female characters.

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