
(MIS) Representations of The Transgender Identity: The Dominant Popular Narrative Culture Versus The Webcomics

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INTRODUCTION

The Human Rights Campaign has recently presented a report on the escalation of transgender homicide in America. It documents at least twenty one murders within ten months of 2015 and also highlights several instances of transgender violence which went unreported. This historic rise in antagonism against the transgender community distinctively points out the widespread transphobia that is prevalent in the society. Furthermore, there is a staggering rate of suicides amongst the transgender individuals, owing to the social discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying that they regularly experience (*Addressing Anti-Transgender Violence*). To unearth the reasons behind this perpetration of violence on the transgender people, it is necessary to look at the “images” formed by the media and the popular culture which represent transgender identities. Although the issue of visibility gains utmost importance in the study of minority groups in popular culture, in the case of transgender community the real problem lies in their misrepresentation.

PROBLEMATIC REPRESENTATION BY DOMINANT POPULAR CULTURE

The social victimization of the transgender people is correlated with

the way in which they are portrayed in popular culture. Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has been surveying and monitoring the depiction of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals in films and television shows every year, since 2005. By analyzing their reports till 2013, GLAAD proffered that “54% of all trans characters on episodic television were outright defamatory, another 34% ranged from simply problematic to acceptable, with only 12% of trans representations good enough to be considered outstanding” (Townsend 2014). It is startling that though in 2015 there was an improvement in the visibility and representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters on television, there were almost negligible transgender roles in primetime broadcast programming (“Where We Are on TV 2015-16”). The media representation of transwomen through the celebrated figure of Caitlyn Jenner is even more problematic due to her already privileged position and her association with big cosmetic brands as well as high fashion. The frenzied reactions of the media regarding her every move and their eulogizing of her as a prototypical transwoman as well as a beauty icon propels her far away from the long struggles of the transgender people and the abuses that they face in their quotidian life. In *The Guardian* Hadley Freeman addresses this issue of Caitlyn Jenner and states:

...this [media’s] rush to hyperbole is the due corrective for centuries of transphobia, which still very much exists. Yet not a single other trans person on this planet has enjoyed the privilege and public goodwill that Jenner has received since she came out. Moreover, true equality comes from being treated not as a special case, but as an equal.

Though there are a handful of transgender personas and activists, like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, and some streaming series which feature transgender characters, they are not sufficient to bring about a

noteworthy change in society's perspective towards transgender people.

Another form of dominant narrative in the popular culture which makes an impact on the outlook of the youth is the comics or the graphic novel genre. The widespread popularity of the comic books of DC and Marvel as well as the graphic novels of Alan Moore and Art Spiegelman have manifested that they can be employed as a medium for constructing a social consciousness about the transgender people. Through the comics or the graphic novels young readers can be enlightened about the concepts of “gender fluidity”, “transgender” and “gender queer”. In the manner of the electronic media, the comic books too seldom fabricate stories around a transgender character. Most of the references to transgender in comics have been fleeting and restrictive. They are not projected as normal human beings or superheroes, rather they are the victims, the aliens, the robots and the shape-shifters. Though the portrayal of transgender characters have started to recuperate from their perpetual status of being a victim and a villain after the production of the Image comics and *Batgirl* by DC, there are still a number of “misrepresentations” or “bad representations” of the transgender people in the genre of comics and graphic novels. For instance, the transgender oriented stories of the Image comics are immensely innovative and they are highly lauded for their bold delineation of transwomen but in the second issue of one of its series, *Airboy*, the protagonist manifests that kind of transphobia which is prevalent in the society. He becomes hugely disgusted when he finds out that the girl he was with is a transwoman and she has a “penis”. The comic strip uses degrading words, like “tranny” and “drag queen”, to refer to the transwomen and also calls it a “sick, ugly world” (*Airboy* #2). GLAAD has severely criticised it and has also associated it with the number of transgender murders that occurred in America in that year:

Robinson and Hinkle not only use slurs to refer to trans women and assert that they are 'not girls' and really men, they repeat the trope that trans women are nameless (and largely faceless, in this instance) sex workers who have sex with unsuspecting men.

This trope is particularly dangerous, as trans women are often violently assaulted by men who feel they've been "deceived." In the past six months, nine transgender women have been murdered in the United States.

In the realm of printed comics the transgender characters are rarely visible and if at all they are limited to minor and secondary roles. They never become the nucleus of any plotline, rather they are depicted predominantly as the other persona in a subtext. This othering of the transgender community is also reflected in the society where they are often accused of deceiving and lying about their gender, they are looked down upon and are considered to be unnatural, mentally unstable as well as easy targets of sexual assault. These notions have repeatedly been encouraged by comics through their recurring illustration of the transgender characters as shape-shifters, aliens and prostitutes. In addition to this, even the graphic novels impart an infelicitous picture of the transgender community. The exceedingly fascinating graphic novel series by Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*, too has employed the victim trope in representing the transwomen. The characterisation of Wanda in *A Game of You* erroneously interprets a transwoman in multiple ways which includes the persistent assertion that she is a man. George, an agent of the villain, refuses to take her to the fantasy world because it is only for women and repudiates Wanda's claim that she is a woman. He says that "the operation" would not "make much difference" and it is "chromosomes as much as uh anything. It's like uh gender isn't something you can pick and choose as uh far as gods are concerned"

(Gaiman *A Game of You*). It becomes unnerving for the genderqueers to perceive such rigid notions of gender binary of the society in a fantasy realm as well. Finally, Wanda faces a tragic death and she is buried like a man by her parents who conceal her real gender even on the tombstone. *The Doll's House*, the second book of *The Sandman* series, put forward another tragic death of a transwoman. In this episode the murderer stands in front of the transwoman's dead body and the narrative informs:

There's something about preoperative transsexuals that makes The Connoisseur [the murderer's name] uncomfortable. Something brittle and bright in the back of their eyes. He loves them. But he always feels they're laughing at him. He's only ever found eight that he's been able to talk to. (Issue 14)

Both the graphic stories of *The Sandman* associate gender with physical appearance which completely misrepresents the concept of "gender" itself. It further misconstrues the fact that every transgender person desires to transform his or her body through operation and their original bodies are "disgusting" for people, as in the case of "The Connoisseur". The effect that these representations have on a transgender person can be fathomed only through their own words. Mey is one such transwoman who has penned down her experience regarding these portrayals of transgender characters. In her article she reveals:

I remember when I was in high school opening up Volume 2, titled *The Doll's House*, and reading issue #14, *Collectors....* This was my first time seeing someone like me in a comic book. It made me terrified for my future. (*Autostraddle*)

She continues to share what representation in comics signifies for the transgender readers,

One of the big selling points of comic books is that they give us heroes to look up to and want to be like. They show us possibilities. They show us dreams and wishes. Not being able to see yourself in those dreams, wishes and possibilities can really have an effect on you, especially if you're a younger reader. When readers are told that none of the heroes look like them, it can seem like it's impossible to be a hero. That's why representation is important. It allows us to see a brighter future for ourselves and to set out for that future. For trans readers, that representation has been almost nonexistent until recent years. (*Autostraddle*)

The kind of representation that transgender readers desire to see in graphic stories has been achieved by the webcomics.

WEBCOMICS:AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

A factual and true representation of the transgender community through the printed graphic stories becomes challenging on account of the fact that these plotlines mostly revolve around a superhero of the fantasy world where the subordinate characters are also otherworldly. In contrast to that, there is a plethora of webcomics which are being created for the past few years that focus solely on the life of transgender people. They let the readers engage with the quotidian life of a transgender person, baring the insecurities of the community and their everyday struggles with gender prejudice. The webcomics mark their difference from the printed comics in treating the transgender characters as ordinary human beings who are capable of leading a mundane life. They are neither given any special status nor bestowed with any extraordinary characteristics. Webcomics, like *Becoming Me*, *The Princess*, *Rooster Tails* and *What's Normal Anyway I?* are in the form of autobiographies which are renditions of

the lives of transgender individuals. The characters of these genderqueer webcomics strive to provide the transgender community a respected and empowered position in the society as well as accord them an equal status with the other genders. The plots of these webcomics offer an honest, unpretentious and simple picture of a transgender individual owing to the fact that all these stories have been written and drawn by transgender graphic storytellers.

In 2010 Sam Orchard, a transman, started making comics and posted them in his webpage called *Rooster Tails*. He employed his comics as a medium to inform the world and his family about his gender, that is, he is not a woman but a man. In one of his comics he acknowledges this where he says:

How do I tell old high school mates that I'm no longer a shy girl, but an awkward boy?

How do I tell my parents that I want facial hair and to walk around topless?

How do I tell my friends that I'm a queer boy, and not a lesbian?

I could just start a comic-blog on the internet and wait for them to find it... (Orchard "How do I do this again?")

The confessional subject and tone of his webcomics appeal to several transgender readers who can relate to his fears in revealing their gender to their families and friends. It has also attracted non-transgender readers and helped them understand transgender people in a better way. One such reader of *Rooster Tails* has shared that her workmate was transitioning and she did not know how to be supportive but Orchard's comics has given her materials for research¹. *Rooster Tails* presents very interesting stories in a few

1 This comment is by Jude, under the comic strip "Roostering" in *Rooster Tails*.

panels and it attempts to cope with the complexities of sexuality and gender. Sam Orchard's partner is another genderqueer person who does not identify with any stipulated gender. This is again reflected in his work where he questions the necessity of determining or fixing gender as well as defining sexuality when it is "so anchored in gender" (Orchard *Types of Love*). There are other webcomics as well which are immersed in the culture of questioning gender binary and the standardisation of gender and sexuality. *What's Normal Anyway?* is one such webcomic series which posits a question against the stereotyping of genders and the association of gender binary with "normalcy" from its very title. Morgan Boecher narrates a semi-autobiographical tale of a transman, Mel, through this webcomic series. With the assistance of humour Boecher exposes the pains of a transman and the difficult situations that he has to undergo in his life. The artist has initiated a "cultural activism" through his work that aims to subtly convey a serious message to the readers (Tashlin). Mel is a representation of all those transmen who are undertaking medical transition. Boecher has modelled this representation with utmost care and thoughtfulness, by concocting his personal experiences with the stories of his transitioning transgender acquaintances. He allows his readers to have an insight into the ruminations of a transitioning person. By analysing the character of Sam in *Rooster Tails* and Mel in *What's Normal Anyway?* one realizes that even the transgender people have frequent doubts about their gender identity and their outward appearance. These two webcomics also divulge the fact that a surgical transformation of the body is not desired by every transgender person. In "Gross and Scary" Mel admits to his transgender friend that the physical surgery is the "grossest, scariest thing" (sic) for them and he believes that it is better for him to keep his "floppy chest and call it male" (Boecher). In another comic strip he is revealed to battle with a string of questions about his own gender

identity and the necessity to go through a medical transition. He enquires, “what if I’m not even sure I want to do the hormones or surgery? Would that mean I couldn’t be a real man?” (Boecher “Trans Is Queer”).

Although the stories and “images” formulated in different webcomics are diverse, the anxieties and fears of the transgender characters connect them. One such case is the striking image of a bare bodied transgender person who has not undergone any transforming surgery. In *Becoming me*, a webcomics series about a Chilean transwoman, the protagonist stands in front of a mirror and feels an unutterable pain of not having any breasts. On the other hand, Mel in *What’s Normal Anyway?* suffers a similar agony when he sees his reflection in a mirror and even after trying very hard he could not look like a man because of his breasts. This reality of bodies has united the “images” of a transwoman and a transman. These reflections of the body do not disgust the transgender protagonists, as in the case of the printed graphic stories, but generate several doubts and anxieties in their minds. This difference in perceiving the “body” of a transgender person makes the webcomics a much better narrative than the printed comics and graphic novels.

CONCLUSION

The transgender-based webcomics which are becoming massively prevalent in the cyberspace furnish multifarious stories of genderqueer individuals. They are not only easily accessible and readable but they also form a huge pool of information on the transgender community. While the electronic and print media have to weigh up their monetary profits from a transgender-based production, the webcomics does not merchandise gender identity. They present the reality without the restrictions of consumerism and capitalism. The representations of the transgender people through

webcomics are subjective, passionate and simplistic. They have constructed a platform for dialogue between the transgender readers and the non-transgender ones and, at the same time, they are inspiring and emboldening more genderqueer people to express their ‘self’. The misrepresentations of the transgender community by the dominant narrative are gradually being ameliorated by the graphic storytellers of the digital space.

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