
The Female Superhero: Politics of Sexuality and the Attempts to Transcend the Boundaries of 'Gender'

Soumyosree Banerjee

'Superhero' is a trope that emerged in the 1930s as American comics' arcs introduced a long catalogue of characters possessing preternatural qualities. While they are sketched almost like the modern representation of the classical epic hero, their sense of ideology depicts Nietzsche's notion of the 'Übermensch'. A currently popular section within the trope of magic realism, these 'superheroes' however, have often come under the scanner of criticism for their frequent manifestation of the archetypal gendered portrait. Most of the female superheroes, initially referred to as 'superheroines' or 'she-roes' are often portrayed as a collective embodiment of seduction and hyper-sexuality. In this paper, I would like to locate the history of introduction of some of the leading female superheroes from the popular comic universes and how, despite the sexist approach and the patriarchal reception, these characters in the comics as well as in their popular adaptations have attempted to liberate themselves from the panopticon of gender-roles and gender-identities. The characters that I would focus on are Wonder Woman, Mera, Captain Marvel, Scarlet Witch and Black Widow.

Wonder Woman is one of the earliest female superheroes who appeared first in 'All Star Comics' #8 by DC comics in 1941. Also known as 'Princess Diana of Themyscira, Daughter of Hippolyta', the

character is a non-human, demigod-like delineation who had no father but was created by Zeus. American psychologist and writer William Moulton Marston and artist Henry G. Peter were the creators of this portrait. Marston had based this character on his wife Elizabeth and their life partner Olive Byrne. While Marston intended to create a superhero who would break the archetypal representation as the epitome of fist-power 'masculinity' but would triumph through love and genuine emotions, his wife Elizabeth had suggested to make this character a 'woman'. The vignette was sketched at a time when birth-control was a recently introduced subject in the feminist movement and was being widely propagated. In fact, Byrne's mother Ethel was a Progressive Era activist who had opened the first birth-control clinic in the United States along with her sister Margaret Sanger. The origin history of Wonder Woman in the narrative manifests how Hippolyta was still a mother without biologically birthing a daughter.

It was also the time when American and European women denounced their long overflowing Victorian gowns and mini-skirts became an empowering trend. If one observes the attire of Wonder Woman in the first comic publication, she is seen clad in a blue short skirt and a red bodice which while not sexualising her, focuses on her athletic and muscular features. Marston therefore through her character, normalises and encourages the freedom of the woman's body. Raised together by her mother and her aunts Antiope and Menalippe in an Amazonian island nation, solely inhabited by women, Wonder Woman is a depiction that is often labelled as 'feminist'. Marston and later George Perez paints a character who without denouncing the socially conceptualized 'feminine' appearance and attire entirely, attempts to transcend the notions of 'female' and 'feminine'. They did not create her with the physical attributes of a male body to show her as an empowered reflection but

had attempted to preserve the 'female' in her while challenging the socially imposed 'femininity'. A particular tributary of the narrative shows Wonder Woman's active participation in the second World War, where her primary weapons were her bracelets, her tiara, a lasso of truth, a sword and a shield. Again the word 'woman' in her name was probably a similar effort as Marston intended to portray how the concept of a 'superhero' was gender-neutral. Her civilian identity is called Diana Prince, the name subtly focusing on her sexuality. Her two identities, separated by the titles of 'Princess' and 'Prince' probably hint at her bisexuality considering the fact that she grew up in an all-women's nation and later developing feelings for the first man that she meets. Also, the juxtaposition in her name 'Diana Prince' where a female name is followed by a male epithet stands as a testimony. While the name Wonder Woman stands for the 'new woman' who redefines the Victorian 'angel in the house' thus challenging the gender-identities that have been imposed on women by patriarchy for centuries, 'Diana Prince' questions the binaries of gender. This probably also focuses on Carl Jung's concept of animus and anima or Sigmund Freud's study of 'innate bisexuality' as observed in his Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex (1920). Diana Prince is sketched wearing a bodysuit or trousers which were essentially a 'man's attire' in major parts of Europe and the U.S. This again was an attack on patriarchy that only a few decades earlier had criminalised 'cross-dressing' barring women from dressing like a 'man'. Debuted in Sensation Comics in 1942, Diana Prince was initially an army nurse who was later portrayed as a military officer, a businessperson, an astronaut and in several high rank positions that were mainly male-dominated.

Wonder Woman, who is portrayed as a founding member of the Justice League, a team of superheroes, is primarily a warrior whose strength is at par with the male superheroes of the league. Several

arcs of the DC galaxy have shown her fighting both mythological and fictional 'supervillains'. However a few individual tributaries of the narrative attempt to restrict her within the panopticon of the patriarchal gaze. In 'Red Son Wonder Woman', the titular character deliberately turns into a weapon of mass destruction to avenge her unreciprocated feeling thus her character being reduced to an insensible and illogical, weak being. In the Justice League animated series aired on Cartoon Network, Wonder Woman is seen to be an easy victim who is the first person to be corrupted and who then goes on to corrupt every other member. Again Frank Miller's 'Man-hunting Woman of Wonder' shows her as a 'feminazi' who hates on men and is one dimensionally violent. However, despite the variations, the primary portrayal which was adapted first in a television series in 1974 where Lynda Carter played the role of the protagonist to the recent Gal Gadot's representation in the live-action DC Extended Universe movie Wonder Woman (2017), the aim was to challenge the concept of imposed gender and highlight a female superhero who was not restricted within the boundaries of her socially constructed gender.

DC has a wide range of female superheroes who constantly question the gender stereotypes. Mera, created by Jack Miller and Nick Cardy, first appeared in 'Aquaman' #11 in September 1963. Though initially sketched as a supporting portrait, her character develops slowly, soon overpowering the protagonist. Manifested as the queen of the oceans, Mera emerges both as the epitome of strength and intelligence. In the comic strips, she is painted as wearing a bodysuit therefore again mocking the patriarchal discourse. Her image is similar to that of Ariel from 'The Little Mermaid'; both the characters having red hair and green attire. A mermaid is often symbolically associated with femininity as well as virginity. While Ariel is portrayed as young as in her late teens, Mera is mature and a skilled warrior. As Mera is not

seen emerging as a solo hero like Wonder Woman, her character is not allowed enough space to flourish. Despite the limited spacious and temporal representation, Mera is a vignette who constantly tries to have an identity beyond her gender roles. While multiple loose strands of the narrative follow a storyline that focuses on her complicated relationship with Aquaman and her deprived motherhood, Mera still is an epitome of female strength. In the primary tributary, she also depicts psychological issues like unbridled anger, a trait that is often associated with masculinity. However, while toxic masculinity glorifies and romanticises anger, Mera's traits are treated with utmost sensibility. In the plot of 'Blackest Night', Mera's statement:

"I never wanted children"

is not just a trick to distract and attack her enemy but is also an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal practice of putting motherhood on the altar. It therefore discards the imposed gender role and the socially indoctrinated notion that motherhood is the ultimate aim of every woman.

The character of Carol Susan Jane Danvers or as more popularly known as Captain America is a popular female superhero. Often regarded as 'Marvel's biggest female hero' or 'Marvel's mightiest Avenger', Danvers was sketched by writer Roy Thomas and artist Gene Colan. Her human identity was an officer in the United States Air Force and Security Chief in a restricted military premise. The early comics portrayed Captain Marvel with long hair, a red cropped top, thigh high shorts or thongs and boots therefore creating a hyper-sexualised image. This has been a major concurrent problem with male artists drawing a female superhero. While on one hand the superheroes would be endowed with power and position that attempted to topple the archetypal feminine characterisation, on the

other hand the constant sexualisation and often pornographic delineations to attract more male readers problematised the entire idea of transcending ‘gender’.

In one of the arcs of Captain Marvel titled ‘The Avengers’ #200 published in October 1980 and written by Bob Layton, David Michelinie, George Perez and Jim Shooter, the narrative shows how Captain Marvel despite her unparallel superhuman strength is manipulated, raped and impregnated. This comic strip was severely criticised by later critics for its unnecessary depiction of violence. However, the Captain Marvel series witnessed gradual changes beginning with a uniform that was more appropriate for her military background. She was also depicted as a leading activist in the Feminist movement, voicing for equal pay. The comic arc by Michele Fazakas and Tara Butters was the first to show Captain Marvel clad in a full-length jumpsuit and with cropped hair, therefore focusing on her athletic features. In the graphic novel titled ‘Captain Marvel in Rise of the Alpha Flight’, Marvel states:

“It’s not that I’m a violent person, it’s just that some things really really need punching”

As depiction of power is quintessentially a man’s trait, this ‘unfeminine’ quality is almost a mockery of archetypal feminine portrait.

In one of the tributaries of the series, writer Roger Stern and artist John Romita Jr. illustrated an African-American superhero, who was titled the second Captain Marvel and was the ‘leader’ of the Avengers for some time. Originally known as Monica Rambeau, the character is allowed a platform as broad as Captain Marvel’s in order to develop, at a time that was still fighting America’s racist rantings and the Eurocentric binaries of the civilised and the uncivilised. Kamala Khan is a recent addition to the legacy of Marvel. Created by writer

G. William Wilson, artists Adrian Alphonso and Jamie McKelvie and editors Sana Amanat and Stephen Wacker, Khan is depicted as a teenager Pakistani-American girl who adopts the label of Miss Marvel inspired by her idol Carol Danvers. The character which was introduced in the MCU in 2013, probably to deal with Islamophobia, is seen wearing a uniform that is similar to their traditional dress- 'salwar-kameez', her cape mirroring a 'dupatta'. However, the lack of a 'hijab' is probably an attempt to keep the character dissociated from any institutionalised religious sentiment. The storyline not only highlights her confrontation with the evil supervillains but also the evil that is deeply embedded into various cultures. The comic manifests her daily conflicts with the gender identity that has been imposed upon her by her family. While her brother emerges as an ideal patriarchal conservative, her mother is the ultimate representation of a marginalised woman who is unaware and uneducated and remains paranoid that Kamala might touch a boy and get pregnant therefore losing her 'honour'.

However, the 2019 movie titled 'Captain Marvel' is the first feature film of the superhero. Played by Brie Larson, Marvel here looks like the one in the comics sketched by Kelly Sue DeConnick and characterised by Stan Lee. The movie has been regarded as a 'feminist' adaptation by leading film reviewers as Larson takes up a character that throughout the movie attempts to get out of the panopticon of gender. Portrayed through a series of flash-backs, Danvers shows how she was trying to cope with a constant demoralisation as her every failure would be associated with her biological sex. Jody Houses takes this up in her graphic publication 'Captain Marvel Braver and Mightier' (2019) as the titular character states in an interview when asked what advice she would have for her younger self:

"I'd tell she's right...everything she dreams of doing, everything she

was told she couldn't do.”

Larson however, was put at the receiving end of online ‘trolling’ for portraying a character who does not smile enough and is stronger and more leader-like than the other popular male superheroes. Danvers in the movie is presented as almost a ‘stoic’ character who continues to break the gender stereotypes. Her absolute nonchalance towards a cat while a male character Nick Fury starts baby-talking is one such instance. Her friendship with Maria Rambeau, a fellow Air Force officer is an unconventional depiction therefore challenging the myth about ‘female friendships’. Also, none of the other female superheroes had portrayed such a relationship. Captain Marvel is also one of the rare depictions as the major universes do not bind her to any gender role or unnecessary romantic associations.

The character of Scarlet Witch or Wanda created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby first appeared in ‘The X-Men’ #4 in 1964. Initially sketched as a supervillain along with her twin mutant brother Quick Silver, Wanda is regarded as one of the most powerful superheroes in the MCU. With the ability to alter reality, Scarlet Witch was initially a calm and submissive portrait. However, her then attire comprising only a bathing suit with straps, short boots, a leotard, opera gloves and a cape all in vibrant red again is a sexualised depiction. She was thus sketched as a product of male fantasy-submissive yet sexually emancipated. Both Lee and later Roy Thomas wanted Wanda to be at the very centre of male attention, both for her fellow team-mates and the male readers whereas the concentric and interlinked romantic associations were written to attract women readers. The word ‘witch’ in her name was probably not just for her super-powers of a sorceress but also for her seductive capabilities. However, the later additions to the narrative and the movie and animated adaptations reflect a drastic change in the portrayal of the character. The recent depiction in the MCU movies

shows Scarlet Witch, played by Elizabeth Olsen, in a jumpsuit and coat thus renouncing the comic outfit entirely. Represented in the films as a young adult, tutored by the male avengers like Captain America and Hawkeye, who in the graphic novels were shown as her romantic interest. While the graphic novels keep Wanda imprisoned in the patriarchal panopticon, her identity oscillating between a ‘seductress’ and a wife-and-mother; the movies liberate her, focusing on her immense strength and practicality.

The female superhero has probably been one of the most efficient catalysts in the attempt to engender the gendered corners of literature as well as their popular adaptations. Having a broader spectrum and a greater reader-and-audience mass, the female superhero, despite the frequent patriarchal intrusions, has managed to transgress and hence transcend the rigid boundaries of ‘gender’.

Bibliography:

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