Portrayal of Women in Indian Comics

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ABSTRACT : *Since time, it has been a harsh journey for women to get themselves a respectable position in the society. While in ancient times, the women were accepted as the housewives, they were accorded some rank of decency too. Sadly enough to our realization when the women have stood up to be the homemaker, attached to this independent image now is indecency and inappropriateness assigned by the obnoxious minds of the society. This paper is an attempt to bring forward the ill projection of the women in one of the far reaching forms of media i.e. Comics.*

KEYWORDS : *Derogatory Portrayal, Indian Comics, Prejudiced Media, Women Empowerment*

I. INTRODUCTION

"How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!" [1]

-Maya Angelou, African American Poet

It has been a long existing concern as far as the status of women in India is concerned. Over the decades the women in India have not been given the right to equality to men. India is a country where the male is highly revered. It is a male dominated society where women are considered as subordinate and inferior to men. The constitution of India recognizes equal rights for men and women, in practice this is a rare sight though. In the same land where women are worshipped as Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, Goddess Kali, Parvati etc., the living women are greatly trivialized. This is not a field-limited condition rather in all the fields the women have been placed in an under graded platform. Since recent years considerable efforts are being made to recognize and establish equal rights for women in India. Still, there exist a number of areas where the right of women has not been adequately discerned. Comics are one such area. This paper intends to reflect the condition of women in the Indian comics by analyzing the portrayal of some women characters from major comics.

II. INDIAN COMICS

Before starting an inter-city journey, if the parents used to remember to carry a water-bottle, the children never forgot to carry a comic book. Such was the situation in 80's and 90's. Reading comic books has been known as one of the favorite leisure time hobbies of not just children but also adolescents and young adults. Not only it provides them with a matter to read but it also provides them with a new world- a fictional world to live in. The readers of these comics get influenced by the comic characters and start relating their real life with the life of the characters. Their eyes are never just confined to the text in the dialogue box rather they also perceive the elements that are beyond the dialogue boxes. The ideology of the characters, the inter-personal relationships between the characters, the physical as well as the social setting of the story, the body structure of the characters, their attire, their language etc.- all are ingested by the eye of the readers. Thus, it becomes imperative on the comics producers' part to create that world in comics which they want to see in their real life.

In India, the comic books were first produced in the 1960s with the intention of educating the children of the nation about the mythological and historical figures. Later it caught pace and remained popular till the introduction of satellite television. Some of these had an intention of interactively enlightening the children about science and history while others had an intention of entertaining the readers. Chandamama and Tinkle are two of such comics which made the learning fun. During the early years of the advent of comics in India, characters like Dhabbuji, Bahadur, Phantom, Mandrake etc. were rendered life. In the same time, one of the great names in Indian comics industry Pran Kumar Sharma under the publishing house of Diamond Comics introduced the readers with never-forgetting characters like Pinki, Shrimatiji, Billoo and legendary Chacha Chaudhary.

These are few of those characters which still after the 3 decades of their birth are found to be highly popular. Last two decades of the twentieth century turned out to be the flourishing era for Indian comics when publishing company Raj Comics sketched super-hero characters like Nagraj, Doga, Super Commando Dhruv, Parmanu, Shakti etc. to rule the hearts of the readers. In the new century due to the tough competition with the satellite TV and internet, the number of comics' lovers declined considerably. New publishing companies like Virgin Comics are striving hard to revive the paling habit by bringing up some exciting characters like Devi, Master Blaster, Sadhu etc.

III.   WOMEN IN INDIAN COMICS

Since the birth of the comics in India, the male characters have been given the central positions. Mostly all the comics produced in the beginning were ruled by male protagonists. Women were given characters with mere importance. All the dominant characters including titular ones were assigned to men. This may perhaps be a reflection of the substandard plight of the women which existed during this period. 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. This concept of misusing the women characters was later termed by comic book writer Gail Simone as 'Women in Refrigerators'. It refers to the women characters who have been miserably treated specifically in order to fuel the stories of men. Columnist Jennie Whitwood (2011) writes in the same context: "Possibly the most notorious criticism of the treatment of women in comics was from the website Women In Refrigerators. Begun in the late-90s by writer Gail Simone, this site was set up as a response to the treatment of females in comics at the time…The site suggested that women in comics should not be abused, depowered or reduced to plot devices." [2] In the last decade of the 20th century a need was felt of bringing the women characters in front. As a result characters like Shakti, Saudangi, Visargi, Black Cat, Bharti etc. were formed. Later, more efforts were made in this cause and Devi, Snake Woman etc. came up. Presently, we find many different and interesting women characters in Indian comics, although the gender portrayals in them are quite uneven. The later part of this paper discusses these gender bias and derogatory portrayals of these characters. The changing portrayal of women over the decades on the basis of different entities like profession, body type, outfit, poses, quotient etc. is also talked about in the following.

IV.   PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN EARLY INDIAN COMICS

Initially, the comics in India were highly indigenous and reflected the Indian contexts considerably. As mentioned earlier, the number of women characters was much less as compared to now but their portrayal was highly reflective and realistic. They were sketched with practical body types and in decent attire. No ridiculous poses and impractical outfits were seen on the women characters of that time. Diamond Comic's Shrimatiji, Chhanni Chachi, Bini (wife of Chacha Chaudhary) etc. are examples of such characters. One snag in the portrayal of these characters was that mostly they were assigned the profession of housewives. The women were rarely shown as bread winners. They were portrayed as beneficiaries. They were found to discuss the issues related to household and neighborhood. This never motivated the readers to encourage the women in real life. Another snag that was found in these characters was that they either played the supporting role or an unpowerful 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. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Suki* or Pran's *Pinki* exemplifies this.

V.   PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MODERN INDIAN COMICS

The last few years of the twentieth century showed a drastic change in the portrayal of women in Indian comics. More women characters were created and recognized in the comic industry. The characters were moved away from their stereotypical portrayal. The comics of this era have got highly influenced by the western world comics. They have got lured of not only the western themes but also of their ethos. As compared to the women characters of the past, now they are shown much stronger and independent. They now act as the role models for the female readers. 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. For instance, in the episode named 'Advocate Madhuri', Shakti delivers the following ideology-reflecting dialogues (originally written in Hindi): "Though I have pledged to protect the women of society, but to help this man too I will have to transform into Shakti…because it is a matter of pride for a woman to help a man… the man who believes himself to be the protector of women and yet oppresses her" [3]

Similarly, the characters like Chandika, Black Cat, Devi etc. hold the capacity of eradicating the evils found in the society. Another positive change that has occurred in modern Indian comics is that the women are now given career-oriented roles. They are shown pursuing white collar jobs and hence independent. Even if the episode is male oriented, the plot is highly based on the intellect of the women character. For instance, Shweta popularly known as Chandika is the sister of Super Commando Dhruva. She is an excellent electronics and computer expert and always helps her brother in fighting against the wicked. Similarly, one of Nagraj's closest friends Bharti is the owner of Mahanagar's media giant Bharti Communications and is always there to support Nagraj in whatever way she can. The women characters act no more as catalyst in the comics. Their presence is now central and reflective. They act as symbols for power (Shakti), vengeance (Catwoman), rebel (Natasha), intellect (Chandika), bravery (Devi), beauty (Saudangi) etc. The gender that was once sketched as weak and irresolute is now sketched incredibly powerful. They are even assigned the negative roles in the comics. Nagina, one of the biggest adversaries of the long known superhero Nagraj accentuates the fact. The positive inter-personal relationship of women characters is another constructive change in the portrayal of them. The sweet and sour brother-sister relationship of Dhruv - Shweta, the affectionate relationship of Nagraj - Bharti and the intimate relationship between Nagraj -Visarpi and Dhruv - Catwoman etc. compels the readers to improve the status of women in the real life society.

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. Apart from this, the poses of these characters are ridiculously awkward and outrageous. Their body type is always appealing for opposite gender but unattainable for the real world women. This portrays an idealistic image of women on male readers. As a result the irrational feeling of offense and jealousy sprouts in the women of the real life. When talking of women in Indian comics, one cannot refrain from mentioning a character that is gaining huge popularity but in the filthy world. A female protagonist in the Indian comics that is most popular among the audiences of adolescents and adults is Savita Bhabi. There was a time when women in comics were shown slow-witted and weak but never sordid. The trend is changing now. With wit and power, has come vulgarity. Pornographic characters like Savita Bhabi are displaying women as a sexual object. This is devaluing the dignity of women.

VI.   CONCLUSION

Swami Vivekananda in 1893 wrote in one of his letters to Haripada, "Can you better the condition of your women? Then there will be hope for your well-being. Otherwise you will remain as backwards as you are now." [4] This advice stands true even in the current Indian scenario. If we desire to develop the nation, we ought to develop the status of women first. The development should be made even in the smallest of the departments like comics. For decades the women have strived to find their identity in the comic industry. Even after being recognized, there exists an impediment in their portrayal. The comic industry in India has been greatly successful in improving the portrayal of the women characters. The women are now portrayed much strongly as compared to the past. But at the same time, one should not ignore the pitfalls. Showcasing strong personalities of women can't be a compensation for their provoking portrayal. Initially, the comics aimed to educate the children of India but with the course of time the aim has undergone an alteration. From children to young adults and even adults, the target audience has changed. The stiff competition with the satellite television and internet has forced the producers to adopt such measures that are derogatory for the women. Different marketing strategies to resist the declining graph of the readers are being incorporated. The majority of the readers are male and to woo them the obscene portrayal of women is being made. As a result, the women are losing their reputation and dignity in the real world. To some extent, these are also proving out to be one of the major causes of crime against women. This alarming rate increment can be checked if the improper portrayal of women in Indian comics is avoided.

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