

Chasmi Maria Chacko

Assistant Professor

Department of Communication English

Marian College

Kuttikanam, Idukki, Kerala, India

chasuchacko23@gmail.com

Sexed Glances: Politics of Representation in Superhero Comics

Abstract

Identity and representation remain contested in popular media. Comic book characters are not just icons of themselves; they play the role of indexes as well as are used in other social schema. For a character, the syntagm comprises of multiple parts of their iconography, including costume, abilities, the place of their origin, their physicality to name a few. They are major ground for representing and transforming cultural images. Representation is assuredly one aspect in identification and a persistent mark of changing civil discourse for marginalized groups. This paper studies the umpteen transitions in the corporeal display of a few DC and Marvel Comic book superheroes. The goal of this study is to understand the myriad ways in which male and female superheroes' bodies express not only their superpowers but also their gendered identifications. The comic reader's 'gaze' upon the physicality of the characters creates an intersection of spectacle and narrative which cannot be separated from both the corporeal body and the costume of the superhero.

Cultural studies have always shown interest in studying and analysing the recent trends in the representation of the body in the mainstream literature. It has given much attention to the anatomic approach in analysing representations of the body. Investigating the myths, ideologies, and pathologies of the body constitutes the body politics. The comic book portrays superhero's physicality which can only be seen as a cultural product and self-constituting process. There are limitless possibilities of reading a culturally produced body that can defy all normal readings.

In *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development*, Dutton claims that "the body is both the personal and social symbol of our identity, as well as the means whereby that identity is constituted" (12). In that case, we can assume that superhero identities are gendered. The bodies of such superheroes have been portrayed sensually and sexually as well. When the character of Superman was artistically construed in North America back in 1938, his creators made it sure that he possessed a muscular body, and gender differences were very visible. Put another way, we can interpret that they were busy in the process of bringing out a super sexual figure for a superhero so that people can relate to the 'super'ness in him.

In early comics, super heroines were shown as inferior or of lesser importance to their macho counterparts. Meanwhile the modern portrayals seem to be more self-confident and independent. It is true that most of the male and female heroic figures have been adorned with hyper-sexualized versions. Some artists are of the view that the physical features of the early superheroes seemed genuine and sensible in contrast to the characteristics of modern superheroes which are ideal and perfect.

Scott Bukatman in "X-Bodies" details the depiction of women characters in comics and observes that "the spectacle of the female body ... is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thighs, and hair so complete, that the comics seem to dare you to say anything about

them that isn't just redundant" (4). Similar observations can be made about the male heroic figures and their portrayal.

While breasts, thighs, hair and lips increase the fetishism of woman characters, the fetish of the male characters is directed to the muscular nature of their bodies and how they convey the male power through it. The artists who created comic strips believed that though women characters indulge themselves in warfare and heroic deeds, the overt representation of muscular body would bring down their feminine quality. This has led to the presentation of superheroes as ripped and robust than the heroines.

Super heroines are depicted as the optimal fantasy of current American femininity. Women with large breasts, sexy hips and perfect stomach attract the readers. They are presented as brave, self-confident and independent too. Increased erotic depiction and extreme sexuality continued to be part of the superhero comics. A closer look can give these super bodies a pornographic outlook. Ironically, this trend is applicable in the case of both male and female comic figures, a kind of absolute fetishism.

The defining characteristic of a comic book hero is the costume which he/she wears. We may see a shift in personality traits, appearances and even power during different interactions and situations while shifting from the page to the big screen. But costume remains the recognizable facet of the superhero's personality. It provides identity and also displays the semiotic relation with the hero's power and ideology which he/she bears.

The costume or the attire can be seen as a camouflage wherein the wearer's true identity is hidden, and the hero's private life is protected from harm. Costume gives identity to the superhero and separates him/her from others. This attire cannot be mistaken for a disguise, but it is something essential that "marks the superhero as other" (Brownie and Graydon 2). This helps them to embrace the ideologies and differences which separate them from the ordinary beings.

Interestingly, we find that the superhero uniform became standardized and contrary to the popular belief the costume was meant to establish an identity rather than protecting it. We see them wearing elastic or spandex tights which are usually worn by the circus strongmen. This explains the well-ripped or voluptuous bodies of the super hero/heroine which is an epitome of power they possess meanwhile marking them as the other.

The costume and the identity it represents are inseparable. Most of the superheroes have their costumes directly motivated or inspired from their names. Superman can function as a superhero without revealing himself as Clark Kent, his original identity, just because he depends on none but himself for performing his heroic deeds. His costume does not change according to his mood or personality like the habitual pattern of an ordinary man. In order to achieve his heroic aims, he needs to have his supernatural abilities and a devotion to his work too. The costume of Superman becomes a specimen of male strength and athleticism.

There is psychology involved too in the transformation of the costume of a Superhero as it provides him/her with a feeling of a different person with powers than if they were in their civilian clothes. The wearer's sense of physical and psychological identity is dramatically altered with the 'motors' of a costume. Throughout the history of dress, this motor effect of clothing in identity construction has been demonstrated, most notably in gender construction.

The costume not just reveals the superhero's masculine features but also establishes the gendered ideology. The idea of masculinity is linked to the attire worn by any superhero. Without them the heroes are nothing. For instance, Clark Kent, the alter-ego of Superman, without the special battle outfit seems to be deprived of his masculine qualities. The moment these superheroes put on their combat attire they unknowingly participate in the process of gender construction. Friedrich Weltzien states that Superman is accountable for establishing the idea of 'manliness'.

Superman constructs and establishes a concept of supreme manliness. Therefore to portray someone with remarkable capabilities as a mere muscular figure will not suffice. The Superman's chiselled body exposed by the combat outfit implies physical supremacy even to his alter-ego. He establishes his supreme masculine features in contrast to the inferior masculinity of other males, including the alternative version of himself.

At the outset, the costume is meant to draw the attention of the readers' to the physique and stunts of the superhero. This, in a way, declares that he has nothing to hide from his readers. At the same time, he demands his audience to question and critique his deeds. He is quite certain that they would consider him a role model and thereby follow his path of justice. These superhero costumes are dynamic, spirited and embellished.

Costume is an essential factor which plays a key role in characterising gender as a social facet. Gender Studies defines masculinity as a camouflage. Weltzien focusses on the superhero genre. He makes use of this theory to show how masculinity is constructed and established via metamorphosis. The hero is transformed from his ordinary outfit to a costumed one. The portrayal of Wonder Woman have been hyper sexualized— large breasts and a costume that barely covers her body are prevalent. A change in the artist or author matters nothing in that regard. Wonder Woman's body being hyper-sexualized assures that female power is reigned in, and indirectly mentioning the primary purpose of the body decorated in nationalist iconography to be an object for male sexual pleasure.

The comic book readers are well aware of the fact that both male and female superheroes are exceptionally dynamic and mighty. The super heroines have no chance of obtaining the chiselled muscles of men unless she is out of her fear about losing femininity. Similarly, superheroes could never present themselves as soft, fragile and vulnerable out of their fear of losing their masculinity. The spectacle and the fiction are very efficiently mixed in these comic books and it is hard to assume a superhero without these hyper-masculine

structures. The current depiction of sexed and gendered body of the superheroes indicate the psychic yearnings of a generation wherein the industry attributes less concern to the desires and gazes of female. The perfection of the superhero's body and how it is not related to the gendered reality sometimes grab the attention of the critics. Therefore one could conclude that the bodies of men and women depicted in comic books are analogous to the ones fancied by the male artists and consumers based on the nature of hegemonic masculinity.

Works Cited

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