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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MANGA AND HOW IT AFFECTS TEENAGERS

Anubhuti Anwekar
Student
Department of English
Chikitsak Samuha's Patkar-Varde College (Autonomous)

Deepti Mujumdar
HoD, English
Chikitsak Samuha's Patkar-Varde College (Autonomous)

Abstract

Gendered representations of men and women are very common across all forms of media; for the purposes of this study, the focus will be on manga. As an art form that emerged in the 19th century, the depiction of women in manga is heavily influenced by Japanese ideals of the time. Manga itself separately caters to boys and girls, in specific demographics, even in the present day. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there was rising awareness among girls and women pertaining to their depiction in media, especially in manga [Sugisaki 2]. Women were now demanding their rights as opposed to the stereotypical 'submissive' expectation. This subject is a polarizing one, with some manga featuring timid women/ 'loose' women, and others depicting women as independent and strong-willed. This paper aims to analyze the portrayal of women in manga, as well as its deep impact on teenagers. Japanese perspectives on feminism will also be discussed.

Keywords: Manga influence, cultural depictions, visual impact, women empowerment, subversion of stereotypes

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Introduction

The term 'manga' is widely used to refer to a large variety of graphic novels and comic books, originating in Japan. Manga forms a massive part of Japan's literary and visual culture, and it is typically published in black and white form. The ones who write and draw manga are known as mangaka. Manga spans across a long list of genres [fantasy, action, grit, science-fiction, time-travel, horror etc.] and appeals to very specific demographics as well [the most popular ones are shounen for young boys, and shoujo for young girls]. Because of its deep impact, the way a particular manga presents its subject and characters affects the audience's perception as well. Although manga is known for its colourful characters, gendered and stereotypical representations of men and women are very common. As an art form, manga emerged around the 19th century, and the depictions of women were heavily influenced by Japanese ideals, especially the stereotype of the selfless mother and submissive wife—i.e., a woman was defined by her connection to the men in her life.

However, Japanese women started the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s [this was also influenced by the World Wars as well as the ongoing Vietnam War], and began demanding their rights to the same educational, marital, and employment opportunities that their male counterparts enjoyed. This also trickled into the frequently problematic depictions of women in media, specifically in manga, as it is one of the largest cultural mediums in Japan. Manga has also been vastly popularised around the world, which is why it is even more important not to stereotype or pigeonhole women into narrow, one-dimensional roles.

Although manga is generally consumed by people of all ages, the most frequent readers are teenaged boys and girls, who are at a very tender and impressionable age. Manga has been found to strongly influence the views of these young girls and boys, specifically toward women—in good ways as well as bad.

Research Methodology and Objective

Primary as well as Secondary sources.This paper is based primarily on findings after thoroughly researching data gathered from conducting informal interviews in the target age group—12-18 years, as well as secondary sources.

The primary objective of this research is to spread awareness about the portrayal of women in manga, as well as to encourage teens to separate reality from fiction, and to see women in a positive and respectful light.

Japanese Feminism

In the feudal period, a strictly patriarchal system was enforced, with the woman taking care of the home, while the man fought on the battlefield and protected his family. The warriors were known as samurai. In spite of the battlefield being largely dominated by men, there have been records of women samurai as well, along with empresses and poets, which clearly shows that, while women were not on the same footing as men [and were at great risk of being insulted/harassed], they were not completely absent from the scene, either. Notably, the stereotype of a woman having to be 'submissive' and 'selfless' is prevalent in many cultures to this day, especially in many other Asian countries.In Japan, this stereotype was typically known as Yamato Nadeshiko-- 'good wife, wise mother' (Lustig n. p.).

Although the revival of the Meiji Era led to many women demanding their rights in the 1880s (Lustig n.p.), the wave of feminism did not completely hit Japan until the late 1960s.It was actively fueled by well-educated, independent women. Due to the violence and unrest caused by both World Wars [and the devastation Japan faced after the second one], women re-evaluated their role; they had actively participated in rebuilding the nation's economy by educating themselves and taking on jobs, whereas initially they were not expected to do much outside of the home. Therefore, this was the official beginning of the women's liberation movement [umanribu in Japanese].

This led to a number of achievements for women, such as being elected to the National Diet, and being granted better employment opportunities, although some fields remained largely male dominated. This movement also granted impetus to the rising awareness of girls and women toward their depictions in media, helping them be vocal about their objections or approval (Sugisaki 3).

Is the Separation of Manga into Shounen and Shoujo Really Necessary?

In its initial days, manga was not compartmentalised to target separate demographics. This classification began in the early 20th century, around 1905. This was due to the fact that the consumption of manga was mainly by young readers [generally, teens between the ages of 12 to 18], and it was found that boys and girls liked 'specific' types of manga. At this time, the manga industry was also largely dominated by men; even most of the shoujo manga were penned by men.

Shounen manga typically features a teen male protagonist, although there are exceptions to this rule—Rurouni Kenshin [1994-1999] and Gintama [2003-2018] feature men in their late 20s. They are also known for having flashy storylines and very intense action scenes, which most mangaka believe boys would appreciate. Some of the most famous shounen manga are Dragon Ball [1984-1995], Bleach [2001-2016], Naruto [1999-2014], and One Piece [1997-present]. Shoujo manga generally, but not always, have a teenaged girl, or young adult woman, as their protagonist. The art in shoujo manga is typically softer and more aesthetically pleasing as compared to shounen manga; many shoujo manga have played a large role in uplifting and inspiring young girls. The most well-known shoujo manga include Sailor Moon [1991-1997], Revolutionary Girl Utena [1996-1998], The Rose of Versailles [1972-1973], andFruits Basket [1998-2006]. It has also been noted that the male-to-female ratio of characters in manga is very often quite skewed—62.9 % are male, while 34.64 % are female (Unser-Schutz 10).

This is where the fundamental problem begins. The division of manga into two demographics is as good as saying'girls like pink, boys like blue' or 'girls like dolls, boys like cars.'Men who have no experience with shoujo manga have often unfairly criticised it as being shallow and focusing only on 'trivial' topics [such as romance], when it is anything but. In fact, shoujo manga is arguably more complex and engaging than shounen manga, but that is the matter of a lengthy and endless debate. Shounen mangaka are generally men, and the depictions of women are often not very favorable—they are targeted primarily at heterosexual males, and teenagers are very impressionable, especially as they are going through puberty. After reading some of these manga, boys tend to objectify and project onto girls, even in real life.

However, in a survey conducted for this paper, it has been observed that many girls are gravitating toward shounen manga, while boys have been reading shoujo manga [although they are in smaller numbers compared to the girls who are reading shounen manga]. Therefore, this clearly indicates that the demographics do not really matter anymore; the whole idea of gender-specific manga is irrelevant in present times. Manga is divided into two other demographics—josei for adult women and seinen for adult men—but they are not relevant to this study. It is not really necessary to separate manga into shounen and shoujo anymore, especially as manga is a cultural tool that is meant to bring people together, not to separate them.

Women in Manga

The portrayal of women in manga is a controversial and polarising topic. In most shounen manga, women are often delegated to secondary roles and are sidelined in favor of men; they are also frequently over-sexualized, depicted with rather unrealistic body types that feature large chests and extremely tiny waists [One Piece garnered especial criticism for this]. In spite of its immense popularity with both Asian and Western audiences, Naruto has attracted a lot of ire due to its poor treatment of its female characters,

especially regarding the female lead, Sakura Haruno, who is severely overlooked despite being very strong and an excellent medic. She is also seen to be in love with an abusive young man. Even the other girls simply fade into the background, exist only to be rescued, or are wholly defined by their men.

Sadly, this is not just the case with Naruto. For most shounen manga, the male cast is always prioritised more, and the girl's role is to either support these men with all her power, or be used as some kind of plot device. In Bleach, the female protagonist, Rukia Kuchiki, is depicted as refreshingly pro-active because she begins the story and drives it forward, although her role reduces somewhat toward the end [moreover, while Bleach presents a colourful array of characters and presents some very impactful women, they are never given more importance than the men, and the writing of one young girl, Orihime Inoue, is particularly bad].

More recent manga have attempted to solve the problem of female representation, giving them more active roles in the story, along with independent characterisation and reduction of fan-service. Jujutsu Kaisen [2018-present] is a good example of this; the heroine, Nobara Kugisaki, even introduces herself as 'the girl' while talking to the two boys on her high-school team, a sarcastic reference to the fact that most female leads are just reduced to being 'the girl.' All the girls in Jujutsu Kaisen have been praised as being impactful characters.

It is also to be noted that, in most shounen manga, many women are presented as giving up their dreams after marriage, becoming housewives. Career-oriented women are often portrayed as aggressive, volatile, and even frightening. In India as well, housewives are seen as more 'desirable' than working women. Although it is as misogynistic to look down on housewives as it is to dislike working women, the housewife is depicted as the 'ideal wife' in manga, while her husband pays little to no attention to household details at all [this is the case with Naruto Uzumaki and his wife, Hinata Hyuuga]. Women are free to choose their own paths, and it has been observed several times that they expertly manage both their career and their home. Therefore, reducing a woman to just a wife/mother and mocking her if she chooses to expand her career options, is just plain misogynistic.

Some manga also use toxic relationships or sexual assault as a plot device, which obviously does not sit well with readers—and it should not. It is horrible and triggering to see women being mistreated this way for the sake of a twisted male fantasy or shock value.

Among girls, one of the most popular manga is Inuyasha [1996-2008; written by a female mangaka, Rumiko Takahashi]. This is primarily due to the fact that the female lead, Kagome Higurashi, is portrayed positively, as she is courageous, takes no nonsense, is the most important character, and saves the life of the of the male protagonist, Inuyasha, several times.

Shoujo manga generally does a better job of presenting its women, although some stereotypes do still exist. In early shoujo manga, when most of the mangaka were male, the girls were often drawn as pre-pubescent, small, and with large innocent eyes; the relative softness and dreaminess of current artwork is inspired by these older trends (Stockins 22). One of the oldest manga dealing with a married woman is Sazae-san [1946-1974], written immediately in the post-World War 2 era. Sazae is vocal about women's rights, even acting as the head of the family and ordering around her husband in comicalbut thought-provoking situations. Sazae-san was very progressive for its time, showcasing a certain shift of gender roles in the new era. (Stockins 22)

The 'magical girl' genre is also one of the most empowering genres of shoujo manga. As its name suggests, this genre focuses on young girls who have magical abilities and can take on pretty much any threat, as a symbolic message to young girls that they are powerful and can achieve their dreams through sheer force of will and determination. The best example of this is Sailor Moon [1991-1997], wherein a bunch of teenaged girls are given superpowers based on planets, and save the world from many threats. The manga also tries to teach young girls that it is absolutely okay to be vulnerable.

In most shoujo manga, girls are given the most prominent and active roles as the protagonists, with their own vibrant personalities, dreams, hopes, and motivations. This also helps set the tone for young girls, as they can look up to many of these protagonists as role models. Perhaps this is because most current shoujo mangaka are women, thereby understanding the psychology of girls well enough to understand what they want. Tohru Honda from Fruits Basket is an iconic shoujo heroine, as she has a lovable personality, and is not passive at all, in spite of being very gentle and kind. In fact, she assumes a rather active role in the story, resolving major conflicts and coming out on top without much help.

Shoujo manga also tend to present femininity as something that is powerful, but not the girl's entire identity. This is a very important lesson for girls and women; it helps them feel comfortable in their skin. Although some shoujo manga depict romance in a rather toxic way [Wolf Girl and Black Prince is a prime example: the girl has almost no independent motivations; the boy is heavily sadistic], it is generally handled fairly well.

A very interesting and important thing some shoujo manga do is to explore themes of women's gender identity and sexuality, territory that is often considered taboo. These manga are very interesting to read, because they stay in one's head long after they are done reading, and really make the brain tick. Shiroi Heya no Futari ["The Couple in the White Room", published in 1971 and considered the first manga to depict female homosexuality] depicts a poignant, tragic romance between two young girls at a French boarding school, drawn together in spite of their sharply contrasting personalities.

Oscar Francois de Jarjayes, the central character of The Rose of Versailles, blurs the line between man and woman; she was born a woman, but raised as a man by her father, who wanted a son and trained her to be one of the finest soldiers in all of France. Though she constantly questions her identity, she tries to strike a balance between masculinity and femininity, and succeeds. She is a complex and well-fleshed-out character. Revolutionary Girl Utena also presents an intriguing dynamic between the two female protagonists, Utena and Anthy, with their relationship being largely left to the readers' interpretation.

How It Affects Teenagers

In recent years, there has been a steady rise in the consumerism of graphic novels due to their pictorial representation, which is perhaps why teens are drawn toward manga.

Manga serves as an influential model because teenagers are impressionable. It is generally a wish-fulfilling medium for readers, hence the separation into shounen and shoujo. For teens, manga acts as an otherworldly escape, because they often feel stifled and restricted in their own homes, boxed into a 'mundane' life.

Since manga [especially shounen] doesn't often do a good job of portraying women and girls-- constantly objectifying and/or sidelining them-- it fuels misogyny in young boys. Domestic violence and sexual assault/harassment are also horrifying realities that many women experience, but unfavorable manga representations lead to desensitisation in boys. It also teaches them to look at women as 'other' beings, mere objects and not worthy of the same respect as themselves. Theystart seeing themselves as superior to women and, in more extreme cases, might experience twisted power fantasies, influenced by some shounen manga. It has also been observed that teenagers often do not know how to separate reality from fiction, which means they project their fantasies regarding fictional women onto real women, putting them in real danger. There is already plenty of misogyny in the world, without misogynist manga adding fuel to the fire.

Another thing that teen boys need to remember is that there is no 'ideal' woman, just as there is no 'ideal' man. All men and women have different perspectives on life, as well as different goals. Therefore, idealising the 'perfect' woman won't get them anywhere.

Girls read manga as much as boys do, and many of them have voiced their disapproval of these crude kinds of depictions.They feel as if women are not allowed to have identities of their own, and must be shoehorned into a certain trope to fit the ideals of men—a very harmful thing to teach young girls. The over-sexualization of female characters in shounen manga also leaves young girls feeling very insecure about their bodies.

As for shoujo manga, many girls have said that they feel quite empowered after reading it, citing Sailor Moon as one of their biggest inspirations. Shoujo manga also gives them the courage to follow their

dreams and aspirations, as well as seek their own identity away from the strict boundaries of society—all very positive influences. On the flip side, some girls have stated that the portrayal of young women as super-powered entities who can defeat just about any threat has also affected their self-esteem, as they do not have these 'magical powers'.

Therefore, each coin has two kinds—this is a very grey area and more attention needs to be paid to what teenagers think and perceive while reading manga.

Conclusion

It is of utmost importance for the mangaka to be careful about what they present. Every teen picks up a volume of the manga in order to read something refreshing and interesting, learning something along the way. Many portrayals of women are simply outdated and not funny at all—just musty and baseless. Mangaka must be able to adopt a balanced viewpoint and depict a woman as a real person—with her own personality, character quirks, and good as well as bad points. They must also be able to look beyond the boundaries of gender, placing their male and female characters on an equal footing and thereby promoting equality and inclusivity. It might take some more time, but as female representation slowly but steadily increases, many teens might take their cue and gain more positive influences from manga.

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