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## Women and Comics: finding a female voice in the tradition of comics

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### Abstract

This paper titled 'Women and Comics: Finding a Female Voice in the Tradition of Comics' is aimed at an overview of the history of comics from a female perspective, that is, comics written for girls and women and the portrayal of women in comics underlining the American comic book industry. The study focuses on movements in comic history that have more didactic purposes, such as to show emotional trauma, social and cultural issues of girls. The study also reflects that readers and writers of comics though predominantly male, nonetheless, comics have also been written, read and enjoyed by women.

**Keywords:** Comics, women, voice, male, mainstream, portrayal, genre, underground.

### 1. Introduction

'Today it is generally assumed that the world of comic books is male. [...] There was a time when girl comic readers actually outnumbered the boys.' These were the observations of Trina Robbins noted in her article 'Women in Comics: An Introductory Guide'. Thus, the much popular idea about mainstream American comics that, it is essentially of, for and by men is put to question. This directs us to personal reminiscences of two other women comic writers which can be brought forth in the following two extensive citations.

'The summer I was eleven years old I went away to summer camp with a stack of Archie comics. I would like on my bunk bed, snuggled up in my sleeping bag, and read about Betty and Veronica bathing at the beach, prancing about in polka-dot bikinis, and fending off boys. Within the year I discovered Sassy magazine and the erotic books beneath my sister's bed, and left Betty and Veronica behind for good. Instead I read Sassy's fashion spreads on dresses-over-jeans, combat boots, and punk rock hair dye. In the evenings, I read my sister's smut and learned about oral sex, masturbation, hymens, and fetishes. Archie and Betty and Veronica were devoid of the prurient details that I craved as a teenage girl. It took almost a decade until I discovered that comic books can be feminist and sexy<sup>[1]</sup>.

'My childhood was filled with comics. I learned to read at the age of 4 with Little Lulu. I was inspired by Lulu's ability to confront boys and find ways to join a club in which being a woman was counted against you from the start - a club that reflected in its "women aren't allowed" sign the future limitations the majority of women would confront when they grew up. When I was 10 or 11, my heroes were two female characters created by men: Aleta, Prince Valiant's lady and Diana Palmer, the Phantom's eternal girlfriend. I was never convinced by superheroines with supernatural powers. For me, Aleta, the Queen of the Misty Isles, possessed all the characteristics that a 10-year-old girl could hope for. She was beautiful and intelligent; a queen who married a prince. In my readings, I assumed the roles that Aleta had as a romantic lover and model mother as something natural and proper for women. On the other hand, Diana Palmer, the Phantom's girlfriend, seemed to be another female character with great possibilities. To be the girlfriend of a mysterious and legendary man who lived in the heart of the jungle seemed to me to be the romantic extreme<sup>[2]</sup>.

The two quotes above compel us to direct ourselves in answering two questions – What will women read? And Why?

### 2. Comic book stories: The desire of female minds

Till the age of eight to ten there is little difference in what a girl or a boy would prefer to

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read. Thus searching for the preferential difference in reading habits based on gender at such an early age may prove fruitless. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when writing genres like Detective series, Science fiction and Ghost stories were on an upsurge and had become popular, the line demarcating the choice of books and reading habits among young readers was indistinct. During the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century however there was a spurt and expansion in writings specifically for children. Children's literature was upswing. During that period an unwritten law seemed prevalent. A boy could read whatever he desired but school authorities and parents decided what a young female reader is supposed to read. There were few books published and made available for female readers which were mandatorily devoid of any content close to sensuous. Thus it had few takers and catered to very a small group of women readers. A young woman of those times registered her dissatisfaction in the following lines – 'People try to make boy's books as exciting and amusing as possible, while we girls, who are much quicker and more imaginative, are often supposed to read milk-and-watery sort of stories that we could generally write better ourselves [3].

Yet for Women who loved reading comics the problem was crude and basic. 'Navigating the typical comic book store, complete with trolls, trivia fiends, teenage boys, and two-dimensional gigantic tits, is intimidating for those lacking an X chromosome [4]. As 'Comic book shops are generally bastions of acne-infused boys and their festering hormones. Persuading stores to carry women's comic books can be a battle [5].

In such an environment it is logical that only few women would get interested to 'buy' comics. Also during those years the Comics Industry did not seek the attention of women as the 'fair gender' was not considered as a potential buyer or reader of comics. So the female characters in them were barely depictions of male fantasy. Hence 'The marvel of generic superheroes carries limited excitement for females who don't identify with damsels in distress or submissive secretaries [6]. As a result '...what has long been lacking in the comic book industry: real and often a strong point of view of the world from a female perspective [7].

### 3. Women in comics: Historical perspective

During 1940s this scenario started taking a new turn. 'During the war years, more women worked in comics than ever before. With male cartoonists overseas, as in other industries, women stepped in, drawing exciting female characters (such as detectives, counterspies, jungle girls and girl commandos) for comic books [8]. Among them Tarpe Mills and Dale Messick are prominent. The character *Miss Fury* created by Mills for newspaper strip had enthralled entire America during those times and *Brenda Starr*, created by Messick, 'the red haired girl reporter was an instant favourite, especially among women [9].

During the golden era of comics (1950s) women characters were portrayed keeping male desires in mind. Example of such female image created by male gaze was *Good Girls*. According to comics reviewer Jim B 'Good Girl comics are a genre that go back to World War II and the glory days of comic books. The phrase is generally used to refer to the

whole class of glamorous heroines whose portrayal owes a lot to the pin-up tradition of cheesecake.' [10] During 1937 Good Girl comics came up with a character named *Phantom Lady* created by artist Matt Baker in the likes of Superman. Later Baker gave a makeover to the character of *Phantom Lady* in 1950s. The costume, hairdo, body language underwent a sea change and now writings with underpinning crude sexual connotations were noticed. Such a phenomenon continued, and characterisation of women in comic strips created by men became laden with overtones of pornography.

In this very decade of 1950s crisis and uncertainty surrounded the realm of comics publishing. During World War II superhero characters were very popular. After the end of the war, comics mostly narrated stories of crime and horror. In both the genres women were depicted with a misogynistic outlook. In the series titled 'Crime Does Not Pay' the cover pages (Vol. 22, 24, 33) depicted the naked truth of violence against women.

### 4. Censorship in comics: The Comic Code

1950s was an epitome of orthodox mindset prevailed in the U.S. society with fundamentalists on the upsurge. The popularity of comics among youth during the time became worrisome for their parents. In 1953 a Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency was constituted by the U.S. Senate to investigate if reading comics had any relation with growing teenage violence. Collective views were generated against the reading of comics. On 19 April 1945 with the publication of psychiatrist and anti-comic crusader Dr. Fredric Wertham's '*Seduction of the Innocent: the influence of comic books on today's youth*' the censorship and sanitization process of the comic book industry began.

During this period many school authorities acted like the Nazi's in Germany and burnt comic books. It was difficult to avail any other comics than those like *Bugs Bunny* in most shops in the US. The Comics Industry and comic art was put to plead for mercy forcibly and was reprimanded. Following this in 1954 the 'Standards of the Comics Code Authority' was laid down by the self-censoring Comics Code Authority (CCA) formed by the comic book publishers. Thus an orthodox manifesto was created, bearing semblance to the medieval era which was against the creative and artistic expression of the times. In the garb of controlling crime filled comics the various annexure of the code got dovetailed with certain severe orthodox influences which was enough to suffocate the comics industry as a free spirited evolving form of expression.

### 5. Women's liberation and comics: Female voice in Wimmen's Comix

The implementation of Code for writing comics was a watershed in the history of comics in the U.S. Even though it temporarily narrowed down the sphere of women in comics the phenomenon changed soon in the 1960s. The ushering in of women's liberation movement brought many women artists and writers to take up writing comics. Initially their writings appeared in small publications which can be referred to as underground comics. The person in command to this road was Trina Robbins who deserves a special

mention. She began writing comics in 1966 in EVO (East Village Other) magazine in Los Angeles. In 1970 when Trina migrated to San Francisco, eventually the city became the heart of underground comics. Robbins said, 'By the early 1970s, the women's liberation movement was in full swing, and affected most industries, including comics. Women cartoonists, disgusted by their portrayal in mainstream comics, and disenchanted with an all-male underground commix *boy's club* that excluded them, produced their own comics (or commix) <sup>[11]</sup>. Within a year from this we witness the launch of 'It Ain't Me, Babe' comics which was the first comics to be exclusively written and designed by women authors. 'Comix anthologies like It Ain't Me, Babe, Wimmen's Comix, and the outrageously named Tits and Clits were forums for new women cartoonists to communicate previously taboo subjects that mattered to them and to their readers: sexual harassment, abortion, lesbianism, single motherhood, sex and sexism - and certain not-yet legal drugs <sup>[12]</sup>. Some renowned women comic artists of those times are Lee Marrs, Shary Flenniken, Roberta Gregory and Trina Robbins herself. After a while 'Wimmen' was respelt as 'Wimmin' so that it bears no trace of the word 'men'.

#### 6. Conclusion: New frontier in women's comics

In the 1980s and 90s the fresh turn of events in the comics industry saw a visible rise in the number of women writers and comic artists. Publishers were now interested to build new a class of readers. Thus towards the end of 20th century we see the emergence of *Graphic Novel*. The idea, planning and subject matter of *Graphic Novels* were distinctly akin to literature. A new technique of storytelling emerged and experimentation with layout and execution was evident with an eye towards detailing. The number of women writers in comics has increased and as a consequence their work is more visible in the mainstream. In this connection Jill Thompson, Donna Barr, Wendy Pini, Lee Marrs along with the famous creator of currently popular *Persepolis* Marjane Satrapi deserves mention. A new horizon in the world of women's comics is evident which has been appropriately articulated in the words of Trina Robbins – '...the internet is the newest place to find comics by women. While most cartoonists have websites, some women are starting to put their own comics up on the internet, where they can be read by anyone with access to a computer. Today, computers and cheap photocopy machines make it possible for anyone with a message to produce their own comics <sup>[13]</sup>.

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