



Wonder Woman in Print and Film: The Evolution of Female Representation

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Abstract

Comic art as an art form has undergone a series of changes and transformations. Through these developments, researchers have been able to track the portrayal of women in comics. This study employed a qualitative method to explore the extent to which comics reflect evolving societal attitudes toward gender roles during specific historical periods. By analyzing the Wonder Woman franchise, the research highlights how the representation of women has shifted in response to changing cultural and ideological contexts.

Keywords: Comic art, Gender, Women in comics, history of women in comics.

المرأة الخارقة في القصص المصورة والأفلام: تطور تمثيل الإناث عبر الزمن

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ملخص: شهد فن القصص المصورة، كنوع فني بصري وسردي، سلسلة من التغيرات والتحويلات. ومن خلال هذه التطورات، تمكن الباحثون من تتبع تصوير المرأة في القصص المصورة. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً لاستكشاف مدى انعكاس المواقف المجتمعية المتغيرة تجاه الأدوار الجنسانية في فترات تاريخية مختلفة. ومن خلال تحليل سلسلة المرأة الخارقة ((Wonder Woman، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على كيفية تغيير تمثيل المرأة استجابة للتحويلات الثقافية والأيدولوجية عبر الزمن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القصص المصورة، السينما، اقتباس الأفلام.

Introduction

Comic for as long as human beings have been documenting history, the combination of words and images has been used as a way to tell the deeply rooted history of humanity (McCloud, 1993; Eisner, 2008). The importance of recording history manifests in the way that it allows people to track attitudes through periods of history (Kunzle, 1973). The evolution of women in comics and film enables the viewer to track the changing position of women in society (Robbins, 2002; Chenault, 2007). This article addresses the history of comics and their transformation to reach their present form. This enables one to study and analyze the historical context within which these comics and films were produced. The researcher used Wonder Woman comics and film as an example of the changing evolution of women.

A History of Comics: West and East, Past and Present:

The Unwritten History of Women in Comics:

As Les Daniels said, “Comics were not created—they evolved” (Daniels, 1971). Yet, this evolution failed to mention the unquestionable contribution of women in the writing, illustrating, and production of comics. This discrimination against women in the history of the comics industry was confronted when the executive officer of the Angoulême International Comics Festival, Franck Bondoux, claimed that the lack of nominations of women was due to their lack of qualifications. This announcement was met with a backlash in the comics industry by women such as Caitlin McGurk, the associate curator of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library, who emphasized that during the first half of the 20th century, women had to create a pseudonym to be able to publish their work and avoid discrimination (McGurk, 2020). An example of this is Dalia Messick, who published her comic “Brenda Starr, Reporter,” which was a big success during the 1940s, under the alias “Dale” (Messick, 2005). The event that occurred during the International Comics Festival led 12 people to drop out of the nomination as a stand against the sexism that female creators encounter in the comics industry. This latter forced the committee of this festival to dispense with the list and give the academy members the free will to vote for whomever they chose (McCubbin, 2016).

Caitlin McGurk points out that “For over 100 years, we have seen the presence of women in the American comics” (McGurk, 2016). In fact, before the Second World War, women published their work in the form of comic strips, children’s books, or anonymously rather than through comic books. However, this would change along with the onset of the war (McCubbin, 2016). World War 2 marked a new era; men had to enlist, and women were forced to join the labor force, which included joining the comic industry as a way to boost the morale of the soldiers. For example, the first female comic book, *Miss Fury*, was published by June Mills under the pseudonym “Tarpé” (Chenault, 2007). Shortly after the publication of the first female comic book by a female comic artist, *Wonder Woman* was created by William Moulton Marston and edited by Alice Marble (Guevara-Flanagan, Leban, & Szajko, 2012). Marston created this comic book as a counterreaction against the “bloodcurdling masculinity of contemporary comics,” and he hoped “that *Wonder Woman* would help to inspire needed socio-political change”. Marston wanted to provide girls with a female role model to aspire to. Later, the associate editor, Alice Marble, created a feature that was displayed in *Wonder Woman* comics and *Sensation Comics* from the period 1942 to 1954. *Wonder Women of History* told real-life stories of women who made a mark for themselves in history, such as Lillian D Wald, who was a nurse and founder of American Community Nursing. Marble eventually stopped this series of backup stories when she stopped receiving credit (Matsuuchi, n.d.).

The fact that history overlooks the achievements of female comic artists highlights the lack of support in this

industry. During the golden era, women were hired by comic shops as scripters and artists, but credit was rarely given for their work. This led comic artists such as June Hill, Gloria Kamen, Betty Kathe, Pauline Loth, and Georgette Sauterel, who worked for Jack Binder's shop, to quit during the early 1940s. Besides comic shops, comic companies such as Marvel and DC had a bad history of discriminating against female comic artists during this era. Elizabeth Burnley Bentley was the only female who worked throughout the 1940s in DC, known then as National Periodicals. Bentley never received credit for penciling and lettering backgrounds for Batman and Superman (Chenault, 2007). As for Marvel Comics, which was known as Timely for a while, this company stopped buying comics from one of the only comic shops that supported female comic artists, National. Fortunately, there were other cases when women were treated equally to men. An example of this was portrayed in Lloyd and Grace Jacquet's shop, Funnies Inc., which provided their artists with equal opportunities, regardless of their gender, as they urged their artists to work independently on comics and sign them. Fiction House is another company that established a better work environment, which allowed artists such as Lilly Peters to profit from her published work, namely, Jane Martin, Werewolf Hunter, and The Lost World (Chenault, 2007).

However, as the war came to an end, men tried to reclaim their jobs, and women were pushed back home. The few women who worked for Marvel Comics were forced to quit after the shortage of men dissipated. In actuality, Vivian Lipman Berg was the last female to work for the company for a long duration. Yet despite the efforts to exclude women from the industry, female comic artists defied the status quo and made their presence known along with the progression of comic art. As for those who were unable to deal with the discrimination, they illustrated children's books; after the birth of underground comix, women were given another opportunity to produce their work. As such, the first all-woman comic was published in 1970 under the title *It Ain't Me Babe*. This one-shot was co-produced by Trina Robbins and Willy Mendes and featured stories by Robbins and Mendes as well as Nancy Kalish, Meredith Kurtzman, Michele Brand, Lisa Lyons, and Carole. Robbins and her colleagues, who came from a feminist newspaper, told stories about their experiences with sexist double standards, discussed women's sexuality, and fought for their reproductive rights. Due to the number of copies sold, this one-shot underground comic turned into an influential long-running series of *Wimmen's Comix*, lasting for 20 years (Chenault, 2007).

Underground comix gave women a platform to fight back against the toxic masculinity that existed in the comics industry. Thus, very few women worked in the mainstream comic book industry, which caused a shortage of female comic artists and consumers in mainstream comics. The decrease in profit called for a change in strategy for mainstream companies. Stan Lee's attempt to regain his female readers involved re-establishing a line of women's comics. Trina Robbins emphasized in an interview that women's comics required "women to write and draw them," and they "didn't have enough women in the business" (Bolhafner, 1994).

Eventually, after Marvel made headway in hiring female creators, the strategy was deemed successful as comics were published under the full names of the female artists. One of the women who was hired by Marvel was Ann Nocenti, who edited works such as *Star Wars* and Marvel's best-selling *X-Men* and wrote for comics, including *Doctor Strange*. As for DC, when Jenette Kahn was promoted to president from 1981 to 2002, a great number of female creators were hired. Among these artists is Dann Thomas, the first woman who receive credit for scripting *Wonder Woman* (Chenault, 2007). Since the beginning of mainstream comics, the media have constantly depicted comic book fandom and creators as masculine. The reality is that "Women more or less remained in the background, helping their husbands, or contributing work as secretaries who doubled as inkers, letterers and editors," as Jill S. Katz points out in her academic paper "Women and Mainstream Comic Books". There were far more women working in the profession throughout the 20th century than history indicates, and in the 21st century, they flourished (Rhode, 2017). The comic industry is more inclusive and diverse in this era than ever before. This can be seen in Miles Morales, the new incarnation of Spider-Man that was introduced into comics in 2011. Miles is half black and half Latino, a different portrayal from the first version of Spider-Man's Peter Parker.

Another example is the new Black Panther series, written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, an African-American creator. Black Panther was first introduced as the first black superhero character, and it spoke to multiple black identities, which undoubtedly contributed to the movie's success. As for religion, Marvel announced in 2013 its first Muslim character to headline a comic book. Kamala Khan, Ms. Marvel, is a 16-year-old Pakistani-American girl created by G. Willow Wilson, a Muslim comic creator. In 2015, this graphic novel won the Hugo Award, the highest prize in fantasy and science fiction literature, for the best graphic story (Maccini, n.d.). Comics have evolved and continue to evolve; along with that, the industry should acknowledge its past because doing so will help to make this a diverse and inclusive platform.

Methodology

An effective dissertation is often characterized by background information on the topic, clear research questions, and appropriate methods. After focusing on the slow evolution of comic art in the first chapter, from cave drawing to comic books, and in the second chapter, on analyzing the changing position of women in society through studying comic books, the third part of this dissertation focuses on the methodology, which is often seen as the reason behind an individual's conduct of research. Because there is a gap in the literature on gender in comics, this study takes on a more exploratory nature. The lack of research in this field of study makes this research a subject that has not been clearly defined. Thus, exploratory research is implemented to gain a better understanding of this existing problem. Exploratory research is research that is conducted as a way to review the data and the literature, which enables the researchers to understand the problem. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative research method was more appropriate for the treatment of such problems. Qualitative research is multi-method in focus; it involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the subject. This means that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings" and attempt to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1996). Thus, the qualitative part of this research enables the researcher to understand the social reality of culture. For example, through exploring and analyzing the different comics that were published from the Golden to the Modern era, the researcher was able to observe the change in women's position within society as well as develop a deep understanding of how comic artists perceive and shape their social reality.

Research Rationale:

Thus, while thousands of studies have been done to study the evolution of comic art, this art form is far from being exhausted as a research area. Specifically, new studies can be conducted in the field of gender representation in comics. Due to the gap in the literature in this field of study, the rationale behind this research paper was to explore the different representations in comics between male and female characters. Therefore, the research paper intends to study comic art as a form of resistance to gender relations that exist in Moroccan society. To achieve this aim, the researcher followed these core research objectives:

- To assess the historical context within which each comic book is produced.
- To study the changes through which the position of women in society has undergone.

Research Hypotheses and Questions:

A research hypothesis describes the results that the researcher expects to find. In other words, research hypotheses are predictions or educated guesses that the researcher expects as an outcome of the research. Thus, since the purpose of this research is to study the change and show the extent to which the portrayal of women in comics mirrors the collective attitudes toward gender roles, this research hypothesizes that:

- Analysing gender through comics provides us with the ability to track attitudes over time.
- The representation of women in comics is a reflection of the societal attitudes during which the comics

are produced.

Beyond these hypotheses, which focus on the role that comic books play in our society and in questioning the status quo that has been imposed on us since the beginning of time, another essential element in conducting a useful research study is the research questions. The importance of the latter lies in the fact that a research methodology or strategy is determined by the nature of the research question and the subject being investigated (Denzin, 2005). Thus, this study focuses on answering these questions:

- To what extent do gender structures that manifest in comics reflect the gender attitudes of the target audience?

Data Analyses

The method that the researcher used in this research is the comparative analysis method. Comparative Method is “the process of comparing situations, groups, cultures, which are similar and yet which differ in known ways” (Hantrais, 1995). Through implementing this methodology, the researcher can compare and notice the differences that exist in the representation of certain phenomena. This research paper uses this method to compare various versions of Wonder Woman, as the eighty-year-old comic book played a role in reflecting the evolution of women’s position in society went through. By comparing the changes that the costume and personality of Wonder Woman underwent, this research paper was able to analyze the extent to which comic books provide us with the ability to track consumers’ attitudes towards comic content over time.

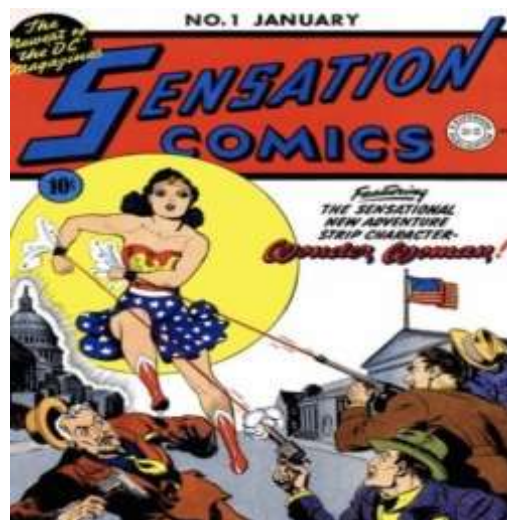


Figure 1 Cover of Wonder Woman No. 1 (First Edition)

Comparative Content Analysis:

The following section aims to provide a meticulous analysis of the evolution of Wonder Woman as a way to study the change through which comics provide us with the ability to track attitudes over time. In other words, comic books are shaped by the historical context within which they are produced. They not only allow us to track attitudes through time but also produce work that can create a chain reaction and, therefore, cause a change in society. To explain further, comic art has been portraying the change that the position of women in society has undergone. Because the eighty-year-old comic book Wonder Woman is considered one of the first female superhero comics that was created as an act of resistance against the misogyny that existed during the 20th century in America, this research will study the evolution that this comic art went through. Through analyzing the changes that Wonder Woman experienced, this paper will highlight the changes through which the position of women in society changed.



Figure 2 Cover of Sensation Comics Featuring Wonder Woman

The original version of Wonder Woman was created in 1941, during World War II, by William Moulton Marston. Wonder Woman was the resulting product of Marston's inspiration from the feminism that existed during the war period, a period during which women were prompted to leave their traditional roles as housewives to join typical male-occupied positions. Similarly, Wonder Woman, under the alias of Diana Prince, joined the military as a nurse. Her character was also a great asset for motivation for soldiers through her patriotic acts of fighting the Nazis while maintaining her unwavering virtues of peace and love. Her distinctive outfit, which consisted of a Gold tiara, wristbands, a red strapless top decorated with a golden eagle, red boots, and blue culottes spangled with white stars, was inspired by patriotic drawings of Lady Liberty from the suffragette movement and ensured to make her an American hero despite her background.



Figure 3 Postwar Reinvention of Wonder Woman in the Diana Prince Era

While Wonder Woman represented the image of independent women during the period of war, the postwar version of Wonder Woman was a reflection of women as they were pushed back into their roles as housewives. During this period, Marston passed away, leaving Wonder Woman to DC Comics, which subjected the character to the changes that new writer Bob Kanigher and artists, including Ross Andru, deemed fit, and reflected the gender roles of that period. Wonder Woman turned from a symbol of feminism and independence to a dainty

woman whose only focus was her relationship with Steve Trevor and her job as the Justice Society of America's secretary. The change that Wonder Woman went through during this period was also apparent in the change in her costume. The culottes changed into shorter, skin-tight shorts, and the boots changed into pumps with leg straps. Similarly, women in America were being pushed back to their traditional gender roles as men came back from the war and took over the workforce.



Figure 4: Political Reimagining of Wonder Woman in “Miss Wonder Woman for President”

By the late 1960s, DC came to the decision that Wonder Woman needed a drastic transformation. The writers and artists changed Wonder Woman from a demure woman to a feminist modern woman. The new version of Wonder Woman changed her name to Diana after she denounced her old image and embraced her new life as a modern girl. Diana Prince was stripped of her powers, lasso, and bracelets, became a boutique owner, and learned martial arts. Her costume turned from the traditional Wonder Woman costume to a modern version of Diana, who modelled a line of sleek jumpsuits. The latter was influenced by Emma Peel, the popular character who starred in the British TV series *The Avengers*. While this version of Wonder Woman is an independent woman, she is still a far cry from the original, powerful superhero that she was known as.

This new imagery did not last long because, along with the suffragist movement, came a new age of independent women. The women's liberation movement allowed for a gradual shift in societal attitudes. Women's role in the labor force grew from “one in every five American women who worked” in 1900 to “three in five” by 1990 (Chenault, 2007). In 1972, the owner of the first feminist magazine, Ms. Magazine, Gloria Steinem, criticized the new version of Wonder Woman for not being the powerful feminist that she was first created to be. Steinem highlighted the importance of the existence of a strong and independent female superhero. Thus, a new version of Wonder Woman was created to reflect the women's liberation movement of that period, which earned her a debut on the cover of the first Ms. Magazine, titled *Wonder Woman for President*. The rebooted version of Wonder Woman was given back her original power and a new costume, as well as a dark-skinned sister called Nubia. Wonder Woman's journey back to her roots made her a recognizable icon of the feminist movement in America.



Figure 5: Mechanized Warrior Aesthetic in Wonder Woman's Rebirth Redesign

However, this changed in the 1990s when DC decided to execute the “Rebirth” initiative. The “Rebirth” initiative was the result of their inspiration from the new genre of movies that existed during that period, namely Terminator, Alien, and Thelma and Louis. This initiative was based on replacing known superhero characters with a new and exaggerated version of the characters. For Wonder Woman, the focus was on her feminine features, her large breasts, her long hair, and her small waist, which was in opposition to the female empowerment that occurred during the previous era. During this decade, the strength of Wonder Woman was deeply intertwined with her overly sexualized representation (Guevara-Flanagan, Leban, & Szajko, 2012). As for male superheroes, Batman morphed into a Hulk-like figure with his chiseled body armor. Trina Robbins observed that both male and female superheroes were not presented as “physically flawless human beings” but as exaggerated. Fantasies designed for the presumed readership (Robbins, 2002).



Figure 6: Cinematic Reinterpretation of Wonder Woman in the 2017 Film

As for the modern version of Wonder Woman, this latter came in the form of action dolls and a movie. Historically, the claims against the absence of female superheroes' action dolls have been dismissed with the excuse that ‘girls do not play with action figures. However, according to a Facebook survey that was done by Brett Schenker, female comic book consumers make up 46.67% of comic book consumers (Schenker, n.d.). Thus, a

modern version of Wonder Woman was designed to create action dolls that are “targeted at a young female demographic that has been starved” for a female superhero (Guevara-Flanagan, Leban, & Szajko, 2012). Jenn Rahardjanoto, Wonder Woman’s artist, stated that DC’s female characters “have been drawn in a pin-up style that most appeals to men”; hence, the new version does not “wear high heels and short skirts”; she wears “flats or boots along with their iconic outfits” (Guevara-Flanagan, Leban, & Szajko, 2012). The release of the first female superhero action dolls made way for the release of the first female superhero movie. Wonder Woman managed to make “a net estimated profit of \$252.9 after all ancillaries” (D’Alessandro, n.d.). The latter is considered to be the first big movie that was directed by a female director, Patty Jenkins. The costume that Wonder Woman wore was inspired by Xena: The Warrior Princess, with her armored top and gladiator skirt. The movie and action dolls were the first to take into consideration the protests of female comic consumers instead of focusing solely on the desires of the heterosexual male readership.

In conclusion, the eighty-year-old comic book Wonder Woman reflects the gender attitude in America: from the independent version of Wonder Woman during the war period, to the post-war version of Wonder Woman, a dainty woman who is more focused on romance, to the later 1950s version of powerless and ‘modern’ Wonder Woman, to the 1970s version of the feminist Wonder Woman, to the 1990s version of overly sexualized Wonder Woman, to the 21st modern version of powerful and independent Wonder Woman. This research paper used Wonder Woman as a sample to study the extent to which comic books reflect the gender relations of a target audience. The evolution of Woman as a female superhero reflects the change that the position of women in America went through. This proves that the first hypothesis in this research paper, which entails that analyzing gender through comics provides us with the ability to track attitudes over time, is correct.

Conclusion

“The visual arts matter because they are about resistance, celebration, and transformation,” Teresa Torres de Eça (Inge, Jackson, & L. S., n.d.*). In conclusion, by studying the evolution that female characters went through, specifically Wonder Woman, the researcher concluded that comics provided us with the ability to track the changing position of women in society. The first super-heroines were introduced during the Golden Age (1938–45), but post-war domesticity swiftly replaced them. Women were reduced to victims during the late 1940s horror and crime boom, and the obedient girlfriend took the role of the femme fatale when the Comics Code Authority was imposed in 1954. Before second-wave feminism and the underground comics that accompanied it prioritized women's voices, first in jest and later in earnest, the 1960s Silver Age superhero renaissance reinforced these limitations. From romance to sci-fi to the “grim-and-gritty” Dark Age of the 1980s, every shift in genre preferences reshaped the possibilities for women writers. Therefore, monitoring those fluctuations entails monitoring societal perceptions of gender. The eighty-year-old comic book Wonder Woman reflects the gender attitude in America: from the independent version of Wonder Woman during the war period, to the post-war version of Wonder Woman, a dainty woman who was more focused on romance, to the late 1950s version of powerless and ‘modern’ Wonder Woman, to the 1970s version of feminist Wonder Woman, to the 1990s version of overly sexualized Wonder Woman, to the 21st modern version of powerful and independent Wonder Woman.

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