



Comics in India: Binary Presentations of Characters and Idealisation of the situations

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Abstract

Comics in India have developed after the post-Colonial development of literature as such. Here when we look at the whole genre with all of its content that has been produced in this specific area from the last 70 years we may have a look at how the portrayal of the main character has been done and how it has been perceived by the people. Children's literature in general is the literature that is subject to criticism on the basis that whether it is appropriate or not for the particular kind of readers it has been addressing to so the characters portrayed reveal this kind of pre conceptual notion in the writer's mind. This kind of presentation by an artist in comics is marked with variation. A character or situation is the medium through which the main purpose of that particular work is revealed and when they are portrayed in either and or situations and whether they must have these qualities or that qualities it is subject to investigation that how such portrayal are taken into notice by both readers (children and adults) and critics (usually only adults). Here this paper is going to see into this branch of characterization and situation in the idealistic form or in a realistic form in the developing genre of comics in India.

Introduction

When it comes to what children literature is and what are the various specific characteristics of it, researchers as well as writer both of them are still to define any particular definition of what it should be and how it should be? One has always tried to define what a book that has been meant for a child should be what it must contain and all. And even if what children's literature is defined one cannot define what age group should be particularly included in what group of reading, which sort of books some children should be given and which some other. In all this problems Indian comics have developed after the end of colonial period by the English, we saw a kind of development in it by the beginning of *Amar Chitra Katha* publications, *Indrajal* publications releasing titles like *Phantom*, *Mandrake*, *Flash Gordon*, *Rip Kirby*. Though if one will go to recent development of comics in India we will come across more of the graphic novels that are basically dealing with a kind of subject that are far away from the development of the comics in the beginning of it. In the prior period of the development of comics they

were loaded with the characters who are either some kind of superhero or has a power to access some kind of knowledge that makes the person outstand the common folks or other then this the character would be a common man who has to deal with the problems that we too suffer and how it leads us to the way where there is the solution of the problem from which a man is suffering. The basic function of the comic when they started developing in India was that they need to set proper examples of how Indians have got the same goodwill of culture and development as the English.

Development of Comics: Specifically for Children

The advent of *Amar Chitra Katha* was considered to be one of the first developments of Comics that were based on an Indian subject. And when the editor of it, Anant Pai was asked about how he came across an idea of developing such an issue. The answer to that that is always given by him was that he saw many a times that children don't know about what their culture is and many of them know about other countries because of the kind of the things they are reading. And comics have always been a good approach to make a child read something as they would appreciate always something that has been allotted with pictures. Though the maintaining of the pictures that we think here and mention must have a good amount of understanding from the point of view of a child otherwise we may get another problem with how the kid is taking it up. As mentioned:

Visual objects can have kinds of meaning also: for a knowledgeable viewer, for instance, an object shaped like a cross can evoke Christian sentiments. Because picture books have the purpose of conveying complex information by visual means, they tend to refer to a wide range of symbolism, and can sometimes be illuminated by knowledge of everything from the iconography of classical art to the semiotics of contemporary advertising.(Nodleman 77)

This argument could be taken further by us with the importance of how the characters that were important to be belonging to the Indian origin were important as sometimes when we read something composed in a different and perceived in altogether different context the same is the situation with the children who were in English medium and are dealing with the comics or Children's literature that is way far from the context in which they were living making them interpret it in a way they could find it possible that will lead them to make certain kind of belief about certain kind of presentation of the characters.

Butterworth and Thompson in their study, quoted earlier in this paper, analysed differences in the interests of boys and girls. The general picture of boy's interest in reading comics consisted of those whose "contents, actions, and stories are predominantly masculine and are written from a masculine viewpoint, whose central characters find adventure through the mastery of danger, whose stories feature good deal of crime and violence, whose main themes is sports and athletes, and whose chief appeal is humour." The general picture of girl's interests consisted of those comics "featuring feminine characters and pursuits, typically adolescent; a certain element of romance, dating, etc.; and all varieties of humour."(Witty & Sizemore 44)

Now what has been observed here is also to be observed today as many of the young readers are influenced by the kind of reading that they have been exposed to during their early days and before the advent of comics that were basically based on Indian characters we were exposed to the comics as well as the children's literature that was meant specifically for a child of different nation and of all together a different social and cultural context such as England, now what an English boy or girl is supposed to do at the age of adolescent may be altogether a very different for a child that is born in India and has to live in a Indian context, not only that the stereotypical description of about what a girl and a boy should be is also one point that shapes the mentality of the young readers. Now in this situation Anant Pai came up with a character like 'Krishna' who is one of the favourite pantheons of Indian devotees and parents also would be very glad to make their kids enjoy something that is worth of some kind of knowledge as well as entertaining. Now the character like Krishna was proved to be massive success not only because of it's being a mythological character but also because it was something that the parents want their children to read and also they deal with the kind of the subject that almost every Indian kid was aware of. After that what *Amar Chitra Katha* series did was it came with the kind of characters who marks a very good importance in the development of Indian history as well as it as a nation. The characters like Jawaharlal Nehru, Bhim Rao Ambedkar, and Mother Teresa were introduced to the kids. Now the introduction of characters like this ultimately leads the children to follow the lifestyle of someone who has achieved something really great in their life. And the basic purpose behind the selection of such characters is that the kids should always learn from such characters.

The egalitarian value system of the Vedic past is prominent in shaping the family which is patriarchal and hegemonic in aspirations. The societal insecurities are shown to be fought with enduring heroism of the background family members. The 'way of living' represented in *Amar Chitra Katha* irrespective of the caste, class creates a setting for bourgeois individualism constructed on the sacrifices and endurance in order to attain 'responsibility'. (Puri 43)

Now *Amar Chitra Katha* was loaded with this kind of characters who use to fit in the situation given above. And that are basically morally bound and are really good in their societal appearance now comes the case of characters who have some supernatural powers basically in *Amar Chitra Katha* we will come across the characters who will have mythological or historical background. But along with that there were other comics publication houses like *Indrajal comics* who has introduced us to the characters like: Phantom and Bahadur who has been given a kind of special good knowledge and power with which they have to save the people in problems and as well as they have to right all that has been wrong. These publications were of even before *Amar Chitra Katha* and has influenced the readers also to a great extent. In 1980's there was publication of characters like Supandi who were very down to earth and was totally into his own life and could not go beyond solving the problems that he has created by his own. And after that with the advent of Raj Comics in market there came a good amount of increase in the number of the characters who are having a kind of supernatural powers basically along with a anti-hero that also has supernatural powers and such kind of quarrels that has such characters has always attracted the kids who has been given the books that were surrounded around the life story of a person who has done something good and has achieved something really great.

In 1987, India got another vigilante hero in the form of Super Commando Dhruva, created by Anupam Sinha and published by Raj Comics. Entering during a time when comic culture in India was all but vanishing, Raj Comics brought home characters like Captain Dhruva, Nagraj and Doga. These superheroes became so popular among kids and teenagers that parents actually started considering them as good reading habit. Raj Comics have published close to 35,000 comics, 5000 titles and 20 characters. (In “history”)

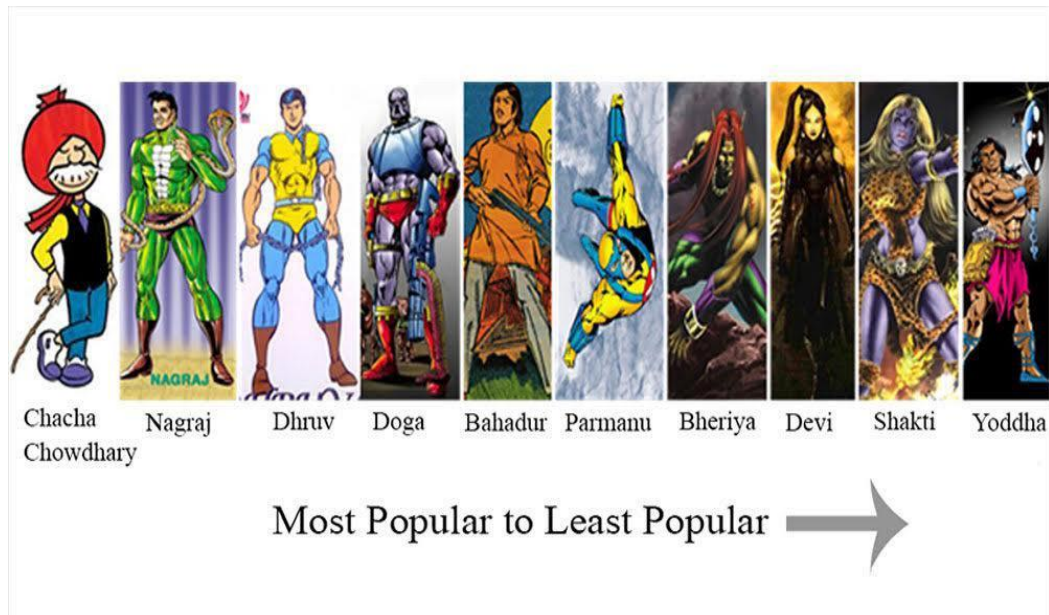
Now when such was the situation that the characters other than the known historical character were getting into light who has some kind of supernatural powers with them there were also characters like Chacha Chowdhary and Supandi who were almost without any visible kind of powers in their life. But though they managed to go be liked and adored by everyone and Chacha Chowdhary is being one of the most famous and liked character among all of them. Now here we have two groups not only in male but females characters and how the kids respond to it, it totally depends on them and what kind of taste they have for their reading appetite. As the characters like Chacha Chowdhary has a very good intellectual power and he could give solution to any situation that a person is in. And characters like Nagraj who were royals and have some kind of venomous powers with which he fights against the national terrorism and super commando Dhruva who being a good athlete was very much able to achieve and do all sort of fighting techniques supported by the equipments like fighting blades that were created by his sister-Shweta. Now with this sort of presentation that is particularly divided into people who are not super humans but are doing great with one of the human qualities in them like Chacha Chaudhary’s mind and Supandi’s faithfulness towards his masters are the quality that are able to hit the mark where the readers could connect to them in an emotional flow. And such comics are in circulation with many new characters even today but the beginning with such characters has made them very famous. Now such comics were basically meant for children and they were though read by other adults but not in a very serious sense just as something that will help them to light their mood out of the life that they were leading with some kind of stress.

In order to follow the culture representation to make the characters more relatable in the comics, people have imitated the traits of the society as well and the critics are very much aware of the fact that there has been portrayal of characters that are stereotypical.

Critics have responded to Pai’s perspective by pointing to the Hinduization of Indian heritage as well as reinforcing stereotypes about good and evil, beauty and gender. Sandhaya Rao, a publisher of Children’s books questioned ACK’s cultural project: ‘The worst blow, however, is that *Amar Chitra Kathas* make the readers, young and old, feel they know it all, they “have” culture.(Khanduri 176)

Such was the presentation of culture and the medium of presentation of what culture is depends on the characters as they are mediums of what is what. And the characters that are basically fully drowned in the situation where they have present what culture is will end up being stereotypical. And the characters here like Super Commando Dhruva have the ability to talk to animals as he was associated with circus since his birth. As these characters are totally different from the characters like Chacha Chowdhary who doesn’t have any particular mission to accomplish or goal to achieve but the goal of their life is to be good in all possible ways and to help

others not in a very rigorous action as other mentioned characters but to be very specific about what life is how it is to be lead.



Now this significance difference in the character leads us to the examination of how were they received? And why and how these people especially kids were responding to it. Now as the competition is in between the characters who are almost altogether totally opposite to each other and do not share any traits except to some extent that they are very good and don't want to harm anyone. The portrayal of negative characters who are given the charge to create problems in the life of these Superheroes like Doga and Nagina are equally liked by the readers as they are as capable as the heroes and are capable of creating problems that make the heroes wrestle till the end. And they can do the best in creating problem for them and this adds to the amusement of the reader as they are exposed to a situation where they can see more adventure and are more immersed in the further development of the comic. Now with the development of various characters in this binary situation where half of the comic character are saving the world or nation from some kind of problems and other characters are very good at being a person within its own circle solving the problem and being what they are in a very specific way.

Now, there is a small survey that was conducted with the basis that which character is more loved by the readers and what may the possible reason behind it.

This figure is taken from the article- *Comics in India* and this article has mentioned that how after the advent of the comics with Indian subject and characters there has been a kind of change in the perception of the reader. How nicely they have started relating to the characters not in all the ways but in some ways or other. Now in this survey that has been undertaken to see which character is liked most by the reader the character that leads the race is Chacha Chowdhary. And the belief that has been taken for this choice is that as being very familiar in appearance and doing the activities that are very common with the only availability of some kind of common sense and intellectual advancement that is may be the result of the experience that he has incurred from his age. And the second character that has been chosen as the second best was Nagraj as again even in the choice of the characters that is a binary selection among the characters who stand first and second on the basis of what they stand for, Nagraj being a superhero with the superhero qualities like his ability to emit venom for his enemies is altogether a different situation in comparison to Chacha Chowdhary.

As we have seen that how the characters and situation stands in a apparent different kind of world. We may also analyse the situation of women in such comics. As there has been certainly very few women characters in the Indian comics and the time that they came many a critic came up with the projection that the women are portrayed in a very debased way and the term ‘women in refrigerators’ given by a comic writer Gail Simone, was used to describe the situations of women in Indian comics the same was the situation of women as either they were portrayed as a housewife(Binni chachi- Chacha Chowdhary’s wife) or as a lady who is helping a superhero with her own powers. Though the portrayal of women in the role of negative character was good enough but that was also limited up to the portrayal of them in a very stereotypical way as that is not possible and mainly they have tried to imitate westerns in that sort.

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.....on a darker side, and the women are now portrayed as flaunting objects. Even though they gained their identity in the Indian Comic Industry yet their description is not of a kind that earns respect. (Siddiqui & Naz)

This sort of representation of women characters was found in some later comics when they started to gain a kind of pace and were popular enough to be imitated by the readers who were reading them on a very regular basis. But as they were portrayed in a very contrasting way as they are here in real life. The woman characters in other comic till the arrival of these various kind of super naturalistic women , the part that they use to play was of only of mere importance or that they were there only to show that they do exist in the world as in the presence of men.

Recent development of Comics and Graphic novels

With the development of the Nation there is remarkable development in the Nation’s art and literature there has been organization of Comic Con in 2011 and seeing that the meeting of both artists and readers at the same

place has resulted in a great success now it is held every year. With such extend of availability of comics and graphic novels to the reader the circumference of the reading circle is also at an expense, now the comics that we have seen in their earlier days were specifically dealing with subjects that are clearly understood by their readers. Now as more and more Artists are coming down the subject is not limited to solving problems and saving the world from some kind of calamity (either manmade or natural).

Taboos around sex and caste persist, says Basu “While many Indian kids have sexual experience by their mid-teens, it is still not talked about. Caste is another very significant subject which has not been talked about, though it continuous to affect many lives. Hopefully, over time, there will be stories that deal with these complex subjects, with the intelligence and respect they demand.”(Joshi)

Books like *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* by Malik Sajad is the story of a seven year old boy who is surviving in the situation of Kashmir’s problem with the same innocence as of child and who loves sugar and drawing. And another example of such a book that deals with the problems of child abuse is *Hush* by Prateek Thomas it is the story of a schoolgirl Maya and depict the shooting at the Indian school. Such compositions are now coming up as the kids nowadays are more aware than the kids before. The News, Media, Peers all discuss about the current issues which includes many subjects from terrorism to sexual harassment. The kids are now growing up as there is a remarkable change in the ideologies of Parents who are not hesitant to expose their children to something that was previously not considered good enough to be exposed to kids.

Conclusion

As there has been a constant change in the subject matter as well as the characterisation of comics is concerned still the comics with Binary presentation of characters and situation that teach the readers some kind of morals and social etiquettes is there in a permanent circulation of the market of Indian Comics and that they are received also with great zest though nothing is wrong in that their subject matter is always good in fact too good and away from the reality that people need to know somehow, especially the child who will step into adulthood. Such presentation of characters is though now a secondary option for an artist but it is still in the use to an extent where they may lead to some kind of influence on the mind of the reader. So one has to go into the characters of Comics how they are made culturally bound when they are portrayed in a very stereotypical way.

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