



Peeping into Powerpuffs' Power-house: Unravelling Politics of Projection

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Abstract

Powerpuff Girls, expected to re-enter the new media sometime in 2016, are obviously not the only superheroines in the genre of animated action superheroes. Their uniqueness lies in possessing superpowers while retaining the essential individualistic girliness. They start writing a saga of female empowerment when the world of children's animated films and cartoons have been mostly dominated by the superheroes and even if there are a few heroines, they are shown as beautiful and enticing with bodily curves represented just in the manner the male gaze would love to see them. This may again perpetuate the myth of how important being physically attractive is for women, no matter whether they possess superpower or not. Keeping this in background the Powerpuff sisters emerge to be different when we focus on their kindergarten age and school-girl superhero costumes. They remain the little girls born out of an accidental chemical reaction possessing three basic elements -- 'sugar, spice and everything nice'-- mixed with the mysterious chemical X. They wear cute clothes matched with their three different skin colours, they tie up their hair in three different girlish styles and wear black belts and black Mary Janes. They in no way appear sensually attractive but statistics have shown a good many number of adults were addicted to the Powerpuff cartoons and used to devour the acts of adventures they undertook. Defying fetishized representation the Powerpuffs have successfully transmitted the message among children and adults that brains have nothing to do with beauty. Besides, what can be the better way to spread the social message of how important female self-sufficiency is in an age when we are desperate to find a remedy for the deep-rooted ideological notion of male supremacy? One doesn't have to hide her identity or reshape them in the cast of a male, one can fight the wrong, save a society and still be a female. However, though the sketchy representation keeps the Powerpuffs away from sybaritic portrayal, they cannot escape the politics of the narrative. Inherent contradictions lurking beneath the façade unsettles the ambitious endeavour of the little superheroines perpetually tying them to the stereotype of the marginalized.

Keywords

superheroines, representation, hyper-sexualization, fetishization, feminism

Representations of superheroines in the visual as well as textual medium are fraught with ambivalence. In spite of being envisioned as a symbol of liberation and women emancipation, they are subdued by the politics of representation. However masculinity, alike femininity, is not free from the grasp of hegemonic polarization and commercialization in the narratives of supermen, but even in hypersexual exaggeration the masculine body enjoys a privileged stature in the fact that the muscled body does not operate as a semiotic negating the superhero's competence. On the contrary, the female body represented with buxomness placards herself as a site where desires of the gazers meet and in the process the superheroine's identity of puissance is reduced to nothing but a shaking shadow. No one cares whether a superheroine is domineering, sovereign or supreme, as long as she is enticing, suave and attractive. The plight of female supervillains is somehow similar, no matter how venomously evil their essences may be, their portrayals are as sybaritic seductresses.

In the saga of Superheroes, the Powerpuff Girls came rather late, in the 1990s, when animator Craig McCracken, decided to make an animated television series for Cartoon Network and their arrival ushered in a novelty in the style of representing super-heroines. The Powerpuffs – Blossoms, Bubbles and Buttercup – are three sisters dressed in coloured clothes (perfectly in match with the colours of their eyes), black belts and black Mary Janes. As soon as they crossed the threshold of page and screen, the Powerpuff girls became icons of Third wave feminism, their representation mirroring plurality in universal sisterhood and their defining name (Powerpuffs) emblemizing 'puff' as their 'power', in other words femininity as their strength, in contrast to the Second Wave ideals of vehemently rejecting any stereotypical portrayal of girliness. One of the major discrepancies in the thoughts of Third and Second wave feminists is that the third wave chose diversity and multiplicity in the experience and representation of women unlike the grand narrative of equality and suffrage for all. Powerpuff girls celebrate this variegation under the umbrella of sisterhood – each having exclusive talent characteristic of them. Although, the freshness in the illustration of the Powerpuff Girls make them escape the purview of objectification, the narrative is not unscathed with ambiguity. My paper attempts to delve deep into the intricacies of the narrative design to explore the loopholes and trace the equivocal ties of Powerpuff Girls designed to preach the knowledge of female empowerment.

Right from the onset, superhero narratives are replete with hyper-sexualized images of both masculinity and femininity. As the appeal of the visual text, to some extent, outreaches

the effect of the spoken word or the written version, the image-text has a colossal impact on the receivers. Though analyzed from the lens of this perspective both the gendered identities are under gaze, the portrayal of women has always been a subject of controversy. In a world of sexual imbalance where the unrealistically portrayed body of a Superman or a Hulk receives the interpretation of they being excessively strong and undefeatable, the body for a superhero playing a semiotic of power and prowess, a super-heroine figure remains a potentially vulnerable site capable of reducing her into nothing but an object of male sexual fantasy. As Mulvey puts it - "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (837). Even before the ingress of the super-heroines into a supposedly male-dominated world of heroes catering mainly to the male psyche, Lois Lane-women were actually not scarce, women who would play "damsel in distress" and rescuing whom from menacing threat would validate the heroism of a superpower. On a more elaborate note, Lois Lane is a fictional character appearing in DC comics series. She is an award-winning journalist for the fictional newspaper 'Metropolis' and the primary love interest of Superman. Basically, in the world of comics Lois Lane emerges to be the archetypal symbol of a superhero's love. In some episodes the creators made Lane rise up to the level of a superwoman, but the portraiture cannot help but giving the impression of Lois Lane being a quizzical shadow of Superman. There were even characters drawn in the 'Girl Friday' image, women who play the seductive vamp to manipulate the superhero and debar him from his mission, and achieving triumph passing through the maze of these distractions is also a part of establishing heroism.

Introducing Wonder Woman, into the orbit of Captain Marvel and Superman, wove the illusion of a watershed and it was so overwhelming to see a woman flying like Superman in dazzling costumes and helping out men in trouble that one easily missed the inception of Wonder Woman – beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules and swifter than mercury – combinations more fantastical than realistic, virtues of a desired woman purposely clipped together. It is obvious that superheroes/heroines are going to manifest the extravagant out-of-this-world traits which make them mega or super, but the unavoidable proviso worth noting is beauty must pour over the pages or the screen in all the actions and poses of a super-heroine. No matter how easily the super-heroines overcome obstacles in their ways, they are invariably portrayed as objects of male desire, with their scantiest clothes, buxom breasts, long legs and stilted postures. Even after positioning them at the centre of the superhero legend, the stamp of being marginalized in gaze cannot be shaken off.

As Powerpuff Girls series comes as an animated version in Cartoon Network from the 1990s through to March 2005, a backdrop of the then popular television series inevitably becomes the cynosure of survey. The period was dominated by cartoons like *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Captain Planet*, *The Little Lulu Show*, *Scooby-Doo*, *Heidi: Girl of the Alps* et al. None of these animated television series did cast their women characters in the mould that is not stereotypical. *Dexter's Laboratory* has Dee Dee, a complete foil to Dexter, wrecking massacre of her intelligent brother's toilsome experiments out of ignorant curiosity. Dee Dee is all pink, less concerned with scientific objects than with her accessories and dresses, which is a manifestation euphemistically showing her stupidity, her lack of skill and technological knowledge. She has two best friends Lee Lee and Mee Mee who are exactly like her. They discuss fashion and spend fun time just being girly, unlike Dexter who loves being engrossed in serious experiments in his lab. Contrastingly, Velma Dinkley in *Scooby-Doo* is very intelligent, the brain behind solving all mysterious adventure they embark on. The panorama of her interest is diverse and full of variety ranging from highly specified sciences to obscure and ancient Viking writing. However, Velma's trouble with her glasses, symbolic of her knowledge and obsession with reading, is a running gag in all episodes. This, nevertheless, reinstates the prototypical notion that beauty and brain cannot coexist and if a girl is to be attributed with intelligence, giving her a pair of black, thick-rimmed, round-shaped glasses is befitting. In the same show we meet Daphne Blake who is drawn as beautiful and attractive and she is the traditional danger-prone figure who gets kidnapped and trapped frequently and who perhaps is a little less wise than Velma because she doesn't wear specs! The *Little Lulu Show* records daily chores and occasional adventures of little Lulu who again conforms to the familiar feminine space having traits of idiosyncrasy, self-consciousness, whimsicality. Conversely, *Captain Planet* strikes a different chord, having two mighty women planetees – Linka (power of wind) and Gi (power of water), whose partaking with Kwame (power of earth), Wheeler (power of Fire) and Ma-Ti (power of heart) is equally important in conceiving Captain Planet, the eponymous hero.

Powerpuff Girls series are ingeniously sketched by McCracken and introduced in a show under the name "Whoopass Stew!" in 1992. Later it was taken up by Cartoon Network and unflinchingly enthralled audiences from all age groups during the telecast period from 1995 through to 2005. Each episode would start with a fresh glance into the creation history of the girls, making a new viewer completely at ease. The Powerpuff Girls are created by Professor Utonium out of an experiment to create "the perfect little girls" mixing "sugar, spice and

everything nice” (Whoopass Stew!). Instead of a single ‘perfect’ one, three super-girls are born when the Professor accidentally spilled over “chemical X” into the blend. The trio – Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup – have three separate ingredients that shape the core of their personality. Blossom whose signature colour is Red, is made of “everything nice” and is the self-proclaimed leader of the group, Bubbles has “sugar” as her personality ingredient, she wears blue, and Buttercup has a core of “spice” making her the strongest of the three, she has all green dresses.



Figure 1: Bubbles, Blossom, Buttercup (from Left to Right)

Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup – sisters with difference – have powers of super strength, super speed, super senses along with x-ray vision, heat and energy protection. The episode of “Ice Sore” shows Blossom having capacity to freeze objects with her breath. Bubbles can communicate with animals spreading supersonic waves with her voice. Though Buttercup doesn’t have any special power like her sisters, she is a good fighter and is able to curl her tongue (as shown in “Nuthin’ Special”). The plot of each episode has close resemblance with the nucleus factor of all Powerpuff narratives – the girls defending their city Townsville against all kind of threats from monsters or villains. The uniqueness of Powerpuff lies in the fact that they are kindergarten-aged girls whose superpower identities are not hidden under the facade of their school-dress. Rather, they are very popular and widely acclaimed for their laudable deeds among the citizenry of Townsville. Even the Mayor seeks their assistance when the security of the town is at stake. Unlike other superpowers, they engage in the activities of quotidian life as Powerpuff girls. They enjoy going school with other children and if necessary they do not hesitate asking permission from their class teacher to leave and

go out to help the world. Powerpuffs never need masks to hide their superpowers as their powers are not delinked from them in their normal life. In the episode “Birthday Bash/ Too Pooped to puff” the girls’ birthday party is broadcast on television. They seem to playfully bask in the shine of their life with nothing to hide and everything to share. The spirit of celebration of abilities is symptomatic of Third wave feminist creed.

By expressing the ‘girl power’ message and celebrating plurality in sisterhood *Powerpuff Girls* series as a cultural text seems to evince the intrinsic Third wave perception that women are of “many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds” (“Third Wave Feminism”). Besides, Blossoms, Bubbles and Buttercup have no curves, as explicit from their illustration and the box-cut dresses designed for them by the animator, posit their visual representation beyond the frontiers of gaze. At the same time, their girlishness is celebrated in the white stockings, Mary Jane shoes and black waist-belts they wear, the way they tie up their hair in ribbons. Evie Kendal defending *Powerpuff Girls* as a feminist text notes,

“What I found most interesting about the *Powerpuff Girls* is that unlike many other young superheroes, these girls are not trying to negotiate their superpowers alongside the demands of puberty and their own developing sexuality. This element is particularly important for series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Secret World of Alex Mac* and *Smallville*, each featuring teenage superheroes whose powers and performance can become unpredictable as a result of hormonal interference.” (237)

In contrast the *Powerpuff Girls* remain little girls throughout the series, they never grow up, though several birthdays are celebrated together. And here the creator’s purposeful ploy to arrest their age reveals the ambiguity ingrained in the narrative, the lack of physical maturity “insulat[ing] them against the objectification and fetishization that characterizes other women within superhero narratives.” [Kirkland13]. Even the universe of the *Powerpuff Girls* is not free from sexualised portraiture of women characters and it is obvious from Ms Bellum and Seduca. Ms Bellum, the secretary to the Mayor of Townsville, is shown having voluptuous breasts, an attractive figure and long legs – her face is never revealed. Every time, she comes on screen, the frame seizes her figure under the neck and the seductive sultry voice becomes her insignia. Though she is not the typical dumb-headed red bomb-shell image as she is

shown aptly performing the duties in lieu of the Mayor, her concealed face creates an aura of mystery surrounding her and in the same vein makes her portraiture ambiguous.



Figure 2: Ms Bellum



Figure 3: Seduca

Seduca, is the archetypal seductress figure, projected as hideously as possible. Shown in the first season episode “Mommy Farest”, the focal point in the portrayal of this character is her sexualized figure and asp-hair. Powerpuff Girls are drawn as counter-images to these excessively objectified bodies, as in the words of Fuqua “these three superheroes brandish brawn, brilliance, and cuteness in place of the current filmic and televisual fascination with lips, tits and ass.”(208). However, to keep their visualized figures untouched by gaze, McCracken had to freeze their ages to the kindergarten ones.

Fissures in the narrative again surface up in The “Rowdyruff Boys” episode aired in Season 1, April 7, 1999, again provokes contentious responses from the audience as well as the critics. Frustrated after series of smashing defeats Mojo Jojo in this episode devises a plan to fight the mighty girls. In the confinement of the prison he realizes to fight the fiery girls he needs equally aggressive counter-villains and “sugar, spice and everything nice” (“The Rowdyruff”) are too girly ingredients to create villainous creatures. He rather prefers to stir snips, sails and a puppy dog’s tail in the filth of a toilet and as a result of the explosion three male equivalent – Brick, Boomer and Butch are born. It seems quite difficult for the girls to seal a victory over these deadly evil boys and they are on the verge of losing hope when Ms Bellum gives counsel of forsaking violence against the boys and “try[ing] being nice” (The Rowdyruff). This time the girls replace clenched fists and random kicks with flirtatious looks

and amorous kisses and the Rowdyruff Boys explode into their prime elements. This episode caused such an outrage that in some countries it was banned (Kendal 243) and in some its popularity waned. Critics accused it of violating Powerpuff's distinctiveness as a feminist text. Adopting paltry means like flirting and kissing the villains in order to win them over, confirms the stereotypical facet of the character of a super-heroine "their sexuality [being] their only real, fear-inspiring weapon." [Hager 63].



Figure 4: Brick, Boomer. Butch

The Rowdyruff Boys do come back protecting themselves against the kisses of the Powerpuffs and Blossoms, to her great surprise, discovers the ineffectual nature of her kiss while trying to seduce them again. These episodes make the narrative design of the plot open to multiple interpretations contradicting each other. Above all, the arrival of Rowdyruffs makes the slippages in the plot of Power-puff Girls conspicuous, thwarting the ideals of asexualized presentation. Though the concept 'power feminism' talks about seizing power in whichever way possible, within the tenets of which even the objectification of the bodies of women becomes instrumental in exerting power over men, it is not quite apt for interpreting kindergarten-aged girls.

Coming back to the genesis of the girls, it is a male professor who is instrumental in giving them shapes with his masterly knowledge and skilful experiment. Unlike the tradition of creating a Man/Male, as in *Frankenstein* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the scientist professor here always wanted "the perfect girl" (qtd. in wiki), and he was more than happy seeing the three brilliant girls for he loves them "just the way they are" (qtd. in wiki). The 2010 *Despicable Me* series is a wonderful spin-off thematically paralleling the plot-line, in bringing the narrative of Gru, the super-villain turned a dotting and responsible father with the magic touch his three adopted daughters Margo, Edith, Agnes provide. Felonious Gru is a super-villain who brings three orphan girls home to use them for his egotistic purpose but as

days pass by he seems to develop affection for them, getting use to with their little habits and uncontrollable exuberance. In the end Gru becomes a father just like Dr. Utonium, preferring to spend the rest of the life reading bedtime stories to the girls, to pursuing some trivial delusions. Coming back to the Powerpuff narrative, Dr. Utonium too never tries to curb his girls' freedom by not allowing them to go out and fight the dark forces outside, rather he welcomes them gleefully every time they return home from their expeditions with "Girls, it's you! You're floating, you have big eyes, no fingers and superpowers!" (Insect Inside/Powerpuff Bluff), cooks dinner for them and manages all household works. Everything seems to be cordially enveloping a celebration of femininity, until the focus shifts on the word 'accident' by which Chemical X bursts into the blend the Professor intended to prepare. The existence of Chemical X is instrumental in making the girl extra-ordinary (or Xtra-ordinary), although *accidental* addition exposes the inherent duality of the narrative. Added to that, the split starts getting visible right from the creation-story where Powerpuff Girls are denied a mother figure.

It cannot be denied that they started writing a chronicle of female empowerment in the visual pop culture when the world of children's comics, animated films and cartoons were mostly dominated by the super-heroines who were shown as beautiful and sexy with bodily curves represented just in the manner the male gaze would love to see them, as quintessential objects of desire. And those who were not super-heroines, like Dee Dee or Daphne, were still confined to play the second fiddle to the central male characters in the plot. Their femininity was defined by such common traits as lack of intelligence, love for fashion and gossip, narcissistic obsession et al. The portrayal of the Powerpuff girls is undoubtedly marked with innovativeness. In spite of being members of the super-heroine clan, the creator never fails to refurbish their characters and story-lines with newness in approach, although the series have a plethora of images showing ruptures in the narrative. It seems to contradict the ideals it wants to address. Most importantly, the Powerpuff Girls even fails the tenets of the Third Wave feminism in the occasion of presenting sisterhood only with white suburban women not admitting the racial difference. There are diversity and plurality in their character traits not in their ethnicities. In conclusion, it can be said that the representation of the girls is marked with inconsistencies. The 'accident' in their genesis seems to falsify the superpowers conferred upon them, as it is not something intentional but a consequence of sheer chance. The unsettled narrative design creates lacuna in Powerpuffs' power struggle.

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