

Gender stereotyping malice: Camouflaging in stock characters and archetypes

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Abstract- Arche type and stock/generic characters have exhibited an enormous presence in almost all ages, forms and genres of literary texts. The booming evolution of media forms over time caused these types of characters to transition to the newer and popularity-attaining media forms including theatre, cinema, games and most recently the meta-verse. As the norm goes, these characters in return have contributed immensely to the creative arts providing them with a stock medium of expression readily available for narration. However, these characters at the same time have contributed to both, the creation of new gender stereotypes and strengthening of the previously existing ones. Over time, these gender stereotypes have, in multiple ways, consciously or unconsciously contributed to the conditioning of the society at large through media consumption and have also rendered considerable impact on several important domains of human life including education, professional space, society and the people encompassing various disciplines. Modern Indian media, too inculcated these types of characters in their chosen narrations leading to a borrowing of the imbibed gender stereotypes as well. Witnessing shifts of trends, these characters too have undergone updates leading to a variety of changes and alterations with regard to gender stereotypes. However, these newer modifications are not yet so significant than the initial cultural impact of the same while accompanying with them is again a newer baggage of gender stereotypes.

The present paper aims at understanding such prevalent gender stereotypes that have been nurtured, strengthened and formulated as a result of the archetype and stock/generic characters thereby enabling identification of such for a wider audience especially those linked to the educational space. Thus, nurturing the underlying aim of helping them (educational professionals) understand the influences hence generated through these recurring character types in multiple media. The paper favours a rather critical outlook upon the roles and impacts of such characters in gender stereotyping and/or their strengthening along with the key issues that they have given rise to considering the population and/or society at large. It aims at a thorough examination of selected and abundantly prevalent archetype stock/generic characters as such including the action hero, chosen one, Christ figure, dark lady, Damsel in distress, dumb blonde, folk hero and the French maid to name a few. It will facilitate an understanding of the sources, backing and flow of gender stereotypes as is lent through these characters. The paper

seeks to examine these with regard to Indian Media citing examples ranging from literary works and motion pictures to internet media like memes and short videos.

The present paper has employed qualitative approach. Under qualitative approach, it is narrative research examining the various imprints of such characters in various media and their role.

The outcomes thus help not only understand, but also trace, segregate and relook towards the inculcation of gender stereotypes lent by these character types.

Keywords: Archetypes, Stock characters, Gender Stereotypes, Media, Literature

Introduction:

Stereotyping is the practice of plain generalization ascribed to roles, attributes, abilities, and expectations on the basis of their belonging to a specific social group. Gender stereotypes are, in fact, a type of stereotype based on gender roles and functions. Gender stereotypes thus lead to strengthening of beliefs, social perceptions and conditioning of behaviours, appearances and expectations strictly on the basis of gender. The prescription of specific expectations, orientation and emotional bent of mind is also one of the functions promoted by gender stereotypes.

Stock characters are sometimes also known as character archetypes are fictional characterisations appearing in multiple media forms including but not limited to literature, films and the recently evolving gaming industry. Stock characters have been used in plenty throughout the literary tradition and encompass periodical, cultural and other forms of diversity. Stock characters are flat versions of archetypal characters while archetypal characters stand for prototype or base characters for creators to further their modelling. Stock characters are easily recognisable often carrying the quality of being acceptable to audiences easily. Certain genres tend to make use of specific type of stock characters more than others. The same goes vice-versa wherein it is expected for a specific genre to have select iterations of stock characters present to make it effective and on charts of similarity.

The usage of stock characters is often attributed as a time-saving exercise for authors/creators to enhance their work without significantly diverting from the range of the genre they are working on and also earning wider acceptability among audiences they are willing to cater. Also, with the usage of stock characters, the component of knowingness comes into play allowing for the audience to better recognise and comprehend the character on the basis of pre-knowledge or past interactions with similar iterations of the stock character. Furthermore, it imparts the quality of prediction and intelligibility on the audience's part in being able to trace out the upcoming flow of character design.

Stock characters and archetypes differ from clichés and stereotypical characters in the sense that the latter ones are usual products of lack of creativity, newness or the writer's personal touch often subjecting them as victims of parody and outcomes of shallow thought or poor effort.

Stereotypical characters may also become a site of offense for audiences in their approach to portray characters in bad light.

Stock characters, however, at times may embody certain stereotypes imbibed within them. Stock characters have multiple types within them and are not identifiable by individual characters. These characters may also embody prevalent social prejudices, signs of discrimination, features based on gender, race, ethnicity or class. They may also be referred to as generic characters. Writers may also club characteristics of two stock or more stock characters into one to better suit their plot or story. While archetypes are vague

Objectives

1. To enlist and understand stock and archetypal characters and their representation in media forms.
2. To understand the gender stereotypes in commonly visible stock and archetypal characters in literature.
3. To investigate the gender stereotyping nourished through stock and archetypal characters in film.
4. To examine the underlying stereotypical conventions reflected through stock and archetypal characters.

Stock/Archetype Characters and Gender Stereotypes

This section of the study enlists various stock character types and the gender stereotypes reflected through them.

Action Hero

The action hero is a recurring stock character often appearing as a strong and violent male figure choosing means of action and violence to dominate over the villains. Over time, modern action heroes have evolved with the inculcation of martial arts, skilled fighting and use of ammunition and weapons. James Bond and Jack Ryan are two popular examples of the action hero.

Action heroes carry with them to be stereotype of men as saviours and their representation as violent beings. Moreover, the assigned characteristic responsibility of saving the world from an impending disaster through means of action, combat and murder along with at times an added twist of saving the heroine reflects the stereotype of overburdened and all saving men, also men as protectors of women.

Chosen one

The chosen one again is often characterised as a male figure who is chosen by the will of god or deity to save or protect other weaker people in the society. The chosen one may exhibit selective traits of action hero in his endeavour for justice. They represent noble ideas such as justice, truth and peace.

The chosen one carries the stereotypes reflected through the action hero along with a bend of choice favoured for men especially when such choice of figure is divine in nature. This stereotypes men as saviours and protectors of peace, truth, justice and other such morals in the society.

Christ figure

The Christ figure is often a male who reincarnates himself after death for the betterment of humanity or for saving people from disaster or some evil in the form of villain. The characteristics are in line of Christianity as witnessed in Jesus Christ.

The Christ figure reflects the stereotype of men and their ability to exhibit miracles. Moreover, the choice of a male figure from heaven is stereotyping depiction of men as protectors and upholders of justice and society.

Dark lady

The dark lady represents a woman with malicious intent bent on destroying the good around her in favour of her sole interests. Such women often resort to murderous or treacherous acts to turn events in their favour.

The dark lady stereotypes women as cruel or malicious. It also assigns women as practitioners of witch craft and treachery to make things better for them. It labels women as antagonists and selfish creatures.

Damsel in distress

It is one of the most often used characters representing a woman caught up in misery, poverty, depression, robbery or unavoidable circumstances bound to destroy her future awaiting the arrival of a noble man to save her from her problems.

As an often-recurring character, the damsel in distress is a stereotypical indication of women unable to help themselves out of their problems and the need for a noble man to save them. It steals choice and right of the woman as being bound to the one protecting her.

Dumb blonde

The dumb blonde is characterised by an attractive woman/girl with desirable physical features but little or no common sense. The character reflects the stereotype of assigning foolishness to white women, especially ones that are attractive.

Folk hero

A folk hero represents a legendary hero whose acts are the basis of the survival of the present generation. These acts may be war, negotiations, deals, treaties or even death/sacrifice in favour of the larger community.

The folk hero, just like all other heroes depicts men having to sacrifice for the greater good of humankind stereotyping them as the all-good and chivalrous protectors of humanity regardless of the price they pay.

French Maid

The French maid represents a house maid of French origin with flirtatious and cheeky nature. She is often sexualised and the choice of her maid's uniform is kept such so as to suit the level of sexualisation the creator wishes to depict.

The character stereotypes maids of French origin as flirtatious and sexualises female servants. It disregards the respect for women coming from humble background and serving as maids to depict them as sexual objects rejecting their own choices in the process.

Angry black woman

The angry black woman often depicts a dark colored woman of Afro-American origin with characteristics including but not limited to witty remarks and sharp tongued replies. The character is often seen as overpowering or controlling another masculine character and forcing things as per her own desires.

The angry black woman, as a name itself may be offensive to certain audiences as per modern standards. The representation of black woman as sharp tongued and having controlling/dominating nature may well be an identification of womanism if looked at positively but at the same time is a stereotyping of the identity itself as portrayal of disregard for women with sharp tongues.

Bad boy

The bad boy is often characterised as a male with immoral conduct along with womanising attributes.

The bad boy carries the stereotype of assigning male with Machiavellian traits especially descriptions assigned with multiple sexual affairs. The stereotype assigns men having a slight bent of mind away from societal standards as womanisers and the labelling of such men as “bad” indicating antagonistic adherences or bend.

Black best friend

The black best friend is often a female character, secondary in nature and often seen as complimenting the lead actress. These are characterised with the ability to guide their friend often white girl/lady out of distress or problem. They may also have considerable intelligence and better world-view especially considering their remarks about relationships.

The character is known to stereotype girls of color as accompanists of the lead white character leading them devoid of any individual identity. Moreover, too less is discussed about

the background of these characters despite being superior over their counterparts thereby stealing from them their own recognition.

Crone

The crone is witch-like or witch figure often characterised by cruelty, heartlessness and against humanity.

The character is a stereotypical representation of women as villainous and witch-like characters. It may also represent women as malicious and as practitioners of dark magic. The ruthlessness of such figures further characterises them as antagonistic in nature.

Dragon Lady

The dragon lady may represent a woman of East Asian origin or from other parts of Asia. Their characteristics include strength, mystic powers and deceptive abilities.

The dragon lady presents a stereotype characterising power and individuality for women but at the same time disregards them from a societal view on account of their abilities of deception. The ethnic nature of the stereotype further leads to the representation of women of Asian origin being marked as untrustworthy or ill-intended.

Farmer's daughter

The character depicts a desirable young lady as a preferable choice for suitor. They are characterised by free spirit, hardworking nature and goodness.

The character embodies the stereotype of labelling women merely as objects for marriage and care-takers of field, family, parents, children and husband. It disregards the notion of choice and love for a woman.

Gay best friend

It presents a secondary character identifying as gay. Other characteristics include interests for shopping, drama and transformation.

The character stereotypes gay men and renders of them devoid of any character depth that is worthy of knowing. It also assigns the quality of better relationship advices to main characters disengaging them of any mainstream place in the narrative.

Hag

Hag is an extension or type of the witch woman.

The stereotype portrays women as malicious and practitioners of witch-craft. It also suggest women as bitter and dislikeable beings.

Hawksian woman

The Hawksian woman represents a bold and self-centred woman daring to speak her mind out. They are strong willed and want things in their own way specific and as per demands.

The Hawksian woman depicts women as bold and speakers of their own mind stereotyping women as self-centred beings with their own choices. The stereotype is at times treated as positive and a representation of the modern and evolving woman in media.

Tart with a heart

It depicts a prostitute with good moral standards.

The stereotype is a portrayal of women unwilling to enter prostitution but having chosen it out of lack of choices but unwilling to give up their moral uprightness. The character is seldom primary and mostly secondary in nature supplementing the lead character with valuable life advices and/or resources to better their future prospects.

Housewife

The housewife is a character representing a woman taking care of household chores, family, young children, husband and other daily activities often considered less useful over the working husband who brings home money.

The character stereotypes women merely as care-takers of children and family. Moreover, it assigns lesser weightage on importance basis to the household work as it is devoid of economy. It represents a woman who works hard throughout the day and is yet dependent on the earning member, often the husband for resources.

Ingenue

The ingenue represents a soft-hearted and all good woman or lady. The chief characteristic being attractiveness of the character on the basis of beauty, speech and behavior.

The ingenue stereotypes women as soft-spoken and as objects of beauty meant for suitable better-halves. It prioritises looks, makeup and dressing over choices, knowledge and understanding.

Italian mafia boss

The Italian mafia boss is a ruling patriarch of an Italian crime family dealing in drugs and illegal acts often involved in murder.

It stereotypes Italian families as being controlled by one male figure made popular by “The Godfather”. The stereotype also depicts Italian males involved in illegal practices and drug trafficking, also other activities like planned murders, gambling and gang wars. It stereotypes such males as strong, determined and feared of individuals in the society.

LGBT characters

LGBT characters are often depicted as flashy and colorful figures. They often find their voice missing in the narrative and are depicted as supporting characters.

These lead to stereotyping of LGBT characters as less worthy of knowing or importance or having only a few roles to play. It disables them from having an identity, voice or opinion of their own often leading to sad endings met with demise of such characters.

Loathly lady/ Beast

The loathly lady and the beast are two similar characters differentiated by gender wherein the former is a female and the latter a male. They are hideous beings who are bound by some curse.

These characters stereotype the need for individuals to be handsome or pretty and further strengthen that those who are not such are bound by curse needing to be lifted.

Male buffoon

It is a depiction of a male character often to mock or it's use for comic relief.

The male buffoon stereotypes various characteristics like the importance of learning English or having better abilities which if failed to be done lead to become the subject of gags often leading to the looking down upon such characters as unremarkable or laughable.

Dream Girl

As the name itself suggests, these characters are embodiment of all feminine and desirable characteristics. They are pretty and looked upon at by all others as the ideal depiction of femininity and beauty.

It stereotypes women as objects of beauty only worthy to be seen and desired. It demands the need for women to be feminine and beautiful according to societal standards so as to be able to attract the male gaze and likeability.

Mean popular girl

The mean popular girl represents an attractive girl in the college who has limited social circle based on certain characteristics like beauty and intelligence. These characters often act rude or mean to other characters outside their circle.

It stereotypes the need for popularity among college going females especially attributes like desirability and likeability, also following among other gender. It also reflects the mean attitude and ego problems carried along with the popularity marked by sharp-tongue, sarcasm and mockery of others.

Prince Charming

The Prince Charming is an ideal and noble man. He depicts the most likeable man in the region and most suitable for the damsel in distress who makes efforts to rescue her and marries her in the end.

The character stereotypes the need for men to be handsome and likeable. Also, the attribute for men to help women caught up in problems just to be able to find their loved one and ask their hand in marriage.

Sissy

The sissy represents a gay character with feminine behaviour and makeup similar to girls.

It is a maligning stereotype of gay characters in media disregarding other gays who do not act or behave in such manner.

Tomboy

The character represents a girl with male-like behavior which may include dressing, speaking or social circle.

The stereotype draws the audience from such characters as less acceptable. It strengthens need for femininity and gender getups in individuals rather than those of choice of liking.

Wise old man

It stands for a male character who is great at advising having experienced the highs and lows in life and has become wise as a result of experience and ageing.

The character presents the stereotype of old men being wiser and helpful in their advice rejecting the changes and transitions that occur with time.

Methods and Procedures

The present study employs qualitative approach to examine the stock characters and how they impact, facilitate and strengthen gender stereotypes. Under qualitative approach, the present study is narrative research discussing stock characters and their roles in depicting gender roles and thereby either creating gender stereotypes or facilitating prevailing gender stereotypes. The study describes various characters that have appeared in multiple forms of media over time to explain how gender stereotypes are reflected through them.

Conclusion

Stock characters play a crucial role in easing the creative process but with time there has arisen a need for more thoughtful, careful and anti discriminatory writings/media for the future generation to adhere to. This shall be brought about by a better looking at the characters thus created and the need for better and fair representation for all along with individuality, choice and justice.

The next generation of media consumers need not necessarily be devoid of stereotypes of all types but the need for better amalgamations to be made is felt and thus should be inculcated so as to not oversimplify representations as stereotypes but as fair portrayals of reality.

Limitations

A notable limitation of the present study is that it solely studies gender stereotyping as an outcome of stock characters. However, in reality gender stereotypes are linked and passed on through generations, social constructs and it is through these that they find an imprint in the story-telling and motion picture media. Therefore, gender stereotypes in stock characters work both ways: in receiving influence from prevailing stereotypes and in further creating newer stereotypes through portrayal in the media of choice.

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