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Women and Gender in the Comic Books

Introduction

In spite of the social changes that have been occurring during recent years in respect of the role of gender, both men and women continue to be categorized according to their sex and in relation with their social role.

Vonk and Ashmore (2003), after studying the female and male stereotypes of men and women, as well as the characteristics that link each of these stereotypes, concluded that perhaps gender is the most important dimension of categorization in our society. In this way, we can affirm that from their birth, people are socially classified according to two main groups: men and women. These groups are socially determined by biological characteristics linked to sex and, therefore, to an intrinsic process for which the creation of personal identity will be mediated by gender, in which attributes, features, roles and occupations become typical for one sex or the other.

Following the statements of Deaux and Kite (1987) we could speak, even in the present day, about the existence and persistence of a system of beliefs and opinions about men and women and the so-called qualities of the male and of the female sex; this includes stereotypes and attitudes toward the appropriate roles and behaviours for both sexes, and also toward the individuals who depart or deviate from such conventions (Deaux and Kite, 1987, 97).

It is true, then, that beliefs about the roles and features associated with men and women have changed, but there still remain facts about the persistence of a different representation for both sexes. In a study about the influence of the contextual variables related to the bullying phenomenon, Hernández et al (2002) found that almost 30% of the male sample thinks that women are better adapted to cook and do the ironing than men. The research about gender identity shows that in spite of the advances in the field of beliefs and attitudes, both boys and girls between 15-20 years old still maintain traditionalist stereotypes and sexual roles (López Zafra and López Sáez, 2001).

The transmission of these values, behaviours and attitudes comes mainly from the socializing institutions: family, school, groups of peers nevertheless, in our present society the influence of the media in the elaboration of social representations is very strong. By means of this, individuals can comprehend reality and interrelate with the environment.

Bearing in mind this last aspect, it seems relevant to know which is the perception about women, as a means to prove the possible persistence of a stereotyped image, socially elaborated, composed of given features and social behaviours associated with the female gender.

Among the informative and communicative products we have selected "comic books". Although the use of motion pictures on TV and the verbalization of the main characters have taken away some of the importance of these illustrated narrations, "comic books" continue attract a great range of interest and a public readership that still enjoys reading cartoons.

These illustrated pages show us narrative through different language codes: the drawn and the written languages, which have become very peculiar means of expression and have acquired a noticeable expressive complexity, from their beginnings to the present (Lara, 1992). As well as any other expressive means, their illustrated pages offer us an ideal place to make analyses and comments of the social sensibilities and values of a given community. That is why we are interested in knowing the generative character of "comic books", analysing the traces left by those responsible for their elaboration with respect to the female figure; studying for this aim, we look at the gender behaviours that characterize women through the whole work of the same illustrator.

The last purpose of the investigation described in this paper is to consider whether the social values transmitted about the female sex are related to these characteristics and stereotyped roles and if the different cartoons can be classified according to the characteristics, features and roles extracted from our analysis.

It could be argued that the image offered by these means, about any topic, is nothing but a distortion, or else, a critical or ironical vision of the reality of which they are a reflection. "Comic books" are not the only means that distort reality, which can be transformed and reformulated by any of the media. Probably, two different readers of the same "comic book" would interpret what they read in different ways, depending on their own experiences. Therefore, we should bear in mind (and this is the point of departure of our analysis) that "comic books", like any other medium, are aimed at offering models to the consumer, characterized by a number of features that the readers can interpret as adequate or inadequate, but they present us reality in one way and not in another.

Method

The sample of comic illustrations analysed corresponds to three different publications, selected because of their world wide reach and their quality as well as the different cultural origins of their authors. They are publications with high sales

<i>Units of analysis</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Description</i>
Graphics Aspects	Mood of Presentation	(Protagonist role in the cartoon to the figure under exam)
	Setting	(Environment where the character is placed and the action develops)
Feature Stereotypes	Instrumentality-Expressiveness	(Characteristics represented by women in the examined cartoons)
	Values	(Values that are identified in the female character out of her act)
	Aesthetic	(Preoccupations that the character to exam can show upon the personal image)
	Non-verbal communication.	(Body expression, mainly facial of the female character)
Role Stereotypes	Sentimental Roles	(Relation of the female character with the rest of the characters))
	Motherly Role	(Description of the functions linked to the role of being mother)
	Domestic Role	(Description of the domestic tasks in which the female character is involved.)
	Academic Level	(Academic level reached by the examined characters)
	Work Role	(Presence or absence of conflicts between domestic tasks and work outside home)
	Status	(Economic, social, work and marital situation of the female character)

Figure 1. Map of categories

and a commercial profile that is not restricted to their country of origin, because they have been translated into different languages and some of them have been published in international newspapers. The selected comics are the following: Calvin and Hobbes, by Bill Waterson, USA; Mafalda, by Quino, Argentina; and Tintín, by Hergé, Belgium.

From Mafalda and Calvin we selected three volumes at random. From Mafalda we took numbers 2, 4 and 8; from Calvin, we analysed "*The Calvin and Hobbes tenth anniversary book*", "*It's a Magical World*" and "*Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat.*" In the case of the Tintin collection, we selected all the stories in which an adult woman appears in any of its cartoons. This corpus as a whole comprises 13 stories: "*The Castafiore Emerald*", "*Destination Moon*", "*The Red Sea sharks*", "*The Blue Lotus*", "*The Seven Crystal Balls*", "*The broken ear*", "*The black island*", "*The Calculus Affair*", "*Cigars of the Pharaoh*", "*King Ottokar's sceptre*", "*Tintin and the Picaros*", "*The Secret of the Unicorn*", "*The Crab with the Golden Claws*".

Out of this starting material, we only selected those cartoons in which an adult woman appears. In this way, our base of analysis is formed by 48 pages from Tintin, 128 cartoons from Calvin and Hobbes and 62 comic illustrations from Mafalda.

The codification system used is based on the indications about content analysis made by Hernandez et al, (2000), and takes into account the investigations made about questions of gender in our context (Moya and Montes, 2002; Sanchez, 2000), and in the international context (Vonk and Ashmore, 2003).

Each group of cartoons was analysed independently out of three unities of analysis. In the first unit, we gathered information about the graphic elements, centered on the mood of presentation of the adult female character and in the setting where the action is developed. The other two units are in correspondence with the stereotypes of gender and roles that the adult female image shows in the selected cartoon. For the codification of these two last units of analysis we followed William and Best's orientation (1990), which focuses on the psychological characteristics and behaviours to define the gender stereotype, and on role playing and activities to establish the role stereotypes.

Figure 1 presents the categories of study for each of the units of analysis. In each codification, we specified the source through which the information was obtained, marking the difference between verbal, visual and mixed information.

For each of the comics, we independently analysed the main adult female character (understanding for this the one who appears most often in the cartoon), and the secondary characters (whose frequency of appearance is much reduced). They were grouped in only one group. In the Mafalda and Calvin comics the character with the highest frequency of appearance is the mother (43 cartoons in Mafalda and 110 in Calvin); This corresponds with Tintin's "*The Castafiore*", in which she appears in 6 stories. As adult female characters with reduced frequencies of appearance, there appear in Calvin the teacher and the baby sitter (each of them in 9 cartoons); in Mafalda, the teacher together with other non identified adults (19 cartoons) and in Tintin, the door women (4 in all), with reduced appearances (in 9 stories), and other female characters with minimal roles (in 25 cartoons). Each comic was analysed by two codes independently and then the results were compared to guarantee major objectivity in their evaluation.

Results

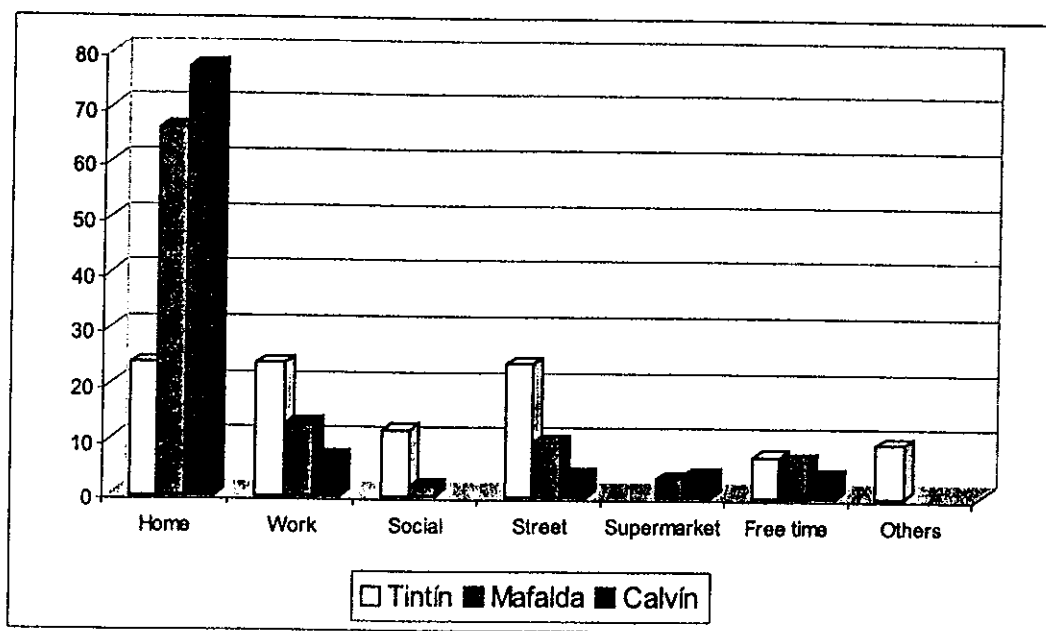
Graphical aspects

In the global sample of "comic books", a woman appears as the main character in 2.20% of them. In *Tintín*, she is a secondary character in 97% of the stories and in *Calvin and Mafalda*, a woman appears sharing the role of the protagonist with a child character on almost half the occasions.

Quino introduces in his cartoons some adult female character with the sole objective of including the adult vision of the action which takes place, as a perspective on the situation, but without any main role on the stage.

We think it is important to point out, as a reinforcement of the second plane in which adult female characters are set, that they do not even have a proper name; they appear conditioned by the relation established with the rest of the characters, but without proper personal identity. This is the case of the mother, the door woman, the neighbour, the teacher, etc.

The locating category of women most frequently used in the "comic books" analysed is home, mainly in *Mafalda* and *Calvin* (graphic 1). In the work setting we can only find school teachers. In the case of *Tintín*, it is balanced with the participation in the work field (basically the door women), and the street, also social meetings (especially the character of "*The Catasfiore*").



Graphic 1. Settings of development of the action (in percentages)

Feature stereotypes

The majority of the characters who show stereotypical characteristics correspond with expressiveness, this being major in 70% in the three "comic books" studied. When there appears any instrumental characteristic, it is linked to the overcoming

of educative conflicts, as in the case of the character of the mother in Mafalda and Calvin, and to the work management in Tintín.

The values that are identified in the female character out of her actions, are reflections of the contextual setting in which each of the authors is placed. Therefore, in the publications of Mafalda and Calvin, the values oriented toward the family are detached (59.67%, and 74.195, respectively), linked to socio-political values in Quino`s cartoons (29.92%), that correspond with the objective of a critical vision of his comic work. In Tintín stories there is a predominance of the absence of values represented by the female character (62.16%); in the stories in which they appear, there is a predominance of social values (24.32%).

In the emotional category, there is the same phenomenon of contextual dependence. So while in Mafalda there is a predominance of the positive emotions of the mother (63.22%), in Calvin`s the predominance is negative (68.59%). Mafalda mother shows negative emotions towards her daughter`s comments about the situation of women and her own situation, but she shows the positive ones of support and love towards her children; Calvin`s mother expresses negative emotions as a consequence of her son`s pranks. In Tintín`s stories the emotions are distributed equally, depending on the character and the development of the story, although in less than 5%.

The aesthetic characteristics of the adult female characters represent only a preoccupation for their external appearance, directed to situations of attention toward the physical aspect and to increasing their beauty through make up, manicure or hair dressing. This only appears in the motherly characters and in Castafiore; the rest of the female characters do not reflect any kind of preoccupation with aesthetics.

Stereotypes of role

In majority of Tintín`s female characters do not have any relation with the other characters (58%); it does not occur either in any of the secondary characters of the other authors. The role of the mother is predominant in Mafalda (59.67%); in Calvin, (82.45%); and in Tintín (4.76%). The role of the wife is evident in Mafalda (14.51%); in Calvin (14.84%), and in Tintín (23.80%). Also, the role of the friend is present in Tintín, at 14%.

The motherly role reflected in Tintín is directed exclusively to health, while this same role in Quino`s and in Watterson`s cartoons reflect two different styles, provoked by the difference of the child characters. Thus, while Calvin`s mother stands out in the functions of maintenance of discipline, Mafalda`s mother is presented as an educative agent and a source of emotional support. Her function of being at home with the children also appears.

The role of wife that they both carry out is also different: while Mafalda's mother shows herself as a support to her husband, Calvin's mother appears arguing with hers, about educative aspects and the taking of decisions.

In the domestic role, the female characters analyzed appear to be doing all the domestic tasks; cleaning and cooking predominate, but also we can see shopping, the organization of the house and sewing.

The work role is only presented in the secondary characters in accordance with the role they play in relation to the main characters. In all the cases, it is about a work status inferior to the male characters. The main female characters appear without any occupation, the mothers as independent from their husbands, and Castafiore appears also independent but living on non-work incomes.

None of the cartoons specifies either the level of education of the female characters, nor their social standing. But, because of the situations in which they appear and the tasks they perform, a low or middling social status can be attributed to the female characters, except Castafiore, who belongs to a high social class.

Information gathering

The codes used the information coming from the verbal and the graphical sources; there exists a prevalence of the complement of information for both ways, but the isolated information given by the graphic elements is also important.

All the codes remarked the importance of the knowledge about the books and the characters to make their own job. It is perhaps in this fact that the major relevance of this means as a socializing agent may lie; it is not an isolated finding that goes without traces, but they are reading products that relapse in the same image transmitted through the different "comic books".

Conclusions

It can be concluded that women are represented according to traditional sexual roles, located at home and in "the work for women". They appear in the performance of the "role of mother", charged with taking care of children and home. This would reinforce the role stereotype that the functions of care-taking are, mainly, womens' responsibility (Delgado and Martin, 2003), and that the motherly role continues being closely linked to the gender identity of women. Women continue being socialized to play their main role in life in the bosom of the family, performing the roles of wife and mother (Aguilar, Fabregat, and Calvo, 2003). In fact, Calvin's mother has quit her job to take care of her son, giving up her work aspirations to reaffirm her orientation towards family matters (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

This represents, to a great extent, expressive characteristics that would also reinforce the female stereotype of communality, expressiveness, sensitivity, warmth and also a major preoccupation for others rather than for herself (Maga, 1985,

Barberá, 1998), being the socialization of girls and adolescents centered on the values of discipline, order and constancy (Del Río, 1999).

Both considerations are reinforced in the values that the female characters analysed represent: oriented toward home, family and social values and for the sentimental roles in which mother and wife are placed.

The roles of mother and housewife are shared in the different functions marked by the performance of that role, although the most relevant fact is that no male character appears doing the same tasks assigned to the female characters.

Other investigations (Sebastian et al 1985; Leal, 2002) have also found a high level of gender stereotyping on television and in advertisements and short stories. Del Río (1996) points out the relevance of the media and of the social model transmitted to new generations.

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