

The Evolution of Same-Sex Comics across Asia, amidst stifling Patriarchy and Toxic Sexual Normativity

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Article Received: 16/6/2022,

Article Accepted: 15/06/2022,

Published online: 26/07/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.7.19

Abstract

Ever since Japanese manga and anime began portraying characters beyond the stereotypical binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, more specifically termed as ‘yuri’ (explicit) or ‘shōjo-ai’ (girl love) and ‘yaoi’ (explicit) or ‘shōnen-ai’ (boy love), the other east-Asian countries in the comic and entertainment industry followed suit as well as Chinese manhua and more recently Korean manhwa flourished in the domain. My research paper takes into account of all the prevailing factors, dominating influence of social custom, normative acceptance of the mass and many more which finally result in the culmination of such non-conforming genre(s). Asians have been perceived as typical of being conventional and sexually orthodox in perception and societal makeup. Despite the backlash and negativity of censorship involved initially in such genre(s), the internet boom and the availability of the same over e-platforms like online websites and the inception of webtoons brought in a wave of mass access and popularity of the same. It is interesting to note that BL (boy love) comics which focus on the same-sex love from a man’s perspective, defying the traditional male-gaze for the female only, has had a massive viewership among women despite them being biologically straight. This paper makes an effort in trying to understand what reasons underlie such antithetical reading choices where sexuality might or might not essentially play a major role in such decisions.

Keywords: Same-sex comics, Queer, Manga, Manhwa, Manhua.

Introduction

The evolution and recent boom of the Japanese manga, Korean manhwa and Chinese manhua in the reader-market beyond the constraints of the Japanese society has been quite the cause of curiosity among readers. What is more interesting is that ‘shonen-ai’ or boy love comics which are also called ‘yaoi’ in explicit context, had always been marketed for and aimed at female readers. More importantly being that, even the authors of such manga portraying homosexual male relationship(s) have been largely female as well. This is where it brings me to the juncture of questioning how exactly such queer, against the normative comics like ‘yaoi’ and ‘yuri’ garner such high viewership and readership across the globe? How are biologically and sexually self-defined straight women so alarmingly charmed by gay-comics when it is expected of them to find straight-jacketed run-of-the-mill romance ‘shoujo’ manga, highly appealing? The introduction, evolution and the boom of the same department of comics across the world beyond Japan, directed at the adolescent and young-adult women is not only fascinating but comes up with its own array of questions and baggage. Although in India, the comic market on the printing front is strictly based on the production of the mass reputed ones like- Fairy Tail, Death-Note, Attack on Titan and the domestically produced ones aimed at children, what we generally miss out during our childhood comes back to us as a realization in

warps in our adulthood. Online retail stores as well in India, only keep the potentially non-harmful ones in stock as the fear and disgust regarding homosexuality and the temper of homophobia runs strong among the masses. Although the scenario is changing, interestingly it is women who have been found to be extremely comfortable and welcoming to homosexual themes, this is not only the case regarding the female-acceptance of the side-lined group, it is also about how women over the years across the world, warming themselves to the genre of boy-love and girl-love, in comics and webtoon.

The causality of the pandemic has not only brought with itself the negatives but the positives as well, one of them being the mass-consumption of online-comic platforms by readers. With restrictions imposed upon by the government regarding travel in the country and the virus looming large, I took to for the first time in concrete and permanent terms, to the online sites like Wakamics, Manga3s and 1stKissManga where a plethora of manga, manhwa and manhua genres were in abundance to be chosen from. Apps like Mangatoon, Webtoon also provide users with the same viewership liberty to choose from a mass of queer comics from ‘yaoi’ or erotic boy-love, ‘yuri’ or erotic girl-love, to ‘gender-bender’ and ‘dojinshi’ (fan-made). Strangely enough, homosexual and queer themes have more variety than the strait-laced heterosexual or hetero-erotic ones. The manga-verse aimed only at the Japanese viewers and readers expanded and evolved and went abroad with the expansion of international shipping business and more recently the boom went exploding across the roof, with online platforms that not only give access to the same to a large number of readers but also free of cost. The Republic of Korea is not only expanding its K-pop and K-Drama business but also rapidly prioritizing its telecom sector as well, earlier it was with Line now it is with Kakao. Kakao is akin to Jio of India, everyone in Korea uses Kakao from managing calls to doing business in comics (over Daum) and travels. Asian and east-Asian countries have been normally portrayed as homo-phobic and backward by the west while giving them the back-seat when it comes to being liberal and progressive. What is clear from the mass-appeal of ‘yaoi’ and ‘yuri’ comics across Asia is that the younger-generation is more accepting than the older-fundamentalist one. The manga industry in countries like the United States and Canada had amassed a lot of revenue with their shares going up to \$207 million (Memmott 4d). The revenue garnered in the Japanese market is even higher with "gross revenues totaling 531 billion yen (\$5 billion)" in 2001 (Thorn 169).

‘Shoujo’ and ‘Shonen’ manga were the first ever genres to arrive in the scenario with ‘shoujo’ being aimed at young girls with fluff and romantic elements while ‘shonen’ was aimed at boys with the theme of adventure, that more or less valorized the macho-masculinity. Recently in the light of legalization of same-sex relationships and more so by a Japanese court ruling out the ground of unconstitutionality regarding same-sex marriages in march 2021, comes off as a victorious moment for the LGBTQ group, where it is not only their rights but their identity which has been constantly been debased and marginalized, same-sex comics have spear-headed its own phenomenal movement. From being the most marginalized to becoming the sensation among manga-readers, gay comics more specifically ‘shonen-ai’ and ‘yaoi’ comics have indeed come a long way. Although both boy-love and girl-love comics have found

their enormous fan-base among women it is boy-love comics, often known as ‘shonen-ai’ and ‘yaoi’ that has become immensely popular. ‘Shonen-ai’ is the fluffy version of boy-love where androgynous men whose appearances are highly feminine, with sleek body contours, long eyelashes and soft aura are portrayed. ‘Yaoi’ is the more sexualized and eroticized version of ‘shonen-ai’ where in Japanese manga the men appearing to be boyish and androgynous are portrayed engaging in erotically sexual acts where the degree of illustration differs with some manga blurring the genitalia, which had been the previous mode of portrayal but at present with more daring acts of being protected by licensing and copyright, the author-cum-illustrators have also begun drawing realistically. Since I am studying Korean manhwas as well, a difference regarding the body shapes and sizes has been noticed, where the Japanese men are portrayed as being super-slender and flowery like ‘flower-boys’ as in manga like *Haikyuu!!*, the Korean counterpart has been more into drawing beefed up men with ripped upper bodies and a sleek waist which truncates to two powerful thighs. This is a conjecture of mine that this contrast in illustration in the same theme is because of how the two societies view men and in what light. Being feminine in Japan is not looked down rather a feminine gait in a conventionally cultural Kimono is considered extremely appealing as I have amassed from the numerous street-side surveys uploaded on YouTube, especially the one by “Nobita from Japan”. In Korea, being ultra-feminine is not that popular and since Korea and Japan have always been at loggerheads with each other from history to culture, to separate their tastes and preferences a line of alienation and isolation has also been drawn when it comes to the portrayal of men. Women in both counterparts are always portrayed as fair-skinned with pearly white complexion and voluptuous bodies, although Japan is intellectually more progressive and liberal than Korea with its ‘Gyaru’ culture. Gyarus are ultra-stylish Japanese women who defy stereotypical gender-imposed rules by the society for Japanese women to be skinny, modest with milky-white skin. They flout every tenet of those imposed rules with their buxom appearance, artificially or non-artificially tanned skin and stylish accessorized self, in short, their distinctively different appearance on not being pearly-white does not bother them instead they make it profound against the societal expectations. Since boy-love manga is more popular and mass-consumed than girl-love, I have specifically focused on ‘shonen-ai’ and ‘yaoi’. Although ‘shoujo-ai’ where school girls in fluffy, unspoken relationships are portrayed with ‘yuri’ being the adult-sexualized version, it is not as popular as ‘yaoi’ to women.

How do shonen-ai’ and ‘yaoi’ by virtue of their essentially queer context, work in the pan- Asian context? The straight-jacketed smut or heterosexual romantic porn has been ditched in favor of the more tabooed and sexually deviant ‘yaoi’ and ‘shonen-ai’ by women. Interestingly, ‘yaoi’ and ‘shonen’ai’ despite being thematically queer with homosexual relationships between men or boys, they have been since the beginning been aimed at sexually straight women, even the authors who write the same are self-proclaimed straight as well. The readership/viewership of male-homoeroticism by sexually straight women brings to the cusp the question of how sexuality does or does not come to play in being a deciding factor regarding such gender-defying attitude. In a survey that I had conducted over the Pollie app, with the prior permission of the participants it was observed that out of nineteen women who

had voted, 13 of them accounting for 68% of the bulk had expressed their ‘interest’ in reading boy-love comics, while 16% had ‘opposed’ to the same with the other 16% being ‘undecided’. This poll propelled me to further research on reading patterns of women which concluded with some obvious and some not-so obvious theories. Women like the LGBTQ sex have always been marginalized no matter how many waves of feminism come or go or how many more Wollstonecraft or Woolf are to come defending our rights, women have continued to be isolated to the peripheral margins of societal discourse. So, what exactly is there in these male-male love manga that straight women find so appealing and daringly open about themselves being admirers of the same? At first, we have to remember how these men who being equally marginalized with their desires and needs as women, are portrayed. There are many reasons why ‘yaoi’ would be so appealing to people especially for the reason that it gives women and girls an outlet to explore their sexuality.

Societal pressure and conventional norms expect women to be meek and submissive to their male heterosexual partners and are supposed to be acceptable of their approach from being dominated to being raped. Rape and sexual molestation have been predominantly deep-rooted in every society, women in such circumstances where every day they are exposed to the rising cases of sexual-crimes and perversions perpetrated by men, unmarried, single women seek the comfort of such literatures, since comic strips are graphic literatures of one kind. Fed up with the misogynistically-popularized themes of rape- culture and domestic violence even in ‘smut’ romance manga, ‘yaoi’ and ‘shonen-ai’ is sought as the only alternative. “Themes of rape and ‘reluctant affection’ are common, perhaps because many women in real life feel forced into relationships for financial or other personal reasons. Another reason could be that violent themes help abuse victims come to terms with their past” (Joy). ‘Yaoi’ as a genre began appearing in the 1970s around the same time along with ‘doujinshi’ (fan-made comics). The word ‘yaoi’ is actually an acronym for yama-nashi, ochi- nashi, imi-nashi which ironically translates to “no climax, no punchline, no meaning” (Schodt 37). ‘Shonen-ai’ is replete with fluff or childish- ‘immature’ romantic scenes with ‘ikemen’ or cool and ‘bishonen’ or beautiful boys engaged in cute, romantic affairs with soft, warm gestures. They are also accompanied with kissing scenes that is common in manga aimed at girls; nowadays even the Chinese print media has expanded into this largely lucrative business with their own line of creation, the manhua. Manhuas are typically ‘shonen-ai’ where generally historical characters like princes are engaged in taboo relationships, majority of the times such bl manhuas are given the guise of bromance comics to tone down the bl factor for the mass- appeal. The Master of Diabolism or The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation which has been recently adapted into a tv series available on Netflix called “The Untamed” or “Mo Dao Zu Shi” featuring the Chinese heartthrob Xiao Zhan, focuses on the loving banter between the two male protagonists. ‘Fujoshi’ or bl comic lovers would be fast to imagine the relationship as more than what meets the eye while normal viewers would view the same as bromance, as is nuanced in the novel, *Kanojo ga suki na mono wa Homo de atte Boku de wa nai*. Print media in terms of comics have also the done same, from deliberately keeping the homosexual origins and underlying current under wraps to gradually unravelling the same. Marc McLelland argues that while in the west

the younger audience is free to choose between the normal and the explicit versions, the Japanese society keeps a tab on the same by strictly maintaining the age restrictions, which is why online platforms where anyone can freely access the same has seen a massive boom with hourly readership soaring previous readership counts. While Marc Mc Lelland is right to point out that Asian gay comics have had a long tradition of aestheticizing boys and men in "beautiful and pure form of romance" it is time to consider some comics in particular to understand the dynamics of female-heterosexual readership regarding the same.

In boy love manga and manhwa, the emotions portrayed by men is of special concern here as even men under the lens and gaze of emotional raptures can turn bashful which women in general might greatly prefer in their partners, instead of being passive recipients in relationships. Men in yaoi and shonen-ai manga/manhwa/manhua are illustratively expressive, their expressions ranging from the dominating alpha to the submissive partner while roles frequently keep changing back and forth, the role-reversal of which is favored by female readers who being at the receiving end and leading a monotonous sex-life would prefer a breath of change. (Chiesi) The disappointment that comes with denial of the same in real life is met in the fantasy world where a window for unbound imagination is let loose at last. Bondage or BDSM and such similar themes are often common in yaoi, the sheer thrill of incorporating the same in real life is extremely arousing for women who would rather like to imagine themselves at being in control than the other way round. Such manga/manhwa is pretty common, one of them being Kiss Me Liar. The dominant alpha is always the active partner in relationship whether it comes to confessing love or indulging in sex. The submissive omega or beta, in terms of sexual competency is often represented as a bashful man who often gets to be the bottom or 'seme' while the dominant partner takes the role of the top or 'uke'.

Apart from romantic manga, same-sex gay manga also emphasize upon the innumerable hardships that the members from the community undergo just because they do not fit or confirm to the heteronormative ideals of the society. Patriarchy or patriarchal domination over every facet is the very cause why same-sex comics have evolved over time only to explode at present. Women can relate to the pain of being subdued and subverted and hence find solace and comfort in the quarters of the same comics which indulge in romantic relationships against their biological configuration. It is not their sexuality that comes into the foray of discussion rather the mannerism of treatment that is meted out to women on a day-to-day basis. Every mass- consumed and mass-accepted romantic work be it manga or novel in crude sense stereotypically focuses on the sexual and romantic satisfaction of men, single-mindedly side-lining the female partner. In real life, women have as they have become more vocal had complained regarding the same as well in innumerable surveys covered worldwide, where their sexual satisfaction is taken no heed of where they are used as rag-dolls for penetration and male-penile climax. A woman taking the lead in the relationship be it while paying for her own share of dining expenses or in bed, has always been frowned upon though some progress on that front has been noticed over time, women hardly get what they desire or more importantly a woman's desire is paid no heed to in the relationship in its entirety. The

‘give and take’ in relationship hardly ever meet the standards when it comes to the real scenario with the woman always being supposed to play the role of the ‘giver’ while the man being the ‘taker’. In ‘yaoi’ comics men are portrayed as ‘seme’ and ‘uke’ where the ‘seme’ is the stronger and more masculine of the two who takes the top position while the ‘uke’ is the one pursued. In ‘yaoi’ roles are frequently reversed and the decision to do so is revered and respected as well unlike the portrayal of the heterosexual counterpart. The fluidity in role-reversal and acceptance is what highly appeals to women, is what I have gathered from the online discussion forums on Novel Updates, Crunchyroll and Reddit. While some critics have been quick to point out the difficulty in ascertaining the sexual orientation of the readers it has been generally accepted to be heterosexual. (Behr 25; Kinsella 117; Mizoguchi 56; Thorn 172) Boy-love comics involve "the open mess of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically"(Sedwick 8). These comics open a vista of innumerable probabilities and possibilities of queerness and stand for defying every monolithically established norm, expanding beyond the boundary of the established and accepted, and through their sexually transgressive elements enable their straight female readers to fantasize sexually beyond any limit. The established norm of men being ultra-masculine with their penile-virility is defied where they are portrayed as submissive to the pangs of pleasure and passion.

The portrayal of those sexually eroticized visuals is highly appealing to women who are only used to the image and concept of non-vocal men. Beautiful men suffering the heat of sexual throes involving anal-intercourse and fellatio, is not only exciting but pleasing to women at the same time who live their fantasies of taking the lead and dominating their male imagined or real partners through the comics. Boy love comics are not replete with only pornographic, sexually titillating, arousing drawings instead they also have soft, spooning, tender moments of love as well where the lover tends to the beloved by doing house-work, running errands and taking care of them. Through these small gestures, boy-love comics along with other queer comics hail to establish what heterosexual comics do not, that being- equality in relationship. Gender inequality is a major cause of concern not only in heterosexual portrayal but also in real relationships as well, where a high percentage of dissatisfaction with sexual climax and romantic disengagement predominantly prevails. Understanding in terms of physical and psychological coherence lays the groundwork of successful relationships as is desperately desired by women but realistically chalked out gender-roles makes them disenchanted, crestfallen so much so that the world of fantastic imagination comes to their vent of escape from the abattoir of patriarchal tyranny and oppression. (Radway) Yaoi manga also bring to the fore the important question regarding homosexual couples having babies of their own by adopting which is also linked to the female psychology at the same time. For women, who are unable to have children of their own are constantly under pressure both physically and mentally and in cases when the husband or the partner is specifically against adoption a rift forms amidst every crisis. The spirit and essence of freedom among homosexual couples who

despite not having a child of their own can have such love portrayed in the comics essentially embalms the scarred psyche of these societal bludgeoned women.

Conclusion

Although the internet and reader surveys do minimally to the slightest extent provide information regarding straight women indulging in queer texts, the line of biologically confirmed and muted silence on the same regarding the sexual configuration gradually dissolves and dissipates with the evolution of the standards of queer and non- queer. Despite the struggle regarding reader identification remaining a major concern the fact that a large populace of women are consumers of boy-love comic's does point out to some transgressive sexual attitude and acts beyond the realm of straight facts and theories. This brings me to conclude with my conjecture that identification with the queer and the deviant, gives women the ability and right to explore their sexuality beyond typified monolithic structures of patriarchal convention.

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