

Mutant and Proud: Interrogating the Ambit Beyond the Binary

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Abstract

Science Fiction (SF) is known to imagine and/or depict transgressive/alternative worlds, often more inclusive and challenging the status quo. With the application of “cognitive estrangement” SF aims to deconstruct the sense of familiarity with our empirical reality, making it possible to explore beyond the apparent and “accepted” (Suvin, 1979). In the process of embracing the societal convention, often convoluted notions viz. gender, sex and sexuality fall prey to oversimplification leading to reductive binaries. Anything beyond that seems an anomaly, leading to otherisation. In this paper, *X-Men*, a popular SF movie will be discussed in order to look beyond the binary. The woman question will be delineated upon, in general and the role of women in SF with vicissitude of gender, sex and sexuality will be studied, in particular. The paper will focus on a character called Mystique, a Marvel heroine/mutant whose identity remains in state of flux for she is a shapeshifter. This depiction poses a challenge to essentialism for she can be read as a queer character, transgressing the “normative” binary construct, providing scope to study the notion of “performativity” (Butler, 2004).

Keywords: SF, Science Fiction, gender, sex, sexuality, binary

Introduction

“Mutants: Since the discovery of their existence they have been regarded with fear, suspicion, often hatred. Across the planet debate rages, ‘are mutants the next link in the evolutionary chain? Or simply a new species of humanity, fighting for their share of the world.’ Either way, it is a historical fact, sharing the world has never been humanity’s defining attribute” (*X2: X-Men United*, 2003, 0:40-01:10).

X-Men is one of the most celebrated comic book series published by Marvel Comics, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Marvel Comics, ever since its inception in 1939 by Martin Goodman, during the Golden Age of Comics, is widely known to produce some of the

best known superheroes as well as superhero teams. In addition, genres such as Science Fiction (SF) and fantasy were also popularized by Marvel in the form of comics. Further, as the readership expanded over the years, Marvel distributed the film rights for adaptations of their popular narratives. The first adaptation of *X-Men* directed by Bryan Singer released in the year 2000, followed by two sequels viz. *X:2 or X-Men United* (2003) directed by Bryan Singer and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) directed by Brett Ratner. After the immense success of the trilogy, various prequels and sequels have foregrounded the cinema ever since.

The *X-Men* narrative revolves around the lives of mutants and their struggles where the former is otherised in the human society. P. Andrew Miller in his work, “Mutants, Metaphor, and Marginalism: What X-Actly Do the X-Men Stand For?”, argued that, “the X-Men [a team of pacifist mutants that stands for equality and calls for co-existence] and mutants in general can be seen as metaphors for any number of minority or marginal” (283).

However, as the title moniker suggests, amidst the overwhelming dominance of male figures, the representation of mutant women has been lost in oblivion and they need to be given due space and respect, not just as token characters but as unique individuals. It must be noted that these mutant women, as such, are marginalised by the virtue of being both mutants and women. “As history since the Enlightenment has demonstrated, more often than not the subject of that universal ‘human nature’ has been white, male and middle-class. In the narratives of this subject, women have tended to play supporting roles as the ‘others’ of men” (Hollinger, 2003, p. 125). The paper will underline the woman question, in general and the woman question in SF, in particular. In addition, the aim of the paper is to study the concept of gender performativity and scrutinise the convoluted ideas that run around the notion of sex and sexuality by analysing one of the mutant women, Mystique who is a shapeshifter.

To begin with, the woman question can be understood as the sum total of the movements and debates pertaining in the society, reflecting upon the position of women. Before feminism established its ground in the twentieth century, people across the globe fought for women rights such as right to education, right to property, right to vote, etc. Arguments made by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) press the aforementioned debates raging in the society, calling for equal opportunities and freedom for women.

Later such debates and discussions took shape in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The First Wave of feminism marked the demand for women’s suffrage. However, the spirit of equality was marred by an exclusive representation and consideration of the white middle class women.

The Second Wave of feminism reached out to address more diverse range of issues. For instance, equality in workplace, fight against marital rape and domestic violence, etc., were the immediate concerns of the Second Wave. Many feminists examined the position of women as the Other to their male counterparts. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1949) underlined the same concern.

Further, the Third Wave of feminism began towards the close of the twentieth century. It called for a more inclusive lens, striving for equal representation of all gender

and sexual minorities, beyond the binaries. Also, an inclusion of black women's liberation was promoted via intersectional approach.

Taking from different trajectories of the feminist movement, it is evident that, "all feminist theories resist the ideological self-representations of the masculinist cultural text that traditionally offers itself as the universal expression of a homogeneous 'human nature'" (Hollinger, 2003, p. 125). Keeping pace with the development of feminism, an ideology which "created a critical distance between observer and observed," to posit that the patriarchal society establishes the women as the Others; SF also managed to fashion a similar critical distance through "cognitive estrangement" so as to objectively engage with the woman question. In other words, feminism in SF aims to "defamiliarise certain taken-for-granted aspects of ordinary human reality, 'denaturalising' situations of historical inequity and/or oppression that otherwise may appear inevitable to us, if indeed we notice them at all" (Hollinger, 2003, p. 129).

In *X-Men*, mutant women could have been used to aid the denaturalisation of sexual and gender inequalities. On contrary, the presence of strong women characters only works to strengthen the X-Men team but they are not deemed relevant enough to be able to have a separate identity, to be called X-Women, per se. A restricted masculine tag eschews a discourse on women subjectivity and reduces them to the Others of men.

Moreover, equating the mutants with the "X-Men" does what equating humans with "men" does, erases the woman question from the mainstream discourse. Tokenism mars the spirit of equal representation where women are only endowed with supporting roles. In *X-Men*, tokenism operates via "recruitment" of diverse women characters in the X-Men team and in the Brotherhood of Mutants (radical mutants). Ironically, the women characters happen to possess the strongest and most intriguing powers in the Marvel universe. Yet they are depicted as allies to their male counterparts who are the leaders, per se. While the broad mutant community comprises of diverse plethora, the X-Men and the Brotherhood keep it traditionally patriarchal. "Although sf has often been called 'the literature of change,' for the most part it has been slow to recognise the historical contingency and cultural conventionality of many of our ideas about sexual identity and desire, about gendered behaviour and about the 'natural' roles of women and men" (Hollinger, 2003, p. 126).

Raven Darkholme aka Mystique

In the Marvel universe, Mystique is portrayed as a strong agile woman. As the name suggests, she holds an air of secrecy around her. Interestingly, her character witnesses immense growth and change over the Marvel timeline. Like her shape, her identity is also always in a state of flux. From being a timid self-doubting young woman under Charles Xavier's (leader of X-Men team) shelter to a fierce fighter amongst the Brotherhood of Mutants, she is all for mutant recognition and rights.

She is a determined and uncompromising woman who doesn't shy away from breaking the barriers which hold her back. For instance, when she no longer believes in Xavier's pacifist ideals, she joins the Brotherhood of Mutants. Similarly, when her ways don't align with that of Magneto (leader of the mutant Brotherhood), she decides to be at her own. However, she keeps moving back and forth to the X-Men and the Brotherhood of

Mutants as and when she decides. In between the transition, she dedicates her life in rescuing mutants from adverse conditions, breaking into facilities and organisations indulging in mutant experimentation and devising plans to act against the same.

Her dark blue scaly natural form makes different from the conventional heroine, ironically, she is one of the most popular “supervillains” in the comics’ world. Accordingly, her character in the trilogy was shown in a devious and diabolic light. In fact, before the prequels hit the screens, she was almost never shown in her “human” form and always in her natural blue form (with a sturdy robotic voice) except when she impersonated someone.

Towards the end of trilogy, she’s hit by an anti-mutation dart whilst saving Magneto. Under the dart’s effect, she turns into a “normal human” who Magneto abandons. What comes as a surprise is that she, betrayed by Magneto, turns in all information (about his base of operations) to the government. This facet of hers, is difficult to comprehend, for is a woman who fought for mutant rights throughout her life, would she forsake her beliefs just to avenge Magneto for abandoning her?

In the prequels, just like the other mutants, Mystique’s journey (of becoming what she has become) is recounted. For the maximum time, she remains in “human” form as she is not comfortable in her own skin for the fear of being othered by the society. While Xavier is concerned about her “cosmic problem,” Magneto encourages her to embrace her natural form.

In the second prequel, the world is aware of the mutants’ existence. Mystique is hailed as a “hero” in the society for having saved humans from evil mutants (including Magneto’s Brotherhood which she has forsaken). In addition, young mutant women such as Storm and Jean look up to her as an inspiration. However, Mystique who (in the first prequel) embraced her natural blue form, learns that acceptance doesn’t come easily, people idolise her yet refrain from treating her as an equal. Hence, she turns to the “human” form and dedicates her time in saving mutants from harassment, experimentation and torture.

Her character poses a challenge to essentialism for she can be read as a gender fluid mutant. The character can be seen as genderqueer for she neither displays the traditionally defined masculine or feminine traits, exclusively. As mentioned, she is a shapeshifter transgressing the normative constructs of gender as her identity remains in a state of flux. “Mystique’s character was not revealed as bisexual until *The Uncanny X-Men* #265, almost thirteen years after she originally debuted” (Ingo, 2006, par. 3).

In some interviews Chris Claremont, the co-creator of Mystique’s character, has also mentioned that he originally wanted Mystique and Destiny [another mutant woman] to be Nightcrawler’s [a teleporter] biological parents, Mystique having “transformed into a man for conception”. However, the plan was dropped for the Comic Code Authority believed that the idea was “too controversial” (Ingo, 2006, par. 5). It took years for the *X-Men* comics to depict LGBTQ characters explicitly. For instance, Bobby Drake aka Iceman’s metaphorical “coming out” scene has been quite popular for mirroring the experiences of closeted sexual minorities. Only in recent past, his character was revealed to be gay in the comics.

More specifically, in the movies, Mystique, as the name suggests, never overtly conforms or rejects a particular gender identity. Her character is best projected in an androgynous form, not befitting socially defined masculine and feminine. “Queer theory also tends to be sceptical about epistemologies which see sexual orientation as a fixed identity, so that sf which describes bodies, genders, sexualities as fluid is much more in harmony with approaches that celebrate fluidity, liminality and other radical tactics for deconstructing the rigidity of binary identity categories” (Pearson, 2003, p. 157).

Mystique’s body and gender is fluid in the movies for she assumes whatever shape she wishes to take. In addition, her comic avatar does not display a fixed sexual orientation either. Also, her character is close to the notion of androgyny where lines between traditionally defined binaries are blurred.

Moreover, her character allows the audience to explore the idea of gender as a kind of a “performance”. In the introduction to her famous work *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler argued that gender is socially constructed via various factors which define and maintain one’s identity. It is a kind of “doing” or an activity that one performs in accordance with the norms underlined by the society. Even if one believes that they choose to “perform” a certain gender, one negotiates between the choices always already defined by the society. One does not author one’s gender for its terms are always negotiated outside oneself and one only determines “one’s own sense of gender to the extent social norms exist that support and enable the act of claiming gender for oneself” (Butler, 2004, p.7).

Since the “doing” is dependent on what is done to a person, the societal norms contour desires which do not originate in one’s personhood. She further adds that, belonging to a certain gender should not imply that, “one will desire in certain way” (Butler, 2004, p.1). As queer theory aims to oppose all identity claims which regulate and restrain an individual, the nature of Mystique’s superpowers allows her to “undo” the societal norms. In the Marvel comics, her character oscillates between binaries as she is portrayed as a bi-sexual, negotiating between dual binaries of desire. The depiction of the cinematic character is left open ended for audiences to speculate over Mystique’s fluid gender and sex.

Her character exists in binaries; in the trilogy she is portrayed as Magneto’s Other. She has a devious voice, largely depicted as a cold blooded femme fatale otherwise second-in-command to Magneto in the Brotherhood of Mutants. Whereas, in the prequels, she journeys from being Charles Xavier’s Other to being on her own. Under Charles’ shelter, she is a naïve young woman struggling to accept herself. Once away from Charles, she devotes her life in rescuing mutants who suffer torture and harassment in the human society.

Hence, the binary of the monster and angel; possibly that’s the kind of binary her character breaks through in upcoming ventures. Her younger version is all heart and emotions, wanting to embrace the difference which separates her from the human society. Not needing validation from Magneto or Charles or even the society, per se.

Conclusion

SF becomes a “site for challenging both the binaries of male/female sex and of the cultural constructions of gender” connected to the former categories. “Protagonists can ‘perform’

gender, they can be male or female, they can be neuters, have no definable sexual category, be intersexed or switch between genders. In science fiction, the body (whether human or other) is a tabula rasa, capable of multiple and contradictory readings” (Wheeler, 2013, p. 210).

As *Mystique* breaks away from essentialist definitions which differentiate between the binaries, her character provides an interrogative potential to imagine transgressive representations. “The body is then a conflicting/confining space that can be transcended by transgressive reinscription and science fiction offers an examination of the cultural and ideological positioning sexuality where identity intersects and undermines any form of substantive representation” (Wheeler, 2013, p. 221).

Such representations need to be devised carefully; else they could end up hovering within the patriarchal harbours and delimit the position of women as the Other to men. Perhaps, the creators of *X-Men* need to consider the same, in order to achieve inclusivity. Charting the history of feminism right from the seventeenth century to the present, this chapter has sought to analyse the position of women in Science Fiction. Within this genre, *X-Men* can be deemed to be an example of equitable female presence in a male dominated space except that several features within it mar the supposed empowerment. The presence of the women characters as tokens remain in the patriarchal framework rather than overturn it. Though, the creators have tried to break free from established conventions, yet the space that they carve for the women characters continues to be limited.

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