Divergence of gender representation: sailor moon and revolutionary girl utena ess...

For the past three decades or so, Japanese anime has offered an array of opportunities for analyzing social structures and gender politics, in particular in relation to the changes and trends occurring one after the other in postmodern Japan. Gender roles are often seen as explicit or underlying themes portrayed in Japanese anime, especially in the genre of Shoujo manga, or otherwise also known as girl manga.

Shoujo manga first started off as a creative production by female writers for a female audience and traditionally more orientated towards roles of empowerment, romance and emotional growth, particularly pertaining to female roles and characters. There are respectively two series of anime which can be considered to have blown opened the doors of Shoujo manga in the 1990's, and they are Sailor Moon and Revolutionary Girl: Utena respectively. Although themes of gender identities are both explored in these two anime, the portrayal of the composition of these identities, whether it is fluid or hybrid, is quite different.

I will attempt to explore the respective composition of gender identities in Sailor Moon and Revolutionary Girl: Utena, and the setting in which it is composed in, specifically concentrating on female identities, and how each of them utilize their respective theme to portraying gradual shifts in social norms or the defiance of social and gender norms in Japanese society. It was a common belief in Japanese anime industry that boys would not read shoujo manga, or watch shoujo manga.

However, in 1992, the creation of Sailor Moon (sailor-suited super heroines) blew this preconception away and is considered now as one of the

forerunners of shoujo manga that succeeded in generating the type of mass circulation or profits of a television series for boys in Japan: Toei's Rangers. The success is that although Sailor Moon was intended for a female audience, it was able to expand to a wider fanbase, including boys and older men. One major underlying theme of Sailor Moon is its play on stereotypical gender identities, which proves both desirable and likeable by young females nowadays.

Traditionally, in earlier shoujo mangas, females are seen to encompass a more fragile, passive, dependent, and submissive role in a romantic relationship and eventually will become the mother and caretaker of her children and her husband's needs. She obeys her partner willingly and faithfully and makes no decision of her own. Males possess the power and the capacity to do everything a female is unable to do. However, Sailor Moon attempts to add power to this traditional female role without destroying it, creating a new female identity that encompasses empowerment, but at the same time, reinforcing the traditional female role as well.

The identity of these girly heroes are, as described in the paper " Sailor Moon: Globalizing Fashion Action", " less a hybrid (in which multiple traits and girls fuse together)" (Alison 27), and more fluid in nature, where characters are able to move to and fro a spectrum represented by a more feminine and traditional identity at one end, and a more new-age, independent and stronger role of the female on the other end. In short, the story revolves around five ordinary school- girls who have been given the

power to transform into girl-fighting heroes who hold the ability and the strength to save the world from evil monsters.

The empowerment of the female, contrasted with relatively weaker male role models, provide us with the shift in the portrayal of the traditional female role. The warriors not only gain physical strength when they transform, their bodies also change to that of a more voluptuous and sexy outlook. The girls can be seen to gain sexual power and domination over their male counterparts too, which might be the reason why many fans of Sailor Moon are also older males.

Also, the strength of the female mind is also highlighted as the Sailors have endurance and a strong will power, especially in times of turmoil and physical assaults one after the other. . Although the empowerment female identity is introduced as a dominant theme in Sailor Moon, we cannot ignore the underlying foundation of the traditional identity of the female in which this new empowerment is build upon. In the case of Usagi, the main Sailor Warrior, she is " also a reincarnated princess who was married to Prince Endymion with whom she had a child"(Alison 6).

She is thus a 14 year old who, at the same time, has a long-term partner and also a child. Her motherly role towards Chibi-chan, her child from the future, portrays the fundamental role of the mother that every girl possesses. It is also interesting to note that female warriors also possess natural feminine and dependent qualities at times. This can be seen in the scene where Sailor

Moon leans on Chiba Mamoru, with his hand on her head. The stereotypical image of the male being in a more superior position is thus illustrated.

Also, although the girl warriors are not undefeatable, they are weak at times, and would require the help of their fellow male partners. Another argument for this fluidity of female identity is the fact that the power to transform into world-saving warriors was not ultimately chosen but given to them. Hence one might argue that although it appears as if the girls are initiative and non-passive, they are constrained in many ways. They do not ultimately seek out evil parties and destroy them, as traditional male heroes might do, but rather, they are sought out by these evils.

In other words, bad things happen to them that are not within their control. Hence, in a way, they are pulled out of their traditional female roles and forced to take on a more aggressive role. This illustrates the characters' ability to morph in and out of two different female identities and the ability to identify with both. Having analyzed the fluid gender identities portrayed in Sailor Moon, one might ask why this portrayal might be attractive to the audience, who are predominately young girls.

As commented by some Japanese feminists, Sailor Moon is a " reflection not only of girls' fantasies today but also of a positive shift in gender reality" (Alison 6). Unlike typical unrealistic male heroes, Usagi is just an ordinary girl who does not do well in school, who loves to go shopping and play video games. However, she is also a character who can " shift between multiple

modalities"(Alison 27) and transform into a strong, cool independent and sexy fighter, a princess and a mature woman.

She is the template for young girls' idols and she represents the realistic dreams of young girls today in Japan: " to be powerful yet selfish in indulging one's earthly desires. " (Alison 6). She is an inspiration for girls in modern Japan: to be both comfortable with their traditional female identity, but also to seek out careers and reams unrestricted by their gender. This is exemplified by a particular episode in the Sailor Moon Supers series, where Amy, dons a mechanic outfit to help a friend fix her car. Her new get-up is a puzzle to her fellow friends as Amy is more often seen diligently studying or reading a book.

This small part of the episode plays on the stereotype image of females and car mechanics and serves to break down this gender barrier. Also, the relatively different characters in the series encompass a wide variety of different roles so that viewers are better able to identify with a different character. Identify is then not just focused on one narrow character, but viewers are able to choose among the individual traits of each character and identify with them. It is thus the fluidity of female identity portrayed in Sailor Moon that makes it so successful.

On the other hand, gender identity in Revolutionary Girl Utena, unlike the fluidity nature of identity portrayed in Sailor Moon, can be analyzed as more of a hybrid, where female characters embody multiple gender traits, especially in the categorization of the main protagonist, Utena. Utena's

gender identity is somewhat more ambiguous and more complicated than the characters in Sailor Moon. Although dressed in a boy's uniform and is actively involved in sports and games against boys in her high school, Utena is unmistakingly female.

This is not only represented by her feminine curves, beautiful facial features and her recognition by others as a girl, but also by her own constant oral reinforcement that " I am a girl. " She represents Japanese translation of androgyny as a ryosei, as she embodies combinations of both gender dichotomies: male and female. In other words, Utena is both a prince and a princess and this idea can be best portrayed with Carolyn Heilbrun's representation on androgyny as " a realization of man in woman and woman in man — as an ideal, nonpolarized way of being that is necessary for the survival of human society" (Robertson 49).

This necessity for human survival can be drawn as a parallel to Utena's attempt to fight for a larger cause other than for herself, which might be considered as required for survival within Akio's unpredictable game of duels. Thus, it is also her androgyny that allowed her to break free from Akio's grasp to save Anthy and those around her in the end. However, one might argue that this hybrid nature of Utena's identity is warped as we near the end of the series, when she is adamant on assuming the role of the prince-saving-damsel-in-distress.

In order to compete in a male-dominated structure, it is not clear whether her own femininity is retained or not. Asano Michiko describes traditional

androgyny as " the harmony of male and female qualities"(Robertson 49) and I question whether or not Utena is able to sustain this " harmony" at the very end of the series, when she refuses to be Akio's bride and vows to be forever the prince for Anthy. Or is she, by embedding a more masculine and princely identity, as Yagi Kimiko states, " suppress[ing] women's sexual difference in the name of equality" (Robertson 49)?

It is definitely a note worth pondering. On the other hand, this interpretation of Utena's identity as that of a ryosei can be further explored. Utena never claimed to be a man, and it can be argued that her actions is simply driven by a desire to save those that are suffering, irregardless of gender. She sees people as people without gender attributions and her judgments are based on pure absolute values. One can thus argue that she is perhaps more fitting of a chusei, which means between woman and man, a combination of neither male nor female, in other words, genderless.

However, if this were so, then Utena would have to be situated within a " dreamworld free from the constraints of fixed, dichotomous, and hierarchical gender roles" (Robertson 71), which is highly idealistic and not entirely portrayed in the setting of Utena. Hence, I am more compelled to classify Utena's androgyny as that of a ryosei. However, no matter what conclusion is taken, the representation of gender in Utena as that of a hybrid nature is unmistaken. Having discussed Utena's gender identity, it is important not to forget another important character in the anime, who, in juxtaposition, possesses a more fixed female identity.

That character is Anthy. In comparison to Utena's hybrid nature, Anthy illustrates a sharp contrast. In this story, Anthy, as the Rose Bride, represents the traditional passivity of a female heroine. Her character is inert and submissive. However, she is not rewarded for her passivity with marriage but instead punished for it by her relationships to various men in the story. The Rose Bride is a figure without any ability to act on her own decisions and without this ability, she is left without hope, power and no self.

This is a complete reversal of the message epitomized by Sailor Moon, where the belief demonstrated is that by empowering oneself, we are rewarded with acquired power and thus, able to indulge in one's desires. However, the story offers hope at the end for those who possesses such a fixed gender identity. With the help and encouragement of Utena, Anthy is ultimately liberated from her rigid identity as a traditional female. By liberation, it does not mean that she is abandoning her femininity. Instead, she is able to fully embrace her gender identity as a female and is empowered to go in search of her prince.

It is important to ask why this portrayal of gender identity has been chosen for Revolutionary Girl Utena. For Sailor Moon, I have discussed how the fluidity of gender identity relates to current shifts in gender reality among young girls in Japan and how it is considered desirable and attractive by this audience. For Utena, one of the intentions of the story is to defy the traditional oppressed female role in a patriarchal society, i. e. Akio's world in Ohtori Academy, and to demonstrate how it is possible to save those who are

locked within this fixed identity. This is exemplified by Utena's and Anthy's relationship in the story.

Utena is deeply disturbed by Anthy's lack of ability to do anything for herself and she constantly tries to encourage her to reclaim her identity. It is only till the end does Anthy realize that she herself has the option to reclaim herself. It is when she realizes this does she obtain liberation from the patriarchal controlled world of Akio's. This can be drawn as a parallel to breaking out of certain societal norms. Certain societal norms such as the prince saving damsel in distress is still prominent in modern society nowadays, even though they represent nonrealistic fairy-tale settings.

Females are expected to yield to a male for help. In the beginning of the series, the story is illustrated by an unknown prince kissing away the tears of a sad princess. This might mislead the audience to thinking that this stereotypical, fairy-tale like, prince-saving-princess story might lead to a happy ending. However, the prince turns out to be a prince who no longer believes in justice and righteousness and the only road to happiness and freedom relies on the princess's own ability to save herself.

This ultimately refutes the societal stereotypical expectation of gender roles and provides a clear yet strong message to the audience that societal barriers can be broken. Though both Sailor Moon and Revolutionary Girl Utena exemplify female empowerment, they have employed different measures to pass this message to the audience. Sailor Moon, through the characters' fluid female identities between a traditional female role and that

of a more aggressive and self-aware identity, girls are encouraged to discover new aspects of dimensions, unrestricted by their gender.

On the other hand, Utena employs a more subtle method to show its audience the possibility of breaking free from societal norms such as restricted female roles in a patriarchal society. Through the story of Utena's altruistic character and determination to save those around her from suffering, we are able to get a first-hand acknowledgement that defying fixed, stereotypical gender identities is indeed achievable.