WEBTOONS, THE LITERATURE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Ridhu Elizabeth
MA English, Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous

Abstract

Webtoons are digital comics that owe its origin to South Korea wherein it developed as a reaction against the large manga base of Japan. Thus as New Media celebrated creating a subculture that transcends geographical and temporal spaces, Webtoons become the digital media that allows for the same through its easy accessibility and larger socially relevant themes, all at the tip of your finger. This paper will analyse the narrative form of webtoons and its relevance today.

Keywords: Webtoons, subculture, narrative.

Internet, the most remarkable creation at the turn of the 20th century made the most revolutionary impact in the cultural, commercial and technological aspect of our lives. Its World Wide Web became the primary instrument in the genesis of the globalized era we are in today with there being no end to communications despite geographical or temporal restrictions thus exciting further innovations in every field.

The literary field was no less different. The beginning of the 21st century saw the rise of the New Media that used computers as the main medium for its creation, usage, propagation and distribution. With the creation of Web 2.0 technologies like Facebook and YouTube, the most technologically challenged individuals could harness the medium for storytelling through their uploading of pictures and videos. No longer are words so prominent, but graphics and animation are just as likelyto communicate story content or be used as part of the interactive interface. The development of Digital Media is then for all purposes merely an innovation that changed the accessibility criteria from the limits of computers to just any digital device.

The possibilities the New Media and digital media offered in terms of narrative techniques in storytelling are wide ranging for example, hypertexts, fan fictions etc. The use of such multimodal narratives became an important topic of discussion over the time that had various theorists forming factions that are either in favor of embracing these novel changes or are rejecting it. Nonetheless, digital media thus allowed for various forms of storytelling leading to the development of Webtoons.

Webtoons are digital comics that owe its origin to South Korea wherein it developed as a reaction against the large manga base of Japan. Korean manhwas/comics have always been overshadowed by the Japanese mangas in terms of its art, storytelling, and popularity and also due to the long history of its publication. Nonetheless, with the advent of Internet, the Korean web portals like Daum and Naver were quick to adapt to the change and developed Webtoons that depend on digital media for the creation and distribution of comics.

While Japanese mangas were globally accepted through the legal or illegal scanning of the original print comicstranslated to English, Webtoons found its acceptance globally with the establishment of Line Webtoons, a subsidiary of Naver, that allows for its licensed translation to English. Over 10 million readers read webtoons on Line Webtoons alone. Other web portals like Lezhin, Tappytoons etc., then followed the trend.

These applications while publishing webtoons also allow for fan translations of the original comics as well allow the readers to upload their own comics. If they garner enough readers, the forum then takes it on as webtoons official to their page. Globalization having effectively garnered more readers, what was originally established as native to only South Koreans has taken to any artist/author of any nationality to upload their comics on these forums.

Thus as New Media celebrated creating a subculture that transcends geographical and temporal spaces, Webtoons become the digital media that allows for the same through its easy accessibility and larger socially relevant themes, all at the tip of your finger.

The very determining factor of webtoons are its colored in art that are mostly visually breathtaking as is in the case of webtoons like *My Dear Cold Blooded King, The Ghost Teller* etc., as compared to the monochrome effect of traditional Japanese mangas. At the same time, the minimalistic use of colors also adds more to the art and storytelling. In *The Devil is a Handsome Man*; the colors used are black, white, grey and a shade of peach. These colors dominate the art style adding to the surrealistic effects in the art. Yet another factor that enables the easy reading of webtoons is the scrolling down that allows the reader to move to the next page without any interruption. This uninterrupted service helps the creators as well to use various narrative techniques to add on to the story telling. For example, the webtoons *Anarusumanara*, *Wind Breaker*, *Tower of God* etc., uses long panels both horizontally and vertically sometimes having effects that spill outside the panels thus creating a 3D effect to the very 2D picture. *I love Yoo* and *My Dear Cold Blooded King,*uses long panels to give a 360-degree effect to the art. Since the creation of webtoons has the use of software like Photoshop and Clip studio Paint,effects like real images compiled into the drawn in images bring in surrealism as in the case of *Anarusumanara* or as background for the drawn in characters in the case of *My Dear Cold Blooded King.*

Webtoon releases are characterized by the release of chapters weekly or according to the author's discretion. Sometimes, some of these chapters have a piece of music added on, that which is adequate to the context of that particular chapter. *I love Yoo, Aerial Magic, The Devil is a handsome man* and other webtoons use this feature to enhance the reading experience. The music released is also available on the Patreon pages of the authors. Sometimes, the chapters are accompanied with GIF content like in *Boyfriend of the dead* or *The Devil is a Handsome Man*.

Webtoons thus allows for multimodal narratives that allows for a more holistic experience for the readers but one may wonder as to how relevant this upcoming digital media is for it stands on a unique pedestal wherein it can neither be classified as static graphics nor that of a motion picture. Nonetheless, this very ambiguity allows it to be popular among all generations for the widespread content of the webtoons. It is also interesting to know that the over 300% growth of webtoons is in the US alone, a statistical revelation seeing that the US has two of the most famous comic industries like Marvel and DC. Yet, the success of webtoons and its large female leadership is owed to the wide varieties of content discussed in the webtoons as well as the lack of objectification of the human body in most of the webtoons.

Webtoons like Woman World that envisions a utopian civilization where mankind and capitalism is extinct, explore themes like female sexuality, lesbianism, and a world where age does not matter. *Sarah's scribbles, Murrz* and *My Giant Nerd Boyfriend* have the female's point of view of their relationships with their respective boyfriends, pets and family members. They serve reality with a platter of humor and allow the readers to enjoy chapters of their everyday lives. Some of the chapters deal with their office lives, social anxiety, depression etcetera and makes the readers relate to them as well. My dictator boyfriend and Small World also deal with the same but of a gay couple than a heterosexual couple.

Webtoons like *Bloody Sweet, Bastard* and *Fragmented* deal with more complex issues like bullying and the extreme psychological trauma it causes the victim. *Bloody Sweet* on the surface projects a love story between a vampire and a socially ostracized high school girl but through the undercurrent attraction between the protagonists, the story explores the relationship between the mother and the bullied girl, the indifference of the school authorities to the girl being bullied, peer pressure etc., reflectingthe all too common situations of our current society. The webtoon *Bastard* takes it a step further exploring parental bullying and society's unfounded belief in the parent's innocence because of the masks they puton. *Fragmented* also deals with parental bullying but that which affects the child not physically but mentally leading to her socially awkward and fragmented personality. The expectations of parents of their children to rise up the social ladder and be perfect in the eyes of their capitalistic standards are a prominent theme explored in webtoons. *Anarusumanara*explores the same urging the youth to

break free from running blindly on the cold asphalt road and stop to look at the sunflower field by the side of the road.

Webtoons like *Ghost Teller* and *Melvina's Therapy* portrays the darker aspect of human beings consumed with jealousy, selfishness and how it affects the people around them, mostlythe innocents. The Webtoons*Lookism* and *True Beauty,* although specific to the Korean society, but still relevant in the larger context of things looks at how society is always partial to physical appearances and how that affects the youth unprivileged to fit into their superficial beauty standards. The ongoing chapters allow the unprivileged protagonists to overcome the obstacle and also ask the readers to engage in these debates.

With the webtoon forum allowing readers' participation through the comment section, there is always a communication established between the author and the reader as well as the reader and other readersthereby becoming active participants in the co-production of the text than passive recipients of the semantic contents. As the New Media Theory highlights, digital media allows from a traditional one-to-one mode of communication to a many-to-many mode of communication. In the formation of such communities, webtoons provide the potential for a democratic postmodern public sphere in which citizens can participate in well informed, non-hierarchical debate pertaining to their social structures (Douglas Kellner, James Bohman on New Media)

While there are ongoing debates between the narrative theorists who view texts in new media narratives with distrust, the media theorists in turn accuse the narrative theorists of text blindness. But with the never-ending development of text in digital media, both the theorists should transcend their limitation and look beyond the text as merely a static process but a dynamic process. Webtoons even with its limited use of technical enhancements become an important part of the globalized world due to its easy accessibility, affecting large sections of the society all over the world, especially the youth. With the various sensitive and social themes it discusses, in the most artistic and simplest text narrative, it becomes a significant vehicle to permeate borders and nationalities and form communities that transcend spatial and temporal restrictions to unite and share similar experiences. If literature served to be didactic overtly or covertly, and elevate the human soul or enlighten the society over the past centuries, webtoons in its servitude to all those purposes, thus becomes the literature of the 21st century.

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