
Can gendered robots change children's gender stereotyping or reinforce them?: A reconsideration of Indian television series and cartoons like

Karishma Kaa Karishma and *ViR: The Robot Boy*

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Abstract

Originally an American invention in the second half of the twentieth century, the inclusion of robots as characters in animation and television series was a direct product of the intersection of digital technologies, creative industries, and global capitalism. Even though the general Indian audience of the time, aloof from computers and robots, relied on vicarious methods like film, literature, television, and the press to shape their mental representations of robots and make up for the lack of a direct, experiential base with digital technologies, today, among the fifty centrally registered channels in the country, broadcasting both Indian and foreign cartoons and over five-hundred entertainment channels broadcasting sitcoms and reality shows, which were for the most part white-washed, gender-stereotypical and majoritarian, robots have fortuitously featured as characters. Airing its first episode in 2003, the Indian remake of the 1980s American TV series *Small Wonder*, *Karishma Kaa Karishma* brought the first Indian robot character “Karishma” on the national screen, followed by “ViR” ten years later, from the animated series named *ViR: The Robot Boy*, however bound by their share of problems and prejudices. In this paper, I attempt to analyse the role of the gendered robot characters “Karishma” and “ViR” on children, linking popular aesthetics to social structures, to study if attribution of gender in robots change or reinforce the way children view cultural stereotypes of gender in society, through select episodes from both the shows.

Keywords: Robot; gender; animation; gender-stereotypical; technology;

Introduction

A vital avenue for self-expression among artists, cartoons were quick to engage interest in the decades following the second world war, for its potential to reduce complex concepts to a broad readership, together with being a terse social, political, and technological commentary. With all the previous successful animated film attempts which began as early as 1906, Indian animation too formally found its home in the Indian Film Department in 1934 with films like *Jambu Kaka*, *Lafanga Langoor*, among others. And it is through cartoons whether nationally or globally, that people had their first knowledge of how a robot looks, how it functions, the issues raised by their presence and their place in the contemporary society, and computers became a part of our quotidian imagination. Perhaps the first country to animate a robot cartoon for TV, Japan, fascinated children all over the map with shows like *Astro Boy* and *Doraemon*, engaging them in stories where robots co-existed and even worked in unison with humans to defeat social evil. While such Japanese cartoons is aired on most of the Indian cartoon channels even today, India herself was in a turtle race in coming up with a robot cartoon or television series of her own, until Sunil Doshi's remake of the 1980s American TV series *Small Wonder* much later in the 21st century in 2004. Created by Howard Leeds, *Small Wonder* was a children's comedy science fiction sitcom about a suburban family adjusting to its father's latest invention—a robot in the form of a 10-year-old girl, whose secret must be kept from their nosy pint-size neighbour and his father's boss. Along with creative director Vincent Franklin, Doshi carefully and sensibly Indianized the American *mise-en-scène* to fit it into the typical Indian apparatus, and owing to its rapid approval among Indian children, how much of the original show's integrity was compromised gradually lost relevance. On the other hand, after a series of Indian robot films taking the market by storm, like *Hollywood*, *Enthiran*, *Ra.One*, in 2013 came out the first Indian eponymous animated series featuring a robot, called *ViR: The Robot Boy*. But along with this "typical Indian

apparatus,” came the biases and prejudices that defined every other genre, like gender binaries, gender norms, and stereotypes commonplace all over the country, insisting upon heteronormativity.

The shift of the country’s blueprint as a political and economic power began altering than when it emerged from colonial authority in 1947 as early as the late 1980s, so that by the time India entered the twenty-first century, it was a completely different country. India’s new economic policies now brought about a slow and steady process of transitioning into modernity, with changes even in the social sphere. Yet, the Hindu fundamentalist orientation, which largely dominated (and continues to do so till date) the largely Hindi-speaking country, was resistant to any cultural change. Both individualism and collectivism were hard to reconcile in the Hindu (Indian) mindset, with individual initiative being appreciated only as long as it does not violate social mores. Afterwards, with the dawning of color television, telephones, and eventually cell phones at the turn of the millenium, the aspiring middle class of the nation gradually interpellated into globalization and television became the breeding ground for this hegemonic shift. As Althusser mentions in his *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, “in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce.” (Althusser 89) which clarifies how sexism and the dominant ideals of patriarchy are reproduced and adapted through a contained digital presence of television series designed even for children. Making use of Donna Haraway’s argument of the cyborg’s ability to move past the biological-determinist ideology in gender, which further advanced the cause of technology’s power to transform gender relations and identity, and cognitive theory of gender development in children or gender-schema theory, in this paper I attempt to answer questions like- Are depictions of gendered robots in children’s shows and television series counter-stereotypic? To what extent does this gendering affect children? Do they add to the existent stereotyping or alter them? through the methodology of content analysis.

A Gendered History

A good starting point to the discussion can be the 2019 UNESCO report which stated that the default female voice for Apple Siri, Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant, and Microsoft Cortana strengthened the gender bias that women played the function of caregivers. As a matter of fact, even the renowned science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov, in his novel “I, Robot” has defined robots to have qualities like “safety to humans, submission to orders, self-defence.” (Asimov 6). This might answer why most of the communication and AI robots created around us are gendered female, an intelligent alternative to nurses and ‘care-workers.’ The need for such gendering over the years originates from the kind of mental comfort essential to establish communication with these highly-developed anthropomorphic computers, and to have an increased accessibility of their social knowledge and the type of service one can offer, stereotypical to its gender. Consequently, each time after going through an upgradation, these robots have been equipped with facial cues and physical attributes typical to that of biological sex determinants in men and women, like long hair in female robots and short hair, sometimes accompanied by a moustache, in case of male ones.

Shaping the momentum of a critical area of thought in the post-World War world cut across by Cold War militarism and Super Power controversies, Donna Haraway’s extension of Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline’s notion of the *cyborg*, became a touchstone for feminist and gender studies research on multiple grounds. Short for ‘cybernetic organism’, the cyborg is a hybrid figuration of body and technology, with the hope of bridging the ever-lasting gap between nature and culture. But little did Haraway know that her *cyborg* was only to be reduced to ultra-gendered female fighters, superheroes, or the ‘femme-fatale,’ in the world of digital media like in the movies *Terminator*, *Robocop*, and *The Matrix* among others; or to uncomplicated little house-dolls assigned with the only critical task of maintaining the household.

A remake of the American television series *Small Wonder* from the 1980s, *Karishma Kaa Karishma* is an Indian television series that premiered on the channel Star Plus in January 2003, and ran for 65 episodes until April 2004. The plot centres around Vikram, a scientist who creates a lifelike robot-child, ‘Karishma,’ and

introduces her as his adopted daughter, to everyone outside the family of three including Vikram, his wife Sheetal, and their son Rahul. Even though robot gender and the gendering of robots is, in part, culturally specific, the portrayal of both “Vicki” from *Small Wonder*, and “Karishma” in their respective shows becomes problematic in the sense that both the culturally heterogenous settings reduce them to puppets acting on the command of the members of the family, and serving to resolve problems in the household, a better substitute for a maid, with the only difference between the two being Vicki’s incompetence in comparison to that of Karishma, as a fully-functional robot. To mention a few occasions in *Karishma Kaa Karishma*, right from the moment of her installation into the family in episodes 1 to 10, Karishma is appointed with the task of helping the other three members of the family with obstacles they face in the due course of the day, and in fact, there seems to be a gradual agreement among them about the same. For the most part, Karishma is shown to be silent, and her dialogues are only responses to others, often repeating intact sentences uttered by them instead of adding anything of her own.

A stark example of the integration of gender stereotypes in the robot slips out into the light when in episode 2, Karishma makes sure to conform to the prototype of the quintessential, well-bred daughter in an urban Hindu household, by singing *bhajans* (devotional songs sung during worship according to Hindu tradition) in front of the family guest. Furthermore, from tasks as trivial as waking the son up in time to be ready for school, or helping him with homework, to helping mother ‘Sheetal’ by finishing dusting and cleaning of the house early in the morning, Karishma seems to handle everything perfectly within the domestic unit. In fact, even the camera movements and sequence of shots in each episode seldom move beyond the margins of the family’s drawing room or focus on Karishma alone in separate close-ups. The colourful and vibrant setting of the household interiors also seem to convey the family’s contentment after Karishma’s arrival. Another noteworthy case in point can be Episode no. 11, where Karishma is made to dress up like that of a boy, so that she can join her brother’s music band and assist them in winning a music competition.

Although interludes of Karishma saving people around from evil and protecting her family from catastrophe are major themes in every other episode in the show, the focal point remains the same.

Significantly converging with the genre of a superhero-cartoon, the very basis of *ViR: The Robot Boy*, is the titular humanoid robot ViR coming to the rescue of anyone in need, and the adventures that follow in his every-day life. ViR's male privilege over Karishma begins with the sheer prearrangement of his family's thoughtlessness about laying bare ViR's robot-identity, presumably because flaunting the same will not have too many consequences in the contemporary Indian setting. Accordingly, unlike Karishma, ViR goes to school, makes friends, and owing to his well-programmed robot-powers, accomplishes a lot more than is possible in his age. In episodes like "Trouble in Plane," "Inter-School Championship Trophy," "ViR ki Patang Baazi", "ViR ki Sapna" and others, ViR engages in activities sometimes within and sometimes beyond the interiors of the household, activities all of which are stereotypic to ViR's gender as a boy. Along with undertaking superhuman projects like helping an aeroplane to land safely, building superfast racing cars, saving tigers, fending off bullies or running at a remarkable speed with his robot faculties, ViR is also seen to indulge in routine gender-stereotypic pastimes like flying a kite, playing outdoor sports like football and cricket, or visiting the nearby village fair.. And almost each and every episode from ViR can be posited as an exact point of contradiction to that of Karishma's. For instance, if we go back to episode no. 2 in Karishma, the one where she was initially seen singing bhajans, the creator even goes as far as to show Karishma helping her mother by utilizing her robot-powers to repair a mixer-grinder and prepare ingredients ready for the meals of the day. The point of view in the latter is essentially that of ViR's, superimposing an element of the meta-theatrical. And furthermore, projecting the male experience as the universal human experience, and consequently silencing, marginalising, or dismissing the female experience of the world with the pretext that it is different from the former. The medium of animation too permits director Suhas Kadav to touch all aspects of film-making and present a hyperbolic auditory representation of ViR's actions through the technique of

exaggeration and heightened sound effects. The visual language is restrengthened using an energetic colour grid of yellows, reds and blues, alongside additional elements like lighting and perspective, with ViR placed at the centre of the frame of reference in a majority of the scenes. This central framing gives ViR a sense of authority and power throughout the show, something which *Karishma* was particularly unprovided with.

Early enough when animation and robots were even a distant future, a multiplicity of perspectives in the field of psychology became influential in administering an increased understanding of children's active roles in gender socialisation and how children receive and reproduce gender stereotypes they come across in society. Along with Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive developmental approach drawn from Jean Piaget, a handful of social psychologists like Liben and Bigler, further elaborated the gender schema theory, which once again foregrounded the reception theory of gender-stereotypic cultural structures or *schemas* in children, which work their way into forming an individual understanding of gender. According to Kohlberg's theory highlighting the child's active engagement in gender development, a child's grasp of gender concepts influences how they behave, and this influence increases as they gain a somewhat sophisticated understanding of gender, being aware that someone's sex is constant and unchangeable. Children look for gender cues everywhere around them, and based on the observation, they choose who should or shouldn't participate in a certain activity, who can play with whom, and the reasons why girls and boys and men and women differ in their respective hobbies and occupations, and make rapid judgements regarding sex differences, even when only given a single instance. Another outcome of such research, is that, not only a child, but also an individual can be observed to perceive a group favourably as soon as he or she identifies with that group, even if only in a very limited fashion. Additionally, children as young as three years old, for example, have been proven to prefer their own sex over the other, as a way of becoming prejudiced towards the other. That being the case, it will not be surprising to come across a child, who, after watching series like *Karishma Kaa Karishma* or *ViR: The Robot Boy* spontaneously develops a constellation of gender

cognitions, expecting any one who is female, even if it is non-human, to look after the household or be a secretary to someone, while the male protects her from evil forces outside or is the one to employ the secretary; thus rendering Haraway's notion of technology to be gender-counterstereotypic, as unrealistic and incongruent to real life as ever. That is to say, even in a counter stereotypical condition, where if, a child encounters a female robot with culturally stereotyped masculine occupations, interests in activities, and traits, the child will simply dismiss them as "masculine", thus reinforcing the pigeonhole.

Conclusion

Postmodern sociologist Stuart Hall has an interesting take on television as a medium in this respect, echoing something similar to that of Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. According to Hall, the form of communication that television entails, is a complex process of interconnected practises in which meaning and consumption are not only interdependent but also determined by enactments of encoding and decoding. This process, called "Encoding/Decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language*, Hall says, is a cycle sustained by means of "production, distribution, production" (Hall 117). In simpler words, ideology is both the cause and effect of ideological apparatuses in society. It gets worked into the different media accessible for consumption by its audience only to be reproduced by them in their immediate spheres of thought-processes, and life and living in general. In retrospect, more than one line of evidence underpin the fact that apart from being social actors and sources of information for learning, robots invariably serve as models of cultural gender stereotypes to children, where their conceptions of gender of the self and the other are reproductions of the very idea of gender the routine content of digital media serve us with; whereby it can also impact their cognitive, social, and moral development greatly.

This categorization may have a lifelong impression in them as adults, to consider gendered robots that play gender-stereotypic roles to be more appropriate, acceptable, and likeable, than gendered robots with counter-stereotypic roles, and indeed influence levels of human-robot cooperation in the time to come. However,

gender and representation theorists today, similar to Hall, who, both inside and outside the text, goes on to pose increasingly elaborate theoretical solutions to new and emerging concerns and the constraints of the state's ideological structuration, are collaboratively coming up with significant questions directed at the historical and ideological processes that give rise to a certain form of cultural artifact, such as a television series, or a film, and the kind of representation of gender it unfurls to its audience. As a process, it is certainly difficult, characterised by contradictions and conflicts, as well as a specimen's placement in specific historical moments, yet indeed, necessary for the proper implementation of the very idea of development that lies central to all.

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Boy

11

Author's bio-note

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