



Research article

Born twice: A redemptive revisioning uncovering the metaphors of representation

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Abstract

The graphic narrative space is a complex labyrinth of nested stories subtly holding a tension between the visual and the verbal metaphors of representation. Every narrative canvas opens up possibilities of new ways of metaphorical seeing, unravelling the encoded signs of the dominant and the popular. Challenging and dissenting the normative ideas of gender representations, the graphic medium becomes a space to interrogate how the revisioned perspectives from the margins, embody a subversive voice to reclaim and reaffirm identity. This research paper aims to unfold the poetics of metaphorical representation in retellings and how the unconventional visual and verbal underscores an agency and voice to the female characters in the studied graphic narratives. The analysis will uncover how a revisioning of the aesthetics of the visual, the landscape of the mythological and the politics of the contemporary can subvert the traditional discourses that promote a conventional or hegemonic worldview. The paper situates Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay and Sankha Banerjee's *Panchali: The Game of Dice* and *Priya's Mirror* by Paromita Vohra and Ram Devineni in the cultural milieu of graphic content that encourages new ways of metaphorical seeing amid the precariousness of identity, ideology and agency of the mythical women characters.

Keywords: Graphic narratives, mythology, postmodern feminist narratives.



Reduced Inequalities, Gender Equality, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Introduction

"Literature serves to say important things about the complexity of the human condition," Bernardo Fernández (2017) said, "and that is what comics and graphic novels are doing" (p. 3). Graphic retellings of canonical texts aim at an inversion of the order for new meanings and voices to emerge. Roccio Davis (2006) argues that contemporary graphic novels "limns the interaction

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between drawing and language, and its ostensible simplification is actually a complex strategy for the representation of events and perspectives that may be difficult to communicate only through words" (p.5). This strategy is what Scott McCloud calls "amplification through simplification", which provides the graphic semantic space, liberty to address and project the complex schisms that are ignored and often relegated to the margins in a traditional narrative. Stuart Hall argues that "meaning is not in the text itself but is the active product of the text's social articulation, of the web of connotations and codes into which it is inserted" (Grossberg, 1986, p.5). He believed that any attempt at meaning making is never isolatable and is always caught in the contemporary, through the various network of chains of significations easily malleable and drawn into the currency of the contemporary discourse. Retellings purport a particular ideology, in other words Hall believed that ideology involved the claims of a particular system or medium to represent societal realities. His theories about representations and cultural systems opens up a nebulous space that disregards representational and ideological absolutes or certainties. Hall names this the 'cultural circuit' which generates and promotes new and alternate meanings defiant of the notion of any attempt at stereotypical and conventional representations. Hence the metaphors of visual and verbal connotations of language are in a constant state of flux, defying a closure or absoluteness of representational meanings. Stuart Hall's edited text *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* is essential for an understanding of "the systems of representation in which men and women *live* ... not blind biological or genetic life, but the life of experiencing, within culture, meaning and representation" (Hall, 1997, p.12). Hillary Chute (2019) observes that "'comics can render metaphors concrete on the page in order to make an experience vivid" (p. 259).

The 'culture' of comics in India, is explicitly tied to Hindu religiosity and nationalism, but also to the broader transnational culture of comic readership and fandom. Hence:

culture continues to be a central concept providing creative, social and capitalist logic for comic publishers and readers. Readers' engagement with comics as culture, offers a space to think through the ways in which dominant frameworks of race, gender, and Hindu culture are re-interpreted (Khanduri, 2010, p.187).

Indian graphic narrative landscape is witnessing a representational alteration in terms of its critique against the sacralised underpinnings of myth, gender and race that justifies and propagates the traditional notions of absoluteness. Ingrained in the cultural subconscious of the society, mythical association has become a part of our cultural idiom. The researcher in *Weaving the story, pulling at the strings: Hindu mythology and feminist critique in two graphic novels by South Asian women*, states:

When Hindu 'culture', 'history', and 'tradition' are represented in comics, they are invoking ideological framings that need to be read critically, even when the use of myth or religious imagery is implicit or allusive. Mythology has traditionally been the way in which religious concepts, values, and roles are passed down, and so might be seen as part of the cultural zeitgeist (Krishnamurti, 2019, p.2).

The familiarity that the myths garner accounts for the hegemony that these narratives, laced with mythical elements have over other realistic stories. Krishnamurti groups the new age graphic and comic narrators who are revisiting the grand myths into loose categories, one of which she calls

'the action driven comics'. These narratives are designed on a superhero framework with technological innovations, where female heroines seldom find agency, and even when included, are charged in highly sexualised representations like *Devi* and *Snake Woman*. Krishnamurti opines that these narratives shape a particular lens on the idea of Hindu modernity, which according to J Barton Scott, along with mythology acts as the axes around which comics from the subcontinent present as characteristically 'Indian'. He also states that, "The resulting vision of Hindu modernity also entrenches an often misogynist reading of mythology and are in some way contiguous with the modernity of Indian comics 'culture'" (Scott, 2010, p.178). The next category belongs to the proponents of a sense of "mythical didacticism", where, "these authenticity-driven comics share the aim of representing mythological narratives in a manner that is consistent with mainstream Hindu tradition" (Krishnamurti, 2019, p.2). The intent is to uphold the understanding of spirituality and mythology through the glorification of deities as seen in *Krishna: Defender of Dharma*, *Draupadi: Fire Born Princess* and their like. These narratives aim at depicting through the visual and verbal, an 'authentic' adherence to the original myth, without challenging the conventional. Krishnamurti identifies a third category of 'affect-driven' comics where "there is a more exploratory, critical and self-reflexive approach to mythology" (p.2). Quoting Pramod K Nayar, Krishnamurti states that "Some graphic novels by artists like Appuppen (George Mathen) or Jay Undurti draw only obliquely on Hindu mythology, other artists/writers like Amruta Patil and Vikram Balagopal take a more direct approach to retelling or reconstructing mythic narratives (Nayar, 2016, p.22). These narratives drawing from mythology aim to cull out conflicting questions and issues about tradition, myth, history and gender and culture, thereby unsettling the dominant and deconstructing the 'original'.

The metaphor of the 'Devi'

Taking inspiration from Stuart Hall's theories, postmodern feminist retelling approach gender issues that advocates the constitutive role of discourse in defining gender, sexuality and identity. Eschewing attempts to develop totalising theories of social reality or the essential nature of woman or man, postmodern writers focus on how orthodoxy and conservative regimes maintain patriarchal dominance and hierarchal definitions of identity and gender. Postmodernists thus:

move away from 'grand theory,' which purports to assert universal truth; seek to avoid binary opposites (for example, male female, reason-emotion); and criticize the pursuit of traditional science that aims to provide "objective" knowledge of the world. Instead, (they) seek to identify multiple perspective situated meanings, and the interdependence and non-hierarchical nature of elements" (Latting, 1995, p.2).

They argue for a redefinition of the normative based on discourses, and challenge the idea of a unified female experience arguing that women's identities are shaped by numerous intersecting factors such as race, sexuality, nationality etc. Postmodern discourses on gender utilise deconstructive techniques of language and metaphor to disrupt dominant meanings, revealing the embedded hierarchy in tradition thereby making the audience sceptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted and serve as a legitimation of the 'natural'.

Rewriting is a (post)modern strategy for what (I) call "activating" the "other" suppressed and concealed by dominant modes of knowing: it articulates the unsaid, the suppressed, not only of texts and signifying practices but also of the theories and frames of the intelligibilities shaping them. Voicing this silenced "other" displaces the dominant logic-dislodging its hegemony and demystifying its "naturalness"-and unleashes an alternative potential" (Ebert, 1991, p.890).

Stuart Hall (1981) opines that "there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle by the dominant culture ...; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms". (p.4). According to him, when a culture through representation and stereotyping tends to fix meaning, it creates a hierarchical structure, attempting to negotiate the preferred meaning. Gender relations in postmodern discourses thus have no fixed essence; they vary both within and over time. The study of gender relations entails at least two levels of analysis: of gender as a thought construct or category that helps us to make sense out of particular social worlds and histories; and of gender as a social relation that enters into and partially constitutes all other social relations and activities.

The representations of women in the Indian graphic narratives reflected the deeply entrenched notions of the 'ideal' versus the 'vamp', thereby conforming to the orthodox image of femininity, and thus reinforcing and idealising the patriarchal framework, in other words what Gail Simone aptly called, "women in refrigerators". These representations of the idealised Indian women oscillate within the various binaries that define her identity, of the superwoman to the docile victim, the divine to the diabolic, as highlighted by Nandini Chandra (2008) as the "pativrata and virangana models embedded in a larger framework of a sati-shakti dichotomy" in her book, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha*. Further studies recognises how even in the new age graphic narratives, the bodies of women become synonymous with the preservation of the ideal, and a metaphor for purity, chastity and sanctity of Indian culture. Representations of gender and sexuality, whose cultural ideals fall outside the established norm, represent an anomaly, the "othered". The historical and mythical female characters who took centre stage in these narratives marched the moral high ground, almost always representing a unidimensional perspective towards their existence, as a goddess or a vamp. The metaphors always intended to distance the real women from the mythical and historical counterparts in the comic and graphic narratives. In her book *Rani of Jhansi: Gender, history and fable in India*, Harleen Singh (2014) probes deeply in the deification of a Hindu woman and she observes that the "metaphoric change from woman to goddess serves not only to contain the Rani within the discourse of the nation, but also sidesteps any accusations of masculinity in the rendering of a national heroine" (p.141). The oeuvre of representations of femme fatale in new age graphic narratives also conformed to the conventional modes of visual language as witnessed in Virgin Comics' *Ramayana 3392 AD* and *Ramayana 3392 AD Reloaded*, Sanjay Patel's *Ramayana: Divine Loophole*, Samhita Arni and Monya Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* and so forth. The hyperreal world of gendered bodies in graphic narratives and the fictional world reaffirm the stereotypical gender boundaries. "How a woman is portrayed gravely affects the extent to which the problems of women are taken seriously" (Natarajan, 2016, p.3) Hyperbolic representations through hero iconography embodying the hero and the heroine as centres of power and perfection, confirmed a duality in their representations, pursuing for perfection in both the digitalized graphic multiverse as well as the mythical world of gods and

goddesses. The influx of these metanarratives created a spectacle of the hero iconography, however robbing the characters of any agency and reducing them to engage in activities like vigilantism, upholding societal moral codes, ensuring justice, mystification of sexuality thereby creating a hyperreal heroic multiverse. Sara Austin (2014) in her article, *Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as political bodies: Representations of female sexuality in idealised culture* discusses the image of the Indian woman which "creates a female archetype, embodies codes of feminine behaviour and proscribes consequences for breaking social codes" (p. 2). She further discusses how the bodies of women are used as a symbolic representative of 'Indian' culture and a means to build postcolonial national identity. The politics of maintaining the moral high ground of women in representations proves that "Indian womanhood has thus been 'invented', 'imagined' and 'defined', and myth and its vagaries have designed and established a gender construct in society" (Bagchi, 1995, p.14). Urban India is welcoming the strategies of new age graphic artists and storytellers to redefine the conventions and address pertinent and relevant issues relating to the marginalised. In these narratives, art and activism merge to propel a voice, an agency of those in the fringes. Mythical tales and ancient narratives like the Ramayana and Mahabharata become spaces for the trope of gender stereotyping and gender subjugation to be addressed from a feminist perspective.

This research paper aims to deconstruct the popular cultural notions of a 'devi' or goddess within the binaries that frame her. In Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, Sibaji Bandyopadhyay and Sankha Banerjee's *Panchali: The Game of Dice* and *Priya's Mirror* by Paromita Vohra and Ram Devineni, the authors and illustrators disturb the homogenizing discourse of the dominant culture, by opening up multiple possibilities of interpretation of a women's voice and agency without limiting her to the discourse of the dominant. The analysis of these representative narratives will study the visual and the verbal cultural symbols embedded within the labyrinth of the mythical texts, as literary fractals enabling us to encode the representational metaphors of discourse. Using the framework of Scott McCloud's "amplification through simplification", the paper focuses on how image aesthetics, the structural and spatial constructions, panel architecture, multiple storyworlds and so forth in the studied narratives leads to a postmodern poetics. By doing so, the thrust of the research is to problematise erstwhile metaphors of representation of women in graphic narratives that project a safe and secure ideal and instead encourage a revisioning of ways to seeing and portraying the agency of its women characters, which is imperative in order to resist the cultural expectations of seeing them as objects rather than subjects.

It dislocates and complicates the discourse thereby reshaping the totalities and centralities of these conventional narratives resulting in oppositional ways of visualising and what Hall describes as, "detotalize(ing) the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference (During, 1993, p.97).

Questioning Dharma – the agency of the voiceless in Sita

Saraswati Nagpal's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, situates the narrative in the backdrop of the divine, mythological elements as Sita's birth was the result of the blessing of Bhudevi, the Earth Goddess. Published under the Campfire Graphic Novels banner in 2011, the narrative promises to do exactly

what the Campfire mission ethos states, which is “to recount stories of human values...and inspire with tales of great deeds of unforgettable people.” Sita over the ages, stands as a metaphor of a victim of patriarchal authority and injustice. Oral folk literature of retellings of Ramkatha abounds songs of Sita’s palpable anger against the injustices and cruelty of Rama. While Sita has found a voice in many narrative retellings, Nagpal’s Sita and Smhita Arni and Monya Chitrakar’s *Sita’s Ramayana* remain the two graphic narratives representing Sita’s agency. *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* is based on the influential versions of Valmiki’s and Tulsidas’ as well as Ramanand Sagar’s televised version of the Ramayana. Nagpal in her representation retains the metaphors of chastity, purity, ultimate sacrifice, or in other words, an epitome of the perfect ‘pativrata’ model. However, there are certainly elements in Nagpal’s version wherein Sita’s voice gains impetus. The shrouding of Sita’s birth in mystery itself carries with it the heroic element akin to many mythological heroic figures, elevating her status akin to Prakruti or Nature. Nidhi Dawesar (2003) in her article expressed that:

Sita is evolved out of man’s interpretations and later reinterpreted in the retellings of the Ramayana. Sita’s character remained in the comfort zone of their writings and depended on the socio- cultural hegemonic status. Sita is always born according to men’s writings and her reinterpretations in the Indian myths and epics. Men always portrayed Sita as perfect female time and again to suit them accordingly and complement them (p.4).

The first person narrative mode as well as the thought balloon adopts a stream of consciousness technique to trace Sita’s different perspectives thereby imparting a life narrative metaphor to her persona. In terms of iconography as well as the colour palette used, closely resembles a calendar art style of representation, again conforming to the metaphor of the popular and conventional. The narrative begins with Sita seated on a raised platform, royal, serene and elegant, with a halo around her, establishing her as twice removed from the reality of the common woman. The narrative ends with similar image, an avatar of Goddess Laxmi, reconfirming that the various iterations of this complex character conforms to the traditional forces of representation, assigning her the venerated position of a goddess and part of a divine plan. Again, following the discourse of “golden age womanhood” as a standard to aspire for, Nagpal’s Sita is portrayed as curvaceous, fair skilled and bedecked in jewellery establishing the need to preserve the metaphor of an ideal Indian woman. She used to visualize the Goddess Bhudevi often and prayed before her so that the goddess could “protect and guide” her. Sita was very much powerful and courageous, wherein history, law, tradition and logic are at the centre of her interest. In a full page panel divided into four vertical frames, Nagpal illustrates the four women from mythology after whom her Sita’s draws inspiration, namely vedic philosopher Gargi, yogini Anasuya, epic heroine Savitri and the Shiv bhakth Uma. The adjacent splash page with a foregrounded Bhudevi, establishes Sita’s guardian angel in her earthly journey. An episode that Nagpal decides to include, is the lifting of Shiva’s bow Pinaki by Sita. The kingdom of Videha displayed this cherished bow in the armory which attracted hundreds of warriors and scholars who would attempt to lift it, but prove unsuccessful.



Figure 1: Panel from Sita: Daughter of the Earth, Saraswati Nagpal, 2011, p.10

In this episode (Figure 1), Sita is trying to recover a ball that accidentally slipped under the raised table that held the bow, and effortlessly move it. "Why mother?! The bow is as light as feather!" (Nagpal, 2011, p.10), she says. While those who witnessed the same are awestruck, the event is closely safeguarded, and one wonders why Sita's physical strength is looked down upon as a gender constraint while considered a symbol of courage in men. Later when Sita wishes to confront the rakshasas who were attacking the Brahim sages, she is rebuked by her father, and Sita opines, "What use was it being born a Kshatriya?" (Nagpal, 2011, p.15). Ryan states that, "the pressures of the social power play, which favours men over women in economic as well as political life, leaves permanent imprints on the dispositions of women which may favour the reproduction of those hierarchies over time" (Ryan, 2010, p.84). Bhudevi's advice to her later that night, "It is not your destiny to battle the rakshasas my daughter, the prince who will do this has already begun his quest." (Nagpal, 2011, p.15) again relegates Sita to the confines of domestic sphere, reconfirming the metaphor or Aryan potency in her womanhood. Another metaphor of confinement is the scene wherein Sita crosses the 'lakshmanrekha', the unquestionable line of

'maryada' or honour. Nagpal projects Sita in a state of self-blame for transgressing the boundary, drawing attention to the victim blaming often associated with crime against women.



Figure 2: Panel from *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, Sarawati Nagpal, 2011, p.10

Another deviation from the normative that Nagpal makes is when she gives her Sita the agency to orchestrate the 'swayamvara'. Though Sita falls in love with Rama when she first meets him, she deftly goes ahead with the swayamvara, all the while praying, "I knelt and asked Bhudevi for a boon. I wished with all my heart that only Prince Rama would lift the great bow and be my husband" (Nagpal, 2011, p.18), again reaffirming the double metaphor of contemporariness and progress, while at the same time also submitting to a structured ideology of the past. Nagpal constantly affirms Rama's devotion to Sita, keeping with the idealisation of Ramrajya and portrays Rama's rejection of Sita as a requirement stemming from the "laws of Ayodhya". However, in an attempt to recast Sita's agency, Nagpal deviates from Valmiki's version as well as Tulsidas' version by having Sita banish herself in the second episode that questions her 'maryada', when she says that "mortal memories are fickle" (p.88) and an understanding that the traditional forces will always regard her under a lens of suspicion. Velcheru Narayana Rao (2004) in his essay argues:

In choosing to return to the earth, she has accomplished two things: she has proven her chastity and demonstrated her independence, as well. It is both a declaration of her integrity and a powerful indictment against a culture that suspects women. It is difficult not to interpret this as Sita's protest against the way she was treated by her people and by her husband (p.47).

In (Figure 2), Sita responds to a second truth-test by proclaiming her love for Rama, "I will not remain here any longer, where people will always doubt me and my love for you...if I am pure in thought, word and deed, then may my true mother take me back in her embrace" (Nagpal, 2011, p.89). The fragmentation of the panel discusses the cultural and patriarchal schisms in the fabric of the mythical truisms and Sita's foregrounding in the panel, is a metaphor of her assertion of

identity and agency. Nagpal celebrates the self-sacrifice of Sita as a counter aggression against the hegemonic metaphor of Sita as a rhetoric of sacrifice. Nagpal asserts Sita's representation as an embodiment of 'sati' as well as 'shakti', reclaiming her agency in the structure of a nationalist discourse.

Unravelling the inherent distortions in the game of dice – The dharmic queen Panchali

Panchali: The Game of Dice by Sibaji Badyopadhyay and art work by Sankha Banerjee was published by Penguin Books in 2022. In yet another iteration of the grand narrative, Mahabharata, Panchali abounds in visual inventiveness and caustic language, thereby setting the tone for a revisionist relooking into the grand myth. In J. A. B. Van Buitenen's words:

The epic is a series of precisely stated problems imprecisely and therefore inconclusively resolved, every inconclusive solution raising a new problem, until the very end when the question remains whose is heaven and whose is hell (Rocher, 1988, p.39).

In an interview with *The Sunday Guardian*, Sankha Banerjee the artist illustrator claims that Panchali draws thematic inspiration and anchoring from the most reliable version of the 'manuscript tradition' of the Sanskrit epic, i.e., *The Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata* brought out by Poona's Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. Sibaji mentions that by the same dint, they are also liable to over-simplification and ideological misappropriation. "Shunning loudness, our effort has been to combat such motivated distortions of the Mahābhārata without compromising our right to poetic liberty." says Banerjee. The tale of the events leading to the Mahabharata war is narrated by Sauti Ugrasava, the peddler of stories, thus establishing the metaphor of a metafictional reality, when he states, "Mahabharata is a fabulous jamboree of fables." (Bandyopadhyay, 2022, p.14). Sauti's presence in the narrative is important as he raises pertinent questions about the integrity and ethical implications of various episodes in the narrative. Born to a Brahmin woman and a Kshatriya man, Sauti's standing in the caste hierarchy is almost equivalent to the Mahabharata tale, a Kshatriya text that challenged and replaced the Brahmanical order and ritual. Sankha Banerjee's use of vibrant colours and vivid frames move at a fast clip to trace the events leading up to the war. The contrasting rhythms of pencil shading, with gothic water colour dark imagery interspersed with the fiery and the green, as well as the staccato panel structuring alternating with spread pages, and overlapping panels all contribute to the fracturing of time and space as well as starkly convey the fragmentation of the times. Sibaji divides the text in seven episodes with interesting titles for each, i.e the first being, "The plot thickens – conspiracy afoot". The associated illustration is of a pencil sketching of a throne with a dark cloud descending over it, the very imagery shrouding the narrative arc as one of treachery, deception and trickery vying for power and control. The gothic imagery and the colour symbolism of darker tones for the lesser mortals across the panels demarcates the gods from the not so godly, calling out the acute sense of caste and discrimination of the times. In the burning of the house of lac as well as the burning of the khandava forest, Sauti reminds us how gods, boons and miracles in the mythical tapestry become harbingers of destruction, obsession and rage. Sibaji pours out this hypocrisy when Sauti states after the killing of the Nishada family in the burning of

the house of lac, "In the land of Bharata, mixed breed, half-caste people can easily be written off" (Bandyopadhyay, 2022, p.40). The allegorical nature of Maheshwata Devi's *After Kuruksheta* (2005) delineates the discrimination meted out to those in the fringes and she states:

For Kunti, the Empress, the nishadins are akin to rocks and stones: their language - unintelligible and their mannerisms childlike. The division of classes creates an impregnable wall around Kunti's consciousness which does not allow her to look at the nishad community as fellow humans. This nomadic tribe with its unique ways continues to remain in the fringes of the mainstream social framework (p.104).

The burning of the Khandava forest also draws a similar satiric comment when Sauti states, "After having his full, the Fire God is cured of his dyspepsia" (Bandyopadhyay, 2022, p.115). Sankha Banerjee foregrounds Sauti's face, dismembered with agony and pain writ all over, as the fire rages on in the background in both these instances, proclaiming the grave injustice meted out by those in power. In a spread white panel, Sauti walks across the desolate khandava land, a lone figure amidst the barren stumps that remain of the once lush green forest. The author/illustrator seems to question with incredulity the epic poem's God like characters' apathetic disregard for the ordinary and the common. The metaphor of the locust, as a creature of destruction gains prominence in its representation in Shakuni, the master gamer who orchestrated the treacherous game of deception. Shakuni's poisonous indoctrination of Duryodhana is deftly represented through the gothic imagery of the the entangling roots, thus sowing the foundation of the great chain of events. Before the spiralling of action in the game of dice, Sibaji interludes with the discussion of the sign of four exhaustively to trace the logic of the yugas or the ages. Dicing was a part of the religious and cultural history of India, associated with gambling and depraved engagements. Text and art come together in a bruvara sequence, wherein the homeomorphic correspondence between the geometric numbers and its significance, and the clever mind game under master Shakuni's control, results in Yudhishtira spiralling towards Chaos, as suggested by the apt title of the next episode in the narrative. Shakuni's (named after a bird Shakun or vulture in Bengali) representation as a dark, gaunt, evil, grand vizier, transforming into hellish metaphor of the crow, in a fragmented broken panel sequence (Figure 3), is an artistic excellence of Sankha. S K Kumar (2011) says about Shakuni in *The Mahabharata*:

In contrast to his sister's nobility and transparency, he was skilled in every form deceit and manipulation. He exulted in exploiting his victims gullibility. Shortstatured and dark-complexed, his eyes look around his areas of vulnerability in other human beings. He believed in scoring his points through strategy rather than confrontation. Weapon of warfare, he thought, were of those who were incapable of using their brains in defeating their enemies (p.37).

The juxtaposition of the panels, alternating the hellish imagery of the crow with that of Shakuni, connotes the metaphorical divide and fragmentation of order and dharma. In a continuation of the idea, page 178 also shows an assemblage of panels depicting an unfolding of reels, each enclosing the re-counting of the intellectual deception in the assembly hall of Hastinapur. In the subsequent panels, the narrative traces the transformation of the dharma yodha, Yudhishtira, through a body horror gothic image as he loses all his prized possessions in the game of dice.

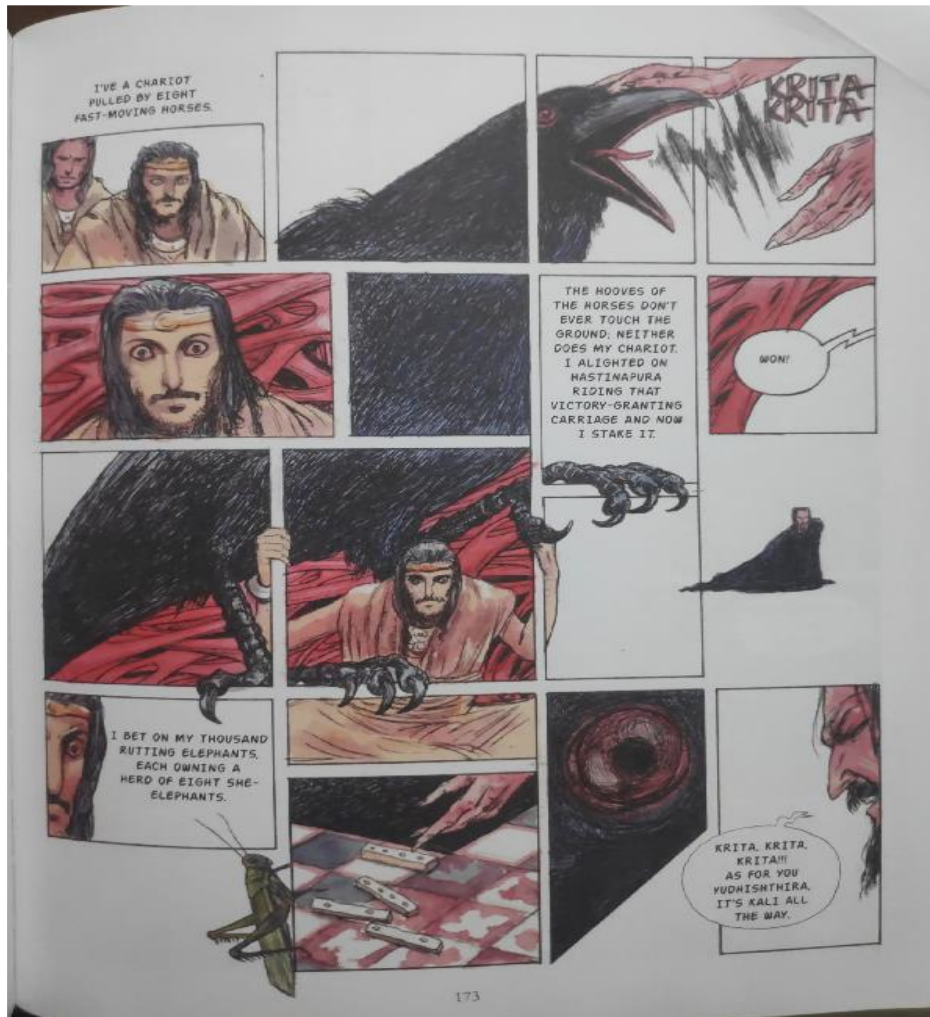


Figure 3: Panel from Panchali: The Game of Dice, Sibaji Banbyopadhyay, 2022, p.173

A jewel encrusted foot introduces the reader to the 'magnificent one', Panchali, in the narrative. The heavy encasing with jewels almost acts as a metaphor of an ornamental and chained existence of the titular character. Even though a beautiful illustration of her conception as a princess wrapped in flames is portrayed, what is sustained is her representation as a dark toned figure, assigning her a marginal position akin to those of the lower castes in the narrative. The colour imagery acts as a metaphor of her lack of agency in the narrative, and this together with the fact that the author deprives her of any voice during and after the swayamvar tantamount to Panchali's insignificant space in the narrative arc. Even when Kunti states, "whatever it is, you five share the stuff" (Bandyopadhyay, 2022, p.80), Draupadi continues as a mute spectator. Sankha Banerjee devotes two spread panels to depict the horror of Panchali, as she is dragged into the court of Hastinapur. The blood shot eyes and the loose hair, act as metaphors of her fury and disorder. As a sign of marriage, her bound hair represents the adherence to her dharma as a Kshatriya wife. Braided hair "suggests conformity to social convention" and deference to one's husband (Kinsley, 1997, p.83). Woman wed auspiciously wear a *trivenī*, a triple braid (Hiltebeitel, 1998, p.143). He further states that that her unbound hair represents a "thirteen-year extension of her menstrual purification," which will be completed when she is washed in the "womblike blood" of her

transgressor, Duhsāsana (p.144). However, the unbinding of her hair, as Dushasana drags her to the court, indicates dissolution of the order, a crisis of dharma that will unleash a catastrophic ripple effect. The splash panel in page 202 foregrounds a crescendo of voyeuristic gazes and lascivious abuse, that metaphorically disrobe her in the courtroom, rendering her devoid of any agency (Figure 4). According to Alleyn Diesel, (2002) Draupadi is "considered by many men as a prize, valued object to be competed for and squabbled over, and she becomes the fundamental reason for internecine strife, which brings disorder (adharma) and ruin to society" (Diesel, 2002, p.9). Panchali almost mocks at the hegemonic masculinity as she questions the wise Bheeshma, "Whom did Yudhishtira lose first. Himself or me? This boils down to asking, after surrendering his selfhood, can a man bet on someone else?" (Bandhyopadyay, 2022, p.196). The series of pertinent questions her poses acts as a catalyst for the change of events in restoring of her honour. As the Pandavas leave the courtroom, Sankha Banerjee endows Panchali as a symbol of power and inflexible political will... she leads unscathed, head held high as the Pandavas follow her, thereby inverting the dynamic of power and rendering the schemers of this great game of dice, powerless. As Sauti ends the narrative, he warns the commoners, "watch PANCHALI..." (Bandhyapadyay, 2022, 223). The preceding last full page panel, highlights the gothic journey of the Pandavas with Draupadi in the dark forest.

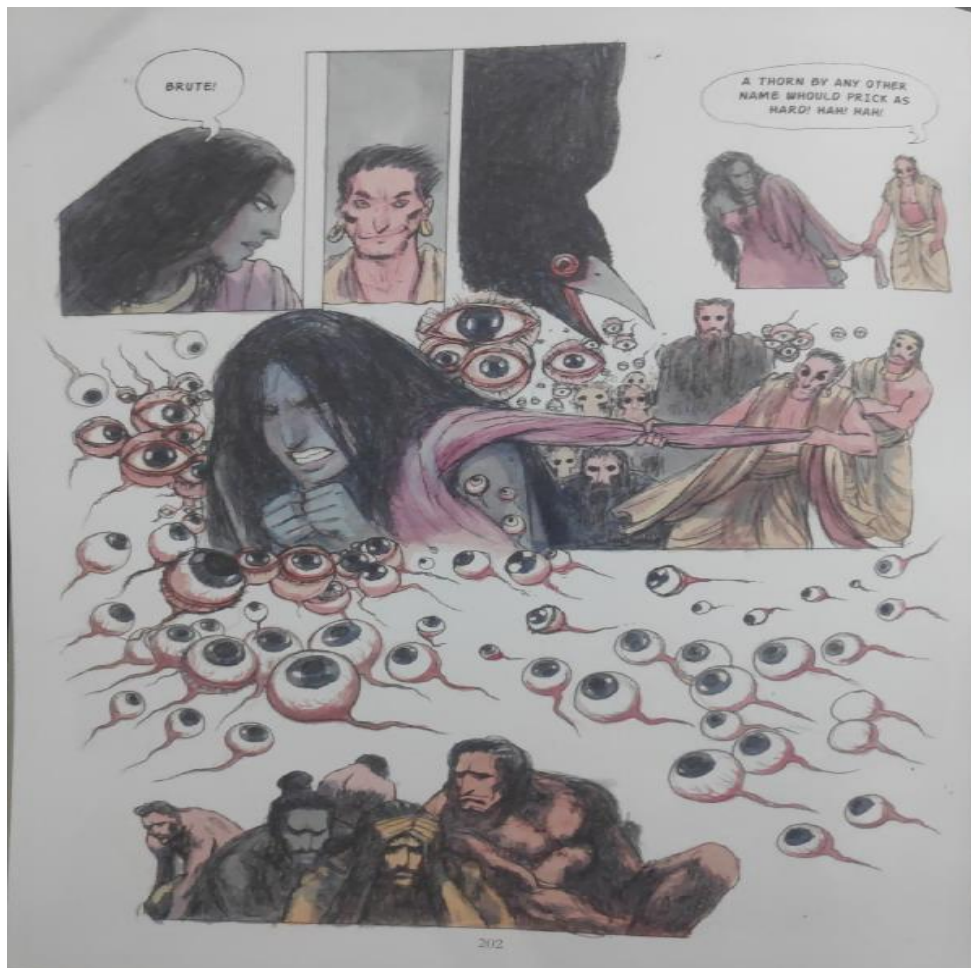


Figure 4:Panel from Panchali: The Game of Dice, Sibaji Banbyopadhyay, 2022, p.202

An interesting motif that journeys the narrative from the cover page to this final end is that of the barn owl. A metaphor of evil and death, the barn owl foreshadows the next step in the journey of Panchali, as she avenges her insult in the all consuming Mahabharata war. The narrative overall seems a bit strained in its effort to include contemporariness as Sibaji uses colloquialisms like "bro", "cow" and "this lustrous fella". The myriad allusions to Chinua Achebe, Bob Dylan and T S Eliot seem more forced than organic, as the language constantly shifts register from those of the kings to the imagined street slang of that time. However, the art of Sankha Banerjee is endowed with an intensity that demands inspection as the reader unravels layers of meanings from the metaphorical images throughout the expanse of the narrative.

Against the adharma of cultural isolation – The crusader Priya

A perfect synergy of art, activism and technology is witnessed in the Indian superwoman series, Priya, created by Paromita Vohra, Ram Devineni and illustrator Dan Goldman. The second chapter of the Priya series, *Priya's Mirror* was premiered in September 2016. Produced by Rattapallax, a literary publishing house and film production company based in New York City, United States and New Delhi, India, the project uses the augmented reality application Blippar to bring visually alive in an interactive 3D experience, the narrative and reach out effectively to a wide ranging audience. Digital fiction has come to the fore over the last couple of years encouraging new modes of digital storytelling. Digital fiction inspires as mobilising mediums that propel the digital natives to participate and raise their voice, organise vigils, gather support, discusses issues and spread awareness through the various online platforms. *Priya's Shakti*, the first in the series of digital fiction, released in 2014, touched a raw nerve in the Indian psyche and inspired media coverage around the world, telling the story of a rape survivor who goes on to assume a superwoman characteristic, instilling terror in the lives of her perpetrators. The graphic narrative had a far reaching effect, the author's intent coming through very effectively, in placing rape culture squarely on the society, calling out the misogyny engulfing religion, politics and the media. The character Priya recieved her strength and inspiration from goddess Parvati, who motivates her to fight for her justice. According to David Kinsley (1997), in Hindu mythology, Durga's:

primary mythological function is to combat demons who threaten the stability of the cosmos. In this role she is depicted as a great battle queen with many arms, each of which wields a weapon. She rides a fierce lion and is described as irresistible in battle" (p.35).

The first instalment of the series gained so much visibility that World Bank's, WeEvolve programme, decided to fund *Priya's Mirror*. Digital fiction was showing to the world how 'the low brow' literature had the capacity to transform and impact a global audience. WeEvolve's Correia states, "We realised that a comic book could potentially involve a much broader socio-economic group and also convey the message more subtly unlike a lot of work done on gender-based violence"(p.2). Priya, the superheroine, aims to tackle the social issue of acid attack, that stigmatises and scars an individual for the rest of their lives. As a horrific instance of yet another act of gender violence and discrimination, *Priya's Mirror* aims to convey that the denouement lies in empowering the women who are the victims of these attacks and reclaiming their agency. The mythological anchoring in Parvati is mainly to maximise the leverage of the divine plan in empowering those marginalised. Goddess Parvati, who comes to Priya's defence when she is in

need of help, stands for devotion to her husband, god Shiva. In addition to her love and devotion, Parvati is also credited as Shiva's strength: "As his sakti, or embodied power, she becomes identified with the creative force of the cosmos and the underlying potency of things." Priya's own strength and perseverance despite various obstacles, is drawn from this metaphorical figure of Shakti, the female energy personified. Priya is aided in her pursuits by a tiger, reminiscent of goddess Durga, another symbol of female strength riding astride a lion. However, to critique this metaphorical representation an article in *Critical Collective* asks certain compelling questions about the depiction of Priya as a devout Hindu woman, with no allusion to her caste or wider community leaving much to be asked of a character touted as India's first "feminist superhero", while revealing mainstream feminism's well documented blindness to caste. It risks propogating a deified representation of the ideal woman leading to a hegemony of metaphorical representation as discussed in *Bruised Goddesses Hurt Indian Feminists*.

The deification of prominent and powerful women from fields of movies, music and politics stems from a goddess-worshipping culture...This is a comfortable image for men and women, not necessarily a feminist strategy. A brand of feminism that is consumer driven and the deification of women as a goddess who is chaste, virginal, and domesticated and clothed, sweeps under the carpet the poor women of those who don't dress in traditional Hindu attire. (Tilak, 2013, p.1).



Figure 5: Panel from *Priya's Mirror*: Ram Devineni, Paromita Vohra, 2016, p.9

Priya's Mirror, begins with Priya, even in her leisure space haunted by experiences of the past. The textuality and visuality reinforces the horrors that remain on in the victims of abuse in spite of passage of time. She is approached by man who recounts to her the story of his beloved, trapped in a castle of the demonic 'Aahankar'. As Priya accompanies him, the reader visualises Anjali's story played out in flashbacks. In (Figure 5), the story of Anjali played out in broken frames, narrates the horror of her situation. The frame to the bottom left, shows the attacker, his back turned, with a glass full acid. The anonymity that the authors display, also acts as a reminder of the hidden identity of the abusers, who could be anybody from the society. Although the throwing of the acid is not shown or described, it is still a powerful moment in the narrative that makes a connection between Anjali's experiences and the reader possible. As Emma Dawson Varughese (2017) states, "the wordless mode marginalises the form of the graphic narrative whilst simultaneously underscoring the fact that society remains largely silent on this subject" (p.43). As Anjali details to Rafi that in the aftermath of the attack, "Over the years, I endured dozens of painful operations – on my eyes, nose, ears, throat, lips, and hands" (Devineni and Vohra, 2016, p. 20) we realise the physical and mental trauma perpetually inflicted on these victims. Through Anjali, the plight of such victims in the society is also brought to the fore when she states, "I felt there was no place for me in the world," (Devineni and Vohra, 2016, p.10) thereby showing how women like Anjali, easily fall prey and are easily manipulated by the 'Ahankars' of the world. The narrative however, also informs the readers the truth about Ahankar, who because of his deprived circumstances and himself a victim of acid attack, transformed from a humble young man, in love with a woman of the upper caste, into a demonic figure in response to a boon granted by Lord Shiva. Kusum, his beloved, is carried away by him and enclosed in the castle sanctuary, and the narrative bubble, "She became a prisoner of her own guilt." acts as a metaphor for the emotional standing of all acid attack victims, who succumb to the stigma. Priya is guided by goddess Parvati who instructs her to show the mirror of love to the women enslaved in the castle, for them to realise their own strengths. In a series of panels progressing from the individual to the collective, the narrative draws attention to the united strength of the community that can facilitate change. The insecurities that plague the women is represented in a full page panel(Figure 6), when the women voice out, "I cannot forget how the police kept asking me, "why did the boy throw acid on you?"..."I was in an abusive relationship, and he felt that to me a man, he had to..." ..."my parents went bankrupt taking care of me"..."there is nothing for us outside" (Devineni and Vohra, 2016, p. 25). The visual imagery of the panel displays the playing out of social injustices enclosing these victims in a loop of doubts and uncertainties. Their trauma is further conveyed when they state, "You could hide your pain from the world, we have no such escape." (Devineni and Vohra, 2016, p.24). The foregrounding of their acid scarred faces illustrates the cultural distancing and alienation experienced by these individuals. It is at this moment that Priya shows them the mirror of love and states, "Why should we hide our wounds?...someone reduced you to only your face. But you are so much more. Look into the mirror and you will see."(Devineni, 2016, p.25). The narrative ends as an empowering story of women who break barriers, fight their personal demons and emerge victorious. *Priya's Mirror* ends with the social rehabilitation of the acid attack survivors, and the "Mirror of Love Café" becomes a metaphor of hope and agency of these women who brave the odds. Real life acid attack survivors Sonia, Laxmi and Monica Singh are all given mention at the end of the novel to showcase how they are part of transformative stories, and catalysts of change in legal action to regulate the sale of acid, ensuring that similar incidents do

not mar the life of young girls. The augmented reality interactive street art that has been painted on the densely populated streets of Delhi and Mumbai ensures that not only women who are empathetic to these causes, but also men who are the perpetrators of this violence, and the community as a whole, educate themselves about the need for change. The narrative also contains several videos, stories, and photo series of survivors of gender-based violence, including, for example, a photo series called "Masks of Courage" on page 6, a comic strip on abuse on page 8, and videos relating to atrocities that women face under the hegemony of power and dominance. In an attempt to reclaim the agency of women who are abandoned and struggle with shame and trauma, Priya's Mirror also introduces us to 'Sheroes Hangout', the first of its kind café that started in Agra, by a non-profit organisation called Stop Acid Attacks, which acts as a space for acceptance, community and means of income. All of these features are meant to make the narrative not only more creative and contemporary, but also to interact in a manner that is not strictly didactic and authoritative, but more accessible, creative, inspiring and educational. The narrative intent of these graphic narratives in the popular medium is generating a transformation in the hegemonic cultural absoluteness.



Figure 6: Panel from Priya's Mirror: Ram Devineni, Paromita Vohra, 2016, p.25

Pramod K Nayar (2018) proposes that:

The contradictions through which the graphic narrative generates critical literacy and achieves meaning are inherent to the genre itself, which combines low and high art, using a popular medium to produce works of complex and sophisticated artistry. In India, where a demotic form of communication is largely aimed at, and consumed by, the English-educated, urban middle class, the genre seems to perform a sort of ongoing, collective self-analysis through the exploration, exposure, and sublimation of historically, socially, and culturally traumatic events and conditions. (p.112).

Conclusion

This research has tried to situate the graphic narratives as agents of revision in the representation of female agency. The popularity of these narratives starkly conveys the current socioeconomic ecosystem of the comic and graphic industry in India. By decentering the conventional and calling for the un-epic, the metaphors propose a radical revisiting of the dominant archetypes and usher in a revitalised visual subculture. There is definitely a diversity witnessed in the wake of new ways of seeing and representing the sociocultural and political realities of the postmodern age, appropriating an ambitious scope both thematically and visually. A S Rao's (1999) *Myth and History in Contemporary Indian Novel in English* states:

The departure from the conventional modes of writing and functioning paves the way for new thinking and leads to the new writing absorbing interest and abiding utility. The new thinking needs new techniques, varied interpretative strategies. Human nature has a prodigious resilience. Any imbalance leads to a sense of despair, desolation and frustration. A sense of uncertainty and futility prevails. The thirst for a life giving sap prompts the postmodernist novelists to make a gigantic attempt at depicting the reigning anarchy of the contemporary socio-political scenario in pictures grotesque and incorrigible (p.4).

The attempt to create an alternate idiom, by rejecting the ideal of the devi and employing a deft fusion of traditional content with the postmodern complexities of the visual and verbal, aims at building a crossover readership and a strong Indian identity in the graphic world. The image-text interface of complex metaphors has harnessed a critique of the comic and graphic traditions thereby encouraging the inauspicious and challenging the orthodoxy. This revisioning calls for a collective identity and agency to the voices in the margins and a critical literacy of the graphic narrative space as a medium of restoring political, social and cultural identity.

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