FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

e-ISSN: 2542-4920

Volume 4, Issue 1
Spring 2020

JOURNALS lectito

This page intentionally left blank.

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 1(1)
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

CHIEF EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.

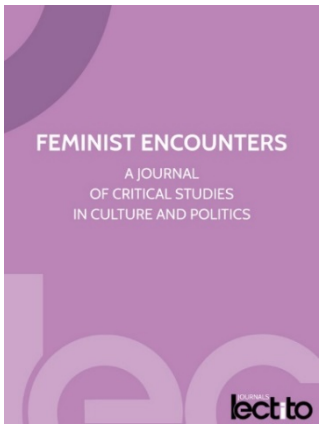
This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing ....".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

Sally R Munt, University of Sussex
Founding Editor

This page intentionally left blank.

EDITORIAL BOARD



VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1
SPRING 2020

Feminist Comics in an International Frame

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Book Reviews

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 01
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Editorial

Feminist Comics in an International Frame

Sally R Munt [1]*, Rose Richards [2]

Published: April 11, 2020

This special issue, which has been jointly edited by Sally R Munt, Rose Richards and comic artist Nicola Streeten, is focussed on exploring how comics and graphic narratives have engaged with feminist politics. We have brought together artists and critics from a range of countries to discuss and debate how artists represent and debate gender, with examples of comics taken from Japan, Nepal, India, UK, China, Mexico, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Argentina, Turkey, Hong Kong, and South Africa. We are thrilled to bring this content to our readers; the special issue offers a snapshot of how international comic art can politicise gender in the twenty-first century. Framing our special issue on comics is an exploration of global comic diversity and local specificity, as each of the texts discussed exists in a dynamic intertextuality between the local and global production and consumption of popular culture.

Comics usually take the form of sequential panels in order to create a narrative. Sometimes for example with stylistic rhetoric such as caricature, comics can consist of a single satirical drawing or cartoon intended to communicate a punch line or joke. In-text formalistic devices such as captions, speech balloons or movement shadowing enhance the chronological sense of movement of a story. Comics are an ancient genre, arguably European cave paintings in Lascaux, France, with their vibrant action scenes, are the earliest form of comic. The famous Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the Norman Conquest of England, is a 70 metre long early form of 'war comic'. Stained glass windows in medieval cathedrals and wealthy churches can be interpreted as early comics too, constructed as they were by the all-powerful Church in order to instruct the illiterate poor in the religious paradigms and folktales invested within the Holy Bible. One of the guest editors of this special issue is descended from the Anabaptist stained glass artists who built St Albans Cathedral, in England. Egyptian hieroglyphs are iconic, figurative, logographic and symbolic engravings and papyrus inscriptions of consequential scenes, instructing the population in the key concepts of deity and the power of the pharaohs, and the natural pagan order. The sacred writing of hieroglyphs was the popular culture of Ancient North Africa. And comics were also developed in their earliest forms in Japan with the appearance of *manga* in the 12th century. But comics as a modern mass media genre didn't really take off and become a trend until the 1930s, when in western culture early forms of leisure combined with the widespread production of newspapers, and new forms of disposable income which entertained the newly literate public.

Growing up in the North of England in the 1960s, Sally Munt was a typical Yorkshire child who was allowed two comics a week, firstly *Bunty* for girls, and then for many years *Beano* and *Dandy*, complemented by the much anticipated yearly highlight: the *Christmas Annual*. Later, being a tomboy, in latency Sally moved onto boy's comics such as *Victor*, and *Hotspur* where she learned many German phrases from the war stories ('donner und blitzen' becoming a lifelong habit), and tried to make some sense out of the football strips. But dominant culture prevails, and so Sally became yet another teenager whose weekly foray into the girly *Jackie* magazine (ineffectively) schooled her into the paradigm of English femininity. Many of these popular British comics were in fact more specifically Scottish, and it is challenging to reproduce now the formative quality of these texts upon whole generations of children. Perhaps in thinking about comics for adults as a niche or underground we fail to recognise that those 'mainstream' comics were both hegemonic, and also in their own ways radical. Figures like Minnie the Minx – a furious little class warrior whose tomboy antics delighted both boys and girls - or Beryl the Peril, from *Topper*, a lovable menace with a pet turkey called Gobbler, whose naughtiness never failed to disappoint in creating mayhem, destruction and misrule, were staples in the readership patterns of young girls that originated in the 1950s, in most cultural histories of the west, a post-war decade widely remembered as being unprecedentedly conservative.

[1] *Professor of Cultural Politics at the University of Sussex*, UK
[2] *Writing Lab at the Stellenbosch University Language Centre*, SOUTH AFRICA
***Corresponding Author:** s.r.munt@sussex.ac.uk

Thus, it is important to understand a key methodological insight from Cultural Studies – that even though cultural texts may be designed for specific audiences, and appear to be conventional in targeting content to such predestinations, media artefacts and cultural objects nevertheless contain opportunities for moments of consumption that challenge and disrupt preconceived ideas and beliefs. So, for Sally's experience of childhood, gendered narratives from comics were consumed in unpredictable and unstable combinations, and in her case, signally failing to construct the social subject of 'girl'. Because of such instances, although markets produce commodities for an imagined consumer, or a preferred consumer, patterns of oppositional reading practices or unintended consumption may turn supposedly conservative media objects into instruments of social change. As academics and activists, it is up to us to understand and make an account of such disruptions in representation, and the social conditions that lead to them.

It is the piercing directness of comics that makes them efficient for political messages. This is something that the English social reformer Henry Mayhew, and wood-engraver Ebenezer Landells, understood very well when they started up the weekly satirical magazine *Punch* (or *The London Charivari*) in 1841; they were following in the footsteps of the great moral/social, visual critic from the seventeenth century, William Hogarth. *Punch* was the initiator and disseminator of the popular political cartoon, understood to be a single sketch or drawing that is intended to amuse or ridicule a knowing reader. In the nineteenth century many of the cartoons in *Punch* directly or indirectly addressed British colonial rule in India, many of those cartoons which addressed colonialism and British Imperialism are available online.[1] Even in early issues of *Punch*, if you look at the iconography deployed in these cartoons, you can see themes that critique the colonial project and its failures. Formally, many cartoons function as a simple gag. It wasn't until the film and later the television industries developed in the twentieth century, following the invention of moving image technologies, that 'cartoons' (or more specifically, animation) became the narrativised experience innovated by Disney, now exponentially reproduced via billion-dollar global media businesses.

Nowadays, cutely anthropomorphised animals, and/or superheroes, have become a staple of childhood entertainment worldwide. Amongst childhood peers, transitional objects with cultural capital have changed, so that a lifetime ago a child who had read classic western canonistic novels such as *Heidi* or *Little Women*, or *Ivanhoe* or *The Three Musketeers* might be regarded quizzically today as eccentric, or perhaps a little weird. Today, consumption of (predominantly American) cartoons has become a ritual of childhoods across the globe, reinforced by synchronous franchise marketing, so that children demand for birthdays and Christmas the merchandise of the cartoons and superheroes they've already watched, in order to cement and validate their social place in the global and local material economy. Anthropologically, comics have been units of exchange for children for a long time, particularly because they are usually so cheap, and durable, and can be passed between many hands before they begin to fall apart. Additionally, marginalised or excluded groups have sometimes chosen to create and circulate comics because the means to do this are widely available and cheap. In that sense, comics as material objects have often been democratic art commodities. Now, children hold plastic and metal electronic tablets in their hands to watch such seemingly ubiquitous heroes, whereas for so many previous generations the material symbolic of childhood media consumption was enabled by the feel of paper between their fingers.

Yet, comics continue to stimulate radical and oppositional energies: organisations such as Comics for Youth Refugees Incorporated Collective[2] produce stories for children in refugee camps and/or whom have resettled and yet continue to experience trauma. Other initiatives, such as in the UK, PositiveNegatives[3] produces comics and animations on humanitarian themes that explore ways to represent complex testimonies via sequential art. PostiveNegatives produces comic art that amplifies the voices of activists, presents 'graphic advocacy' to the UK government, and depicts the refugee experience through visual immersion and the power of comics. There are in fact many comic artists all over the world who grasp the potency of comic art to produce creative material for inspired, humanitarian, and pedagogic reasons. This is partly because comic art is accessible to wide audiences, it doesn't require specialist knowledge to interpret, and has a powerful immediacy that can communicate an important message in an economic way.

Comics have been appropriated by radical activists of all political persuasions for a very long time. We know that it is the plasticity of comic art that lends itself toward instant symbolic communication, as witnessed currently with the dichotomous appropriations of Pepe the Frog, a comic figure created by American cartoonist Matt Furie in 2005 in a zine called *Boy's Club #1*. In western and specifically USA popular oppositional culture, Pepe the Frog was an Internet meme co-opted by the alt-right to codify far right advocacy and activism on 4chan, and there its use was disseminated widely to connect disparate white nationalist agendas, in spite of the artist's outspoken objections to Pepe being appropriated as a hate symbol. In 2019 however, Pepe the Frog was adopted as a symbol

[1] See https://punch.photoshelter.com/gallery/Imperialism-and-Colonialism-Cartoons/G0000vKN2v8ZjQ.g/ Accessed 20 February 2020.
[2] http://www.cyric.us/ Accessed 20 February 2020.
[3] https://positivenegatives.org/about/ Accessed 20 February 2020.

of resistance to Chinese authoritarian rule by the Hong Kong protestors, who were largely unaware of its fascist connotations in the USA. In Hong Kong, Pepe the Frog became a symbol of individual liberty against state intimidation, although arguably both divergent uses, politically right and left, adopted the cartoon in order to protest state power. A 2020 documentary directed by Arthur Jones about the struggle for 'ownership' of Pepe the Frog's symbolism won a US Documentary Special Jury Award at the Sundance Festival, and is worth watching precisely in order to gain understanding of the plasticity of such cultural icons.

The fantasy of a superhero who is able to vanquish one's powerful enemies and fight corruption is perhaps necessary for childhood development and for channelling an early sense of justice. Certainly traditional folktales have such figures at their centre, and those heroes are often depicted as being lone knights operating outside of the law. Such fantasies don't become redundant once readers have grown up, and then have to confront the cruelties and effacements of everyday life. Perhaps the fight between 'good' and 'evil' is a universal in human cultures, and so often comic art grapples with fundamental moral dichotomies for humankind. In 2008, Sally Munt wrote about one particular subcultural lesbian comic icon, *Hothead Paisan*:

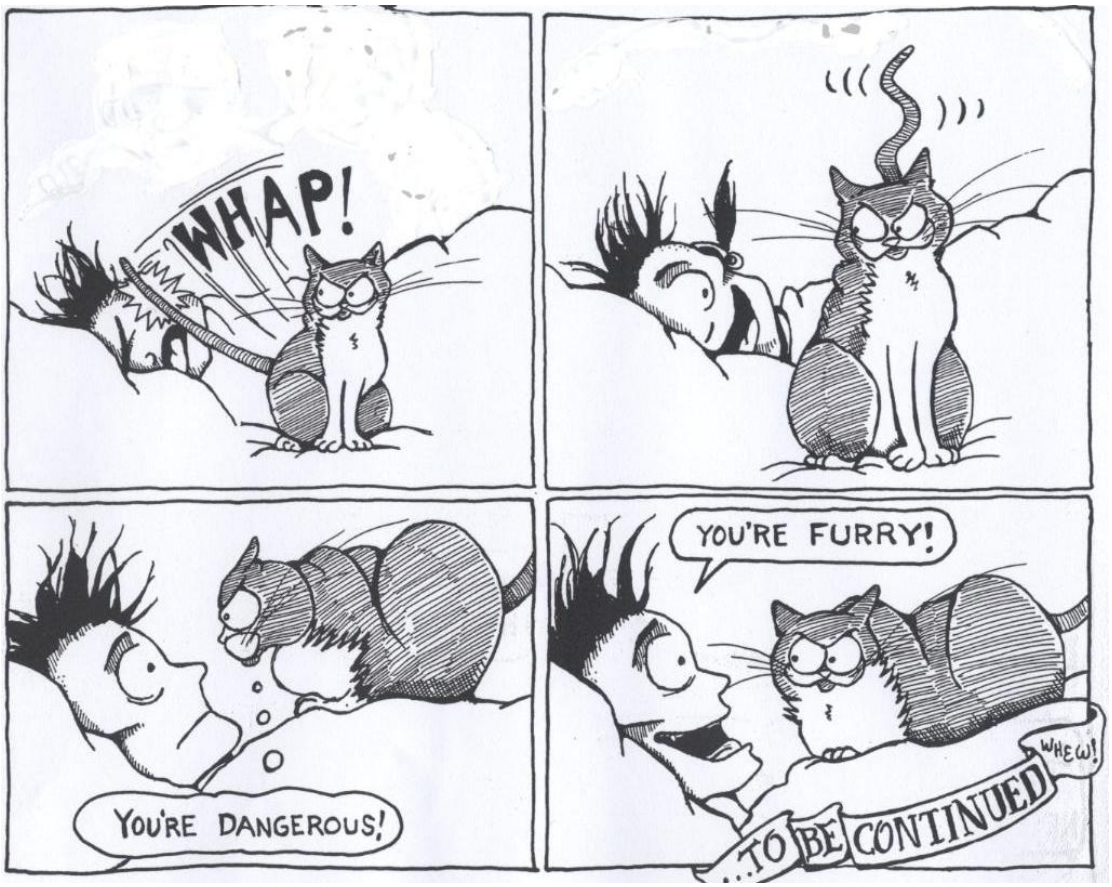
> In *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* (1993-5), Hothead is a feminist anti-hero, the comic cleverly satirizes mainstream comic superheroes by returning over and over to violent revenge fantasies enacted against homophobic and heterosexist men, as the caption puts it:
>
> "Hothead Paisan, the cult-comic hero. Defender of the Stigmatized, Marginalized, and Disenfranchised. Bodyguard to the Underbelly. Avenger of All That Is Wrong.[4]

Used with permission © Diane DiMassa

> The multiple episodes are excessively, viscerally brutal, they are in antithesis to the post-modern gender fluidity emerging at that time, basically all men have penises and that makes them BAD. The men in Hothead's life are irredeemable, un-reconstructable, and morally deserving of their grisly and sadistic ends. The series is vigorously macabre; it captures well the misogynistic violence directed at the feminist and lesbian underclass, and the fearful damage that results. Hothead Paisan is a radical lesbian feminist vigilante, she spares no man, and the violence is frequently absurdist in quantity and quality – one of her comics was banned in Canada as 'hate literature'. *Hothead*'s aesthetic is pure Bataille, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker or Marquis de Sade, it is redolent of transgressive fiction, a political genre that focuses on anomie, and rebellion against social norms. Protagonists of transgressional fiction are frequently portrayed as the excluded, the mentally ill, anti-social and nihilistic, they are habitually mutilated characters, wounded by their epoch. The genre typically deals extensively with taboo subject matters including urban violence and violence against women, drug use, and dysfunctionality. Much of this type of transgressional fiction deals with youthful searches for self-identity, inner peace and/or personal

[4] http://www.hotheadpaisan.com/index.html Accessed 27 June 2008.
See further:
Heller, Dana A. (1993). Hothead Paisan: Clearing a Space for Lesbian Feminist Folklore. *Folklore, 19*:1-2: 27-44; Muscio, Inga. (1999). Review of *The Complete Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* by Diane Dimassa. *Lambda Book Report, 7*(2): 20-22; Sloniowski, Lisa. She Was Framed: An Analysis of Hothead Paisan. *Siren* (April-May 1996).

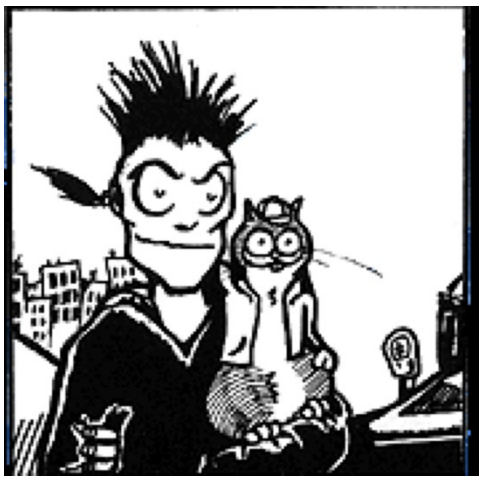
freedom, unbound by usual restrictions of taste; comic illustration, with its ability to go beyond acceptability, is hence an ideal medium for its message. *Hothead Paisan* belongs gleefully to queer gothic, or splatterpunk in its willingness to portray forbidden behaviours and shock its readers as she lurches from one brawl to another. But Hothead Paisan is a difficult and psychotic character, maniacally fuelled by TV and coffee, she is as much the victimised as the tormenter, and these 'zines portray her acute damage from homophobia as much as they document her resistance. She is the angry lesbian wound.



Used with permission © Diane DiMassa

At the end of a lesbian avenging angel's day however, she must stomp home, exhausted, to her cat, and in Hothead's case this means the fez-wearing, dancing, karmic 'Chicken'. Chicken is the most fully-fledged lesbian cat in literature, she is the ground, the fundament, the soil of Hothead's existence. Wife, mother, friend, and naughty sibling function, the cat companion Chicken restores, nurses back to health, warns, mends, contains and nurtures her companion's fragility, she is a therapeutic atoll, a warm salve, a Pullman-like daemon to her neurotic lesbian's survival. A cat's constancy can also calm the savage beast of lesbian love, Hothead's human affairs are frequently fraught. The role of Chicken, together with Hothead's blind Buddhist friend Roz, is what gives this series profundity; as their loving relationships grow, and their little queer family is unwrapped, it contains repeatedly moving narratives of recovery from trauma. Despite the pessimistic message that makes this comic sometimes almost too painful to read,

The particular and distinctive love between Hothead and Chicken is a lesbian fantasy of cross-species intimacy that resonates across and down the years. This enchanted couple are the (f)ur-lesbian story.



Used with permission © Diane DiMassa

> If you ask Anglo-American lesbians of a certain age if they are acquainted with Hothead Paisan they will sigh nostalgically for their activist youth and go 'Ah, yes'. Dana Heller wrote an excellent piece at the time that situated this 'urban amazon' within a folklorist tradition. She typologises *Hothead* as a lesbian feminist comic which could offer cathartic, mythological, heroic resolution to an underclass dystopia 'emblematic of the intense and debilitating sense of powerlessness which almost all lesbians have experienced' (1993: 30). This tough, rangy butch is one paranoid lone avenger who organises our revenge fantasies into a 'last frontier' story, always accompanied of course by her trusty sidekick Chicken. Heller describes how Chicken's allegorical function in the comic
>
> > ... is to demonstrate alternative coping mechanisms in the face of a relationship defined by an unequal distribution of power and unjust hierarchy that gives human beings – even somewhat deranged beings like Hothead – dominion over their wiser and more civilised pets. (1993: 37)
>
> Chicken tempers the abused dyke mindset with a reality check; she is not simply a salve/slave, she is also the functional representation of animal co-dependence and its associated ethical complications.

This extract from Sally Munt's previous analysis of *Hothead Paisan* is reproduced here because Sally wanted to include a reminder of how much queer and feminist cultural production has been successfully appropriating and rescripting popular cultural forms. In the early-mid 1990s, following the 'decade of enterprise' in the 1980s, feminist cultural production exploded in the west. In the last two decades of the twentieth century there was a systemic paradigmatic shift in artistic creation and curation, reflecting the political objective that previously marginalised women must be included and properly recognised. But social memories are short, and subcultural memories are shorter because we have fewer cultural institutions to note and commemorate such breakthroughs. Groundbreaking queer and feminist comic artists like Diane DiMassa, whose comic strips were so innovative at that time, are quickly forgotten and remain unacknowledged by younger, queer feminists today. Perhaps it is the ethical duty of older feminist queers to continuously remember and remind, to be the hags who nag! But equally, we require better institutional memories to ensure that such ephemeral cultural interventions are not misplaced or forgotten and our haggish, annoying remembrance function becomes obsolete.

The role of memory in feminist art history is crucial, because we need to diversify our actions – firstly to enable historical revisionism (or as we prefer re-visionism), in order to retrieve the women artists that have been excluded, devalued, or trivialised in the history of art; that exercise in making the invisible, visible, has been going on since the 1970s by some wonderful feminist art historians. Secondly, we need a better 'history of the present' that archives, catalogues, critiques, and enthusiastically engages with women (and men) who are producing counter-discursive art that foregrounds and problematises heteronormative gender politics, whilst remembering that these artists frequently labour without status or reward, their creative industry remaining *still* on the margins. And thirdly, we need to improve the epistemological tools that dismantle the archaeological superstructure of art, with its entrenched cultural, symbolic, and economic capitals, in order to better disseminate intersectional, feminist creative practices so that inclusivity becomes more of the norm. Fine art still maintains its elite status, but cultural salvation may still be found by looking to traditionally 'debased' art practices such as comics, and perhaps looking toward digital technologies to democratise the hierarchies of value and embrace popular participation even further. Print has been the chosen communication technology of political dissent since the Industrial Revolution and since the availability of cheap wood pulp to make paper, however the Internet has democratised cartoon and comic art even further, so that digital comics, or e-comics, now proliferate, whether they are accessed through commercial

platforms such as Amazon's comiXology or Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited, or 'pay what you want' publishing fora such as Panel Syndicate, or Asian platforms such as '*manhwa*' in South Korea, or in China 'web *manhua*' where many titles are available for free. Such digital supermarkets have also offered comic book archive files in which publications are accessible in the long term, for posterity. All of these collections require further cultural analysis.

Feminist art history has only recently begun to uncover and classify the neglected history of women cartoon and comic artists, as Nicola Streeten and Cath Tates' (2018) co-edited 250-year history of *The Inking Woman* demonstrates. Sheila O'Connell (2018: 10-12) writes about the styles of visual satire and caricature made by, funded by, and about women from the elite social classes of the eighteenth century, with her particular case study of the owner of the 'Macaroni Printshop', Mary Darly, who recognised the commercial potential of satirical prints. The vernacular comedy of artist Marie Duval in the Victorian era is introduced by Simon Grennan, who argues she invented a new drawing style that 'contributed to the creation of a new urban media environment' (2018: 13). Elizabeth Crawford (2018: 14-7) in the same volume provides a short historical analysis of women's suffrage in cartoons, uppity women being something that particularly aggravated readers of *Punch* magazine. What these short pieces do is open our minds to consider how women's, and feminist, cultural production has been forgotten or in some cases deliberately excluded from genre histories. As feminists, we are still doing the work of uncovering hidden history and re-reading public or commonsense historical traditions, in order to recognise and record the presence of women and also in many cases challenge the gender conventions reproduced in stereotypes of femininity, and sometimes masculinity. Because this work aims to be intersectional, it also changes our understanding of classification, of what is to be included and how we might best draw from that 'sinister wisdom' that problematises such inherited, silencing and often canonistic traditions. Using a critical feminist lens, our aim is to improve and transform knowledge, to expose its powerful orientation to the world that frames particular assumptions about gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class and privilege as 'truth'. Thus, by interrogating knowledge in this way, the epistemological process is shifted. This is an important political project to challenge visual narrative as it is written, intended to disturb and challenge the patriarchal equilibrium that continues to promote forms of knowledge that efface 'others'.

THE ARTICLES AND INTERVIEWS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

So in bringing this latest special issue of *Feminist Encounters* to you, we want to engage with popular visual art more deliberately and strategically. We are concerned to engage directly with popular subcultural and independent media because we recognise the special role that such frequently devalued cultural forms take in oppositional political movements. Our special issue on comics brings together contemporary comic and cartoon artists who bring feminist politics into their creative method, whether as themes, through characterisation, or narrative structure or all of those. This collection of essays contributes to a 'history of the present' in popular feminist art practice and seeks to proselytise such creative work. We are very pleased to have included more visual material in this issue of *Feminist Encounters* too, and we very much hope you enjoy reading it. And now to the articles themselves:

The original contributions to this special issue commence with an interview by Róisín Ryan-Flood with M. J. Barker about their work on *The Secrets of Enduring Love, Queer: A graphic history, Gender: A graphic guide* (with Jules Scheele), *How to Understand Your Gender*, and *Life isn't Binary* (with Alex Iantaffi), *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want to)* (with Justin Hancock), and *Rewriting the Rules* and *The Psychology of Sex*. Barker discusses how they came to be part of these projects as well as the usefulness of the comics form to raising and exploring topics as complex as sex and gender. They discuss how this format can contribute to overcoming heteronormativity and other forms of oppression and marginalisation.

The South and Central American articles in this special issue concern feminist comic artists' responses to social justice issues affecting women. Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Facundo Rubinstein (Mexico) discuss Cintia Bolio's exhibition on the legacy of the Mirabal sisters who were murdered by Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic and use the exhibition to make clear links to current violence against women in Mexico. Amadeo Gandolfo and Pablo Turnes (Argentina), in their article, interview several feminist comics artists and trace the history of feminist comics in Latin America as well as exploring the current situation as the comics artists who have in different ways become involved in current social justice issues such as highlighting gender-based violence.

Comics art in Japan, Hong Kong and China has undergone a number of developments in the last few years regarding the representation of the female form. Sara Sylvester's article is on Rokudenashiko's graphic memoir *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy* (2016), the memoir drew her international recognition and an arrest for indecency in Japan. In her article Sylvester considers the artist's controversial work through an intersectional lens. She uses themes of the body and sexuality, subversion of the monstrous feminine, and feminist activism. In contrast, Kin-Wai Chu's article examines the feminist graphic diaries of Stella So (Hong Kong) and Naoko Takagi (Japan) who write about and draw the smaller events of the everyday experience of solitary living.

Everyday culture is conventionally associated with femininity and the domestic; however, in these works, the focus is removed from sexuality through a subversive, manga-like infantilising of the female form. In her article, Xiyuan Tan assesses how ethnic minority females are represented in Chinese comics by analysing and comparing two such female characters and suggesting ways in which this type of character can be represented in more meaningful ways.

Seval Erkul's article considers the comics of *Bayan Yanı,* the first women-led caricature publication in Turkey, that takes public positions on socio-political issues. Erkul examines the nature of the comics' feminist activism and how they engage with women's everyday experience in Turkey as well as commenting on socio-political events that affect Turkish women.

Safiyya Hosein contrasts the representation of the first female Muslim Marvel comic hero, Dust, with that of the Egyptian webcomic superhero, Qahera. Hosein finds that the overdetermined symbol of the veil takes on a range of significances in these comics and that the complexity of using the veil is more accurately portrayed in Qahera's stories, which speak more authentically to the everyday experiences of veiled Muslim women in Egypt.

In her contribution, Catherine Mao interviews Congolese comics artist, Fifi Mukuna, discussing her creative journey and the challenges facing female comics artists within the Democratic Republic of Congo. Fifi Mukuna engages socio-politically with everyday African experiences in African countries and in migration to the west. Mukuna describes comics as 'a great medium for educating people and raising awareness' due to their accessibility; however, she now lives in France because her work has antagonised authorities in her home country.

In Rose Richards' interview with Neeske Alexander from South Africa, Alexander describes how she came to be making comics and why these have been useful to her in processing difficult things. Although Alexander is new to the comics world, she shares a number of experiences with other comics artists in this collection, including the realisation that her more controversial topics will not gain mainstream recognition despite (or perhaps because of) their value to a feminist audience.

Promina Shrestha tackles the topic of comics by Nepali women artists and considers the extent to which women artists representing aspects of everyday lives can be considered feminist. Shrestha discusses Nepali feminism and how comics fit into this, pointing out that Nepali feminism is not in itself completely representative of the mix of different cultures and socio-economic classes of Nepal. She discusses the work of seven Nepali women artists over nearly 20 years.

Both Surangama Datta and E. Dawson Varughese write specifically about Indian female queer comics art. Datta uses her study of Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) to examine how this experimental text appropriates the act of looking for a queer feminist protagonist and how Patil uses fluidity as a visual metaphor for Kari's experiences. In Varughese's interview with Neelima P. Aryan, Varughese and Aryan discuss the comic medium as a way of adding layers of complexity to feminisms by combining image and text. The interview makes an argument for having a wider range of culturally and socially situated feminisms, including queer feminisms within the context of urban India.

Debanjana Nayek's article is also about women in Indian comics. In her article she traces how Indian comics engage with gender, from *Amar Chitra Katha* to contemporary graphic novels. Nayek explains how the gaze has evolved in ways that have allowed women comics artists to represent themselves and their own lives. Her article also takes account of the effects on the comics form of using different digital media.

Aanchal Vij interviews Priya Kuriyan through the lens of the interaction between the individual and the collective in the space of Indian comics. Priya Kuriyan plays with nostalgia and time-bending in her comics in order to help create a better future for Indian women. She has told the stories of famous female figures such as Indira Gandhi, and has also engaged with events of national importance, such as the aftermath of the globally infamous Delhi rape case, through the medium of comics as this makes the complex and often inflammatory subject matter more accessible to a wider audience.

The original contributions to this special issue conclude with a comic by Shromona Das, entitled 'A Reflection on #Metoo, a Story of Sexual Assault and Victimhood in India'. In this comic Das tackles the subject of her own sexual abuse by a relative. In an interview with *HuffPost India*[5], Das explains why the images are black and white:

> The white paper was my only friend—I was afraid of being betrayed similarly, that is, in terms of silencing my voice, by my family members. So I started channelling it all through my black Parker pen—for the longest time, I've never parted with that pen. That pen was my one true friend.... For the largest part of my life, black and white became my language—all of these paintings were about domestic settings, everyday objects, toys and violence. I don't remember a single one that didn't talk about violence—and death.

[5] The interview can be found here: https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/10/24/metoo-in-india-a-24-year-old-jnu-student-called-out-her-abusers-in-a-powerful-set-of-paintings_a_23570060/

Das' act of drawing her story allowed her to overcome the silencing she experienced and became a subversive act of defiance that allowed her to take her story back.

In addition to the articles and interviews, four books are reviewed. Adam K. Dedman (University of Melbourne, Australia) reviews *Rewriting the Victim: Dramatization as research in Thailand's anti-trafficking*. Cordelia Freeman (University of Exeter, UK) reviews *Peruvian Lives Across Borders: Power, exclusion, and home*, Janine E. Carlse (University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University, South Africa) reviews *Black Feminism Reimagined: After intersectionality* and Po-Han Lee (University of Sussex, UK) reviews the *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies*.

In *Feminist Encounters*, we are always committed to bringing new feminist criticism and creative work to you available online for free. *Feminist Encounters* is an open access publication, and our growing readership across the world reflects our commitment to high quality and accessible research. We sincerely hope you enjoy our snapshot of international feminist comic art.

REFERENCES

Munt, S. R. (2008). Introduction: On lesbians and other animals. In McCauliffe, M. and Tiernan, S. (eds.). *Lesbian Lives Volume II Sapphists and Sexologists: Histories of sexualities* (pp. xvii-xxxi). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press. Conference Proceedings.

Streeten, N. and Tate, C. eds. (2018) *The Inking Woman: 250 years of women cartoon and comic artists in Britain*. Oxford, UK: Myriad Editions.

Citation: Munt, S. R. and Richards, R. (2020). Feminist Comics in an International Frame. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 01. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7905

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 02
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Interview

Interview with MJ Barker

Róisín Ryan-Flood [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Meg-John Barker is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender, and relationships, including *Queer: A graphic history* (2016) and *Gender: A graphic guide* (2019, with Jules Scheele), *How to Understand Your Gender (2017)* and *Life Isn't Binary* (2019, with Alex Iantaffi), *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want to)* (2017, with Justin Hancock), *Rewriting the Rules (2018)* and *The Psychology of Sex (2018)*. They also work as a one-to-one writing mentor, as a creative consultant on various projects, and speak and train on gender, sexual and relationship diversity. They are half of the Meg-John and Justin podcast (megjohnandjustin.com) and blog and publish zines and comics on rewriting-the-rules.com. They regularly speak on their areas of expertise in the media, including Radio 4, *Cosmo*, and being featured in the *Independent on Sunday Rainbow List*. They were an academic psychologist and UKCP accredited psychotherapist for many years before focusing on writing full time. They are an internationally recognised expert on gender, sexual, and relationship diversity (GSRD) and psychotherapy, with numerous academic books and over one hundred academic papers on the topics of bisexuality, open non-monogamy, sadomasochism, non-binary gender, and Buddhist mindfulness. They co-founded the journal *Psychology & Sexuality* and the activist-research organisation BiUK (The UK National Organisation for Bisexual Research and Activism), through which they published The Bisexuality Report (2012). They have advised many organisations, therapeutic bodies, and governmental departments on matters relating to gender, sexual, and relationship diversity (GSRD) including writing the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) document on the topic. They've also been involved in facilitating many public events on sexuality and relationships, including *Sense about Sex* and the *Critical Sexology* seminar series (since 2006).

Firstly, thank you Meg-John Barker for participating in this special issue about feminist comics for *Feminist Encounters*.

I'm so happy to be included, it's great you're doing this.

It is fascinating to see that your work has expanded into the realm of comics and graphic works. Can you please say how this came about?

Absolutely. Actually, like so many things in life it wasn't planned and it nearly didn't happen. Back in 2014 my Open University colleagues Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink had just finished this huge study of people in long-term relationships - *Enduring love?* - and Penguin were keen to publish a self-help book around it. They'd brought me in to lead on that because I'd published a self-help book before and was keen to do more. Then Kiera Jamieson - an editor from Icon books - contacted me out of the blue to ask whether I'd be interested in writing a graphic guide on queer theory.

My initial thoughts were (1) I'm way too busy with this other project, (2) I want to become a full-time author and that's way more likely with a big publisher like Penguin than it is with an independent like Icon, and (3) I'm not a queer theorist so who am I to write a book about queer theory?

However I felt very reluctant to turn down the book, largely because I've always been a massive fan of comics. Also I could see a huge potential to get these queer ideas - which I've personally found so helpful - out to a much wider audience than the academics, students and activists who are usually exposed to them. When I reflected on my 'not a queer theorist' concern, I figured that most academic specialists would probably struggle to convey queer theory simply enough for the general reader, whereas I've always felt that my talent was in weaving together

[1] *Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Director of the Centre for Intimate and Sexual Citizenship at the University of Essex*, UK
*Corresponding Author: rflood@essex.ac.uk

complex academic and therapeutic ideas in a way which students and readers could understand and apply to their lives.

So I said 'yes' to the queer graphic book, even though it meant a lot of work and repeatedly confronting my internalised queer critic! Four years later and sadly *The Secrets of Enduring Love* has only just made back its advance, whereas it is the huge success of *Queer: A graphic history* (2016) that has meant that I've been financially able to go full time as a writer (with a good bit of downsizing!). We've already written two follow up graphic guides - on gender and sexuality - with more planned.

What are the advantages of writing in a comics format?

The main one for me is the potential to reach audiences who - for all kinds of reasons - would never read a purely text-based book. There are many groups of people who find regular books impossible, or immensely challenging to read. That can be due, for example, to various forms of neurodiversity; to disabilities or chronic health conditions that impact attention, fatigue, and focus; and/or to unfamiliarity with text-based books, or experiences of being shamed around reading at home or in the education system.

The comics format also means that these books sell in places which reach audiences beyond those who would normally seek out social science, philosophy, or even self-help style books. The book sells in comic bookshops, in queer/feminist sections of mainstream bookshops, and in galleries and museums, for example. We were also fortunate to hit the shelves at a time when non-fiction comics were becoming much more of a thing, when there was an increasing social media engagement with feminist and queer politics, and when more and more organisations and institutions were keen to put on LGBTQ events for Pride, LGBT history month, and the like. So booksellers were looking for books like ours, particularly ones which were eye-catching as *Queer* is.

These graphic guides are designed in a way that tells a story over the course of the book, but also in a way that means every page could be read independently to give the reader a sense of one key idea in words and pictures. This was to ensure that they would work on e-readers where people don't always read from beginning to end. The advantage of this is that many people have said they enjoy reading slowly and spending a lot of time on each page to take it in. It invites quite a different kind of reading. It also means it works as something of a coffee-table - or bathroom - book which people can pick up briefly and flick through.

One innovation I made with *Queer*, which I've developed through the subsequent books in the series, was to visualise the imagined readers as a group of four people who we follow through the book as they grapple with the ideas they're being introduced to. I actually did this initially to help myself to remember that I wasn't writing the book for my internalised critical queer theorist! I wanted to write it for a person who was queer themself, for a student who was struggling to understand queer theory, for an older person who was feeling lost in all the new language around gender and sexuality, and for somebody who was questioning their own gender and sexuality. But this approach to writing the book also meant that the books feel friendly to all these kinds of readers. Following the 'story' of these characters, such as it is, is also part of what makes the books an entertaining rather than purely informative read. Some of the others ways we made it entertaining were to put in visual references to popular culture, as well as visual jokes and some of the puns that queer theorists seem to be so fond of!

Are there any disadvantages in relation to this format?

No format is going to work for everyone. I'm passionate about getting better understandings of gender, sexuality, relationships, and mental health out to as wide an audience as possible, and I have to acknowledge that comics are not going to reach all audiences. Just as comics feel more friendly and accessible to some people, they're going to be off-putting to others who don't have a background of reading comics, for example, or who find them geeky and alienating. Also, of course, a visual medium isn't great for anybody who is visually disabled. Even describing such books in audio formats doesn't necessarily work well for such audiences given that it still has a visual starting point, rather than meeting them where they are.

This is why I've explored several other mediums with my work in recent years. Where I've ended up is with three to four different strands. There are the written self-help books and zines which I now write primarily with my co-author (or 'artner') Alex Iantaffi. There are the graphic guides which I collaborate on with Kiera and illustrator Jules Scheele. There's the sex and relationship podcast which I produce with Justin Hancock. And I'm also playing with writing erotic fiction which also include reflections on the key themes in my work, like consent, gender, and relationship dynamics. Hopefully between them these mediums reach audiences who engage primarily in visual or auditory ways, as well as those who get more out of words or images, and those who take information in better in the form of non-fiction or stories.

With a visual medium like comics there's also a vital question of representation. Something we've engaged with from the start is how to ensure that readers from diverse groups see themselves represented in the books, so that they know these books are for them. Some things that we've attempted to do is to ensure that people of colour are thoroughly represented throughout each book, both in our group of main characters and in the experts who they're learning from, rather than in any kind of tokenistic manner. Where there have been historical issues in the

over-reliance on white, male experts within the discipline we have named that and reflected on it explicitly. Similarly we've endeavoured to represent disabilities beyond the standard image of a person in a wheelchair. We've also tried to represent people from different class backgrounds engaging with the material and applying it to their lives, and to represent various types of queerness beyond the most common depictions.

Obviously it's never possible to do this job of representation perfectly and there's always room for improvement, especially as a white author within my particular area of expertise. One limitation to these books is that they come from a western anglophone focus rather than covering these topics - or thinkers - in any kind of fully global way. While I feel confident addressing gender, sexuality, and so-on from a pretty interdisciplinary perspective, having studied psychology, biology, sociology, media studies, philosophy, and psychotherapy. However, I don't feel that I could do justice to the global diversity of perspectives in 176 pages, with my background. These books focus on current western perspectives, how they've developed, the impact they have, why they are so flawed, and how they might be different. Even within that I have to get my historian friend to help me out with the historical chapters as I'm very aware of the limitations of my knowledge in that field. I very much hope that future projects in this series will be able to bring a more global and decolonising perspective, given how white and anglocentric these fields are in the west.

Gender and sexuality have long been central themes of your work. What would you say are the key issues that you have explored in relation to these?

Starting this journey as I did within bi activism and scholarship, a key focus for me has always been on why sexuality and gender have been understood as binaries when clearly that doesn't match many people's - probably the majority of people's - lived experience. Research from Kinsey (1948, 1953) onwards has demonstrated that sexuality can be better understood on a spectrum than as a binary, but popular culture and science alike have continued to question the existence of any sexuality beyond gay or straight, and to stigmatise those who claim such identities to such an extent that we see the impact vividly in the high rates of mental health struggles in bisexual people, compared to both straight and gay people.

From questioning the gay/straight binary, I began to explore theories and research around sexual fluidity, and sexuality as multidimensional, as well as those that applied this same thinking to gender, and which questioned the whole sense of sexual or gender identities as meaningful or helpful.

Training as a sex therapist I was struck by the ways in which adhering to rigid ideals of masculinity and femininity, and endeavouring to meet up to a hetero-norm of penis-in-vagina sex, seemed to be making a lot of people very miserable. I was always motivated to include the ways in which normative understandings are bad both for those outside of them and those within them.

Engaging in social justice in these areas alerted me to the fact that activists and other members of marginalised sexual communities were often ahead of theorists and researchers in their understandings and practices. The history of the science of gender and sexuality, and even queer theory to some extent, has been a process of academics catching up with what people in these communities have often been saying and doing for years. So I've always been committed to foregrounding lived experience and presenting the 'margins' as something to learn from, rather than to be explained (as psychology and sexology have generally endeavoured to do).

How have your thoughts and writing about gender and sexuality changed over time?

I think the main shifts in recent years have been to connect gender and sexuality up more with all of the other intersecting forms of privilege and oppression, and - relatedly - to ask what non-binary and queer ways of thinking have to offer to other areas beyond gender and sexuality.

I have a much better sense - from reading intersectional feminists, and from working with colleagues like Alex Iantaffi (2011), Ros Gill (2007) and Laura Harvey (2011) - that there is no way to separate out the histories of patriarchy and queerphobia from the histories of colonialism, white supremacy, neoliberal capitalism, ableism, or any other forms of oppression or marginalisation. And that means that - personally and politically - we can't separate out our understanding or experience of gender and sexuality out from that of class, race, disability, and so on. For this reason, each of the graphic guides begins with a history of these interwoven forms of oppression, explaining how they have developed, and how they operate today. Also both the graphic guides and the 'how to understand your…' books which Alex and I write together situate gender, sexuality, etc. in relation to other intersections throughout the books.

Additionally, the static, binary, unidimensional ways of understanding which have been so problematic in relation to gender and sexuality pervade in popular - and often academic - understandings of many other areas. They limit the very ways that we can think and feel about issues, because we're so trained into polarised debates where one view or experience must be 'good' or 'right' and another 'bad' or 'wrong'. This is what prompted me and Alex to write *Life Isn't Binary* which explores this territory and considers alternative approaches such as multiple spectrums, fluidity over time, holding multiple stories, and embracing uncertainty and paradox.

What for you are the key issues facing writers and practitioners in the field of gender and sexuality today?

For me a vital one which impacts us all - whether creators, activists, academics, or therapists and other practitioners - is how we communicate across difference and - relatedly - how we can sit with discomfort and distress in relation to our positions of both privilege and oppression.

It seems that many of the tough conversations which happen across these areas are about the ways in which all our work inevitably excludes as well as including, oppresses as well as liberating, and harms as well as helping. We see these kinds of issues play out in polarised debates between different groups of feminist or queer activists and scholars on social media, for example, and around trigger warnings in the classroom, representations in creative work, and the ways in which therapists and mindfulness teachers often perpetuate the individualising of mental health prevalent in wider culture in ways that can exacerbate rather than ameliorating shame and self-blame. Many times the focus in such conversations is on casting blame and/or defending against perceived attack. Individuals are often claimed to be all good, or all bad, on the basis of their behaviours.

My sense is that it would be useful to put a good deal more effort into studying and understanding the processes in play in these conversations. It's important to find alternative processes which steer clear of blame and shame and instead foster the capacity to sit with the difficult feelings which these conversations inevitably bring up for all involved.

It seems to me that a key aspect in play here is that most of us find ourselves in the position of victim - or marginalised - in some of these situations, and perpetrator - or oppressor - in others. It's extraordinarily hard to hold the emotions brought up by both of these positions, especially when many of us have been traumatised personally in the past by sexual violence and/or by queerphobia. To have that trauma re-triggered by finding ourselves once more victimised - often by those we assumed to be allies, or to be confronted with the ways in which we - ourselves - have hurt others or violated their consent, can be incredibly hard to bear. But it is only by becoming able to face these things in ourselves that we can truly understand how oppression operates, speak out about it in ways which can be heard, and act accountably when we have behaved in harmful ways ourselves through ignorance or defensiveness.

You have often engaged in collaborations in your work – with co-authors and artists. What appeals to you about collaborative work of this kind?

One key thing for me is that one person can only access so much knowledge in a lifetime. I love working with people who have come to similar places to me in terms of their understandings of the topics we're writing about, but from very different backgrounds. For example, Alex's background is in the humanities, systemic therapy, and Pagan spirituality, whereas mine is in social sciences, existential therapy, and Buddhist spiritualities. That means we bring different theories, research and practices, as well as lived experiences to our work. Similarly, with Justin it feels helpful for our podcast that his experience and expertise is primarily in youth work, and working with men and straight communities, while mine is more on adults, and working with women and queers. I feel our collaborative work is much richer for the different pools of knowledge we're drawing from. It is also more creative, with the potential to reach more people, when it acknowledges the differences between us and comes from dialogue across that.

Such collaborations help me to feel more content with the knowledge that I do have, and with following the ideas that I feel most drawn to. This is preferable to getting stuck in that 'never enough' place where I'm overwhelmed by all the books, papers, videos, podcasts and websites out there: feeling I should read all of the things - regardless of whether they speak to me.

Collaborating with Jules and Kiera on the graphic guides is a different form of collaboration because it's more about us each bringing specific skills rather than knowledges. As editor Kiera puts in at least as much time and energy as Jules or I do, to the point where I question why editors are not named on the covers of such books. She is extremely talented at knowing what will be clear and accessible for a reader, and what won't. She helps to whittle down my words to our 200 words per page maximum, and to visualise which of my suggested illustrations will work well with the text. While I do illustrate comics and zines myself I have nothing near Jules's level of talent in this area. I certainly couldn't draw a convincing Butler or Lorde! So collaborating with Jules means that the books look as beautiful as they do. The fact that Jules and Kiera are also both feminists, and the relationship we've built together, mean that we can trust each other during the process, which is vital.

Something that I've learned from all these collaborations - and also from the one with Ros and Laura on our academic book *Mediated Intimacy* - is that consent and care have to be at the heart of any collaboration. We have to be able to reflect on the process of what we're doing, and to keep checking that it feels good to all concerned. We have to prioritise self- and other-care over meeting deadlines or producing particular kinds of outputs that we feel pressured to produce by wider systems.

This feels increasingly necessary given the hostile political climate at the moment, and the degree to which all of us are precarious and facing trauma in our own lives. Writing about sexuality as a survivor or gender as a trans

person during the trans moral panic takes a toll, and it's vital to work with others who really understand this and are up for ensuring that the process, as well as content, of our work reflect an ethics of consent and care.

Although there is greater visibility and awareness of trans rights nowadays, significant inequalities remain for trans and non-binary people. What for you are the key equality issues facing trans and non-binary people today?

For me the main issue is that we've been living through a moral panic around trans people and their rights now since 2017. At the beginning of that year there was a major negative news story or documentary about trans people every month. By the time we'd dealt with one we were onto the next and it felt overwhelming and exhausting for all of us in the UK trans community. However, we look back on those times now as easy compared to where we've been at since. By the end of 2017 we were at the point of one story per day, sometimes even three separate stories in the same newspaper on the same day, and this has hardly diminished since then. Imagine waking up to multiple news stories every day about how your community is to blame for multiple social ills, is lying about their very existence, and is a danger to (other) women and children.

The impact of these daily onslaughts across mainstream and social media cannot be over-estimated. For a group which already has shockingly high rates of hate crimes and discrimination, suicide and shame, we are certainly talking about significant distress, loss of life, and many failing to access the kinds of support from family, friends, and professionals that we know to be the main buffer against suicide, self-harm, and depression.

So while it is obviously important for trans people to have the same rights across all areas as those that are afforded to cis people (those who remain in the gender they were assigned at birth), for me the most vital thing - at least in the UK - is to bring an end the moral panic around trans people.

There have been various controversies recently about trans rights and proponents of what has been termed 'gender critical feminism'. What are your thoughts on this?

Ah the question every trans person is waiting for in an interview! I feel that this is a great example of an area where the content of the conversation has detracted from the much more important issue of the process which is going on. People are swept up in trying to determine who is 'right' in a 'debate' between trans activists and 'gender critical feminists' rather than asking why this conversation is happening now, why it is being reported upon so gleefully by the media, and who it serves.

I'll touch briefly on the content of the conversations before moving on to process. To me the underlying questions about who counts as a 'real' man or women, whether sex/gender is biologically essential or socially constructed, and whether non-binary people exist feel somewhat pointless given that they stem from massive misunderstandings about the way gender works. To give a brief précis of the material I cover in *Gender: A graphic guide*: The evidence is clear that gender is a biopsychosocial phenomenon. It would be impossible to tease apart the ways our bodies and brains develop, from our lived experiences, from the cultural world which we inhabit, and all of these aspects impact the others in vastly complex, ongoing, ways throughout our lives. This means that each of us has a unique experience of gender which it makes sense to express and identify in whatever way is meaningful to us. Also, all of us go through social - and often physical - transitions during our lives around gender which affect the ways in which others read us and in which we experience our own gender (e.g. changing names, taking hormones, dressing differently, reaching different points in the lifecourse).

A trans man's experience of his masculinity will likely be radically different to that of a cis man, but it will also be radically different between two different trans men, or two different cis men, depending - for example - on whether the two men in question are gay, straight, or bi; black, white or mixed race; visibly disabled, non-disabled, or invisibly disabled. Also, on no possible measure of sex/gender is there are simple binary between male/man or female/woman. Significant numbers of both intersex and non-binary people exist. Finally, culturally there are vastly different understandings of gender across countries and contexts. To insist on one - relatively recent white western - model as correct is deeply problematic.

Turning to process we need to ask ourselves what is going on that people seem to be so invested in these 'debates' at the moment, and that they are so prominent in mainstream and social media. I have three thoughts that I think are important to keep in mind, but would also refer readers to trans feminists like Julia Serano (2016), Juno Roche (2019), artist Travis Alabanza, and Ruth Pearce (2018) who write eloquently on these matters.

First, there is a long history of different groups of feminists being pitched against each other, often represented in the media as embroiled in a kind of 'cat fight'. The current pitching of trans feminists against 'gender critical feminists' is just the current version of this. In terms of who it serves, I guess it seems obvious to me who benefits from huge swathes of feminists focusing on this rather than on dismantling the patriarchy. It is worth recognising that most of the concern is around trans women and girls, and transfeminine people, not about trans men and boys, and transmasculine people. We need to reflect on the misogyny which has always policed those perceived as moving towards femininity far more than those moving towards masculinity, whatever their gender or sexual identities.

Second, it serves existing systems and structures of power for people to blame more marginalised groups for their difficulties rather than questioning - or dismantling - those systems and structures. We see this in the blaming of immigrants for societal ills despite all evidence to the contrary; we see it in the demonising of individuals with mental health problems as dangerous to others when we know they are far more dangerous to themselves and their problems are likely far more systemic than they are individual; and we see it in the representing of trans people as violent predators or as endangering children through social contagion, precisely echoing the gay moral panic back in the 1980s.

Finally, I would return to my earlier point about sitting with our experience as victims and perpetrators, oppressed and oppressor. It is incredibly hard for those who have been fighting hard for people who've been oppressed and victimised for years to acknowledge that some of what they have done may have hurt or excluded others. Black feminists, trans feminists, lesbian feminists, working class feminists, and feminists in the global South, have all pointed out that the battles which seem highest priority for mainstream feminism have often been relatively unimportant - or even actively harmful - for them. The answer is not to defend against these criticisms, to position the critics as angry, difficult or crazy, or to deny them the status of womanhood entirely, the answer is - again - to learn to sit with the intense discomfort such conversations bring up, and to find ways to listen across difference.

What for you is the relationship between gender, feminism and sexuality?

Again to synopsise a lot of what is covered in *Queer* and *Gender*, for me gender and sexuality are interwoven within heteronormativity. We're culturally assumed to be either a man or a woman, and to be attracted to either men or women, and our identity is defined by this. In both cases, one side of the binary (men, straight people) is regarded as the norm and given high status and the other as less normal and given lower status (women, gay people). As previously mentioned, these binaries and hierarchies are also intrinsically linked to those around race, class, disability, age, location, mental health status, etc. The further binary of trans (changing from gender assigned at birth) and cis (remaining in gender assigned at birth), has also become interwoven with this, such that cis people are also seen as more normal and granted higher status than trans people.

Therefore, to my mind, all of these areas fall under the remit of feminism: gender and sexuality, but also race, class, disability, age, species... We simply can't fight gender oppression without also fighting homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, being explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-racist, addressing climate change and its impact on the global South, engaging with body normativity and benefits, immigration and asylum, etc. As Flavia Dzodan (2011: n.p.) put it, 'my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit'.

In *Gender: A graphic guide*, you write about intersectional analysis and the importance of incorporating awareness of 'race, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, ethnicity, age, generation, geographical location, faith and more' (p. 5) into understanding how gender operates. How would you say intersectional analysis informs your work?

Deeply, and - of course - I am still learning. For me the people who I'm learning the most from at the moment are intersectional feminist thinkers and Buddhist teachers, and those who are weaving these ideas and practices together. Intersectional feminism makes more sense of my own lived experience - and that of the people I speak to - than the other ideas which I've engaged with over the years, and Buddhist teachings are a fruitful place to find practices which enable us to sit with the kinds of discomfort and distress that I've spoken about here. Together, for me, the work of people like bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), Kai Cheng Thom (2019), Pema Chödrön (2000), Thich Nhat Hanh (1985), and Lama Rod Owens (Owens & Syedullah, 2016) offer vital ways finding compassion for ourselves and others navigating these terrifying times, and forging new systems and structures for working together across our sharedness and difference.

In *Gender: A graphic guide*, there are several pages about non-binary experiences. What are your thoughts about the increasing number of people who are claiming this identity, as a non-binary person yourself?

It interests me that the numbers here vary radically depending on how you frame the question. It's similar to research around bisexuality. Studies which ask how many young people identify as something other than gay or straight come up with figures of between 1% and 10%. Studies which ask how many young people experience attraction somewhere between 'exclusive heterosexuality' and 'exclusive homosexuality' come up with figures over 40%. Similarly, with non-binary gender it seems that around 0.4-2% of people identify in this way given the opportunity. However, studies which ask the general population whether they experience themselves as to some extent 'the other gender, both genders, or neither gender' find that over a third experience themselves in such ways. When I ask people in workshops to list the stereotypes of being a 'real man' or a 'real woman', virtually nobody locates themselves on either list. Obviously even the framing of such questions assumes a Western binary understanding of gender which would not translate globally.

So clearly few people experience themselves on either side of a rigid, stereotypical gender binary, and many people would locate themselves somewhere on a spectrum given a choice. Also, as I mentioned before, many

cultures worldwide, and across time, have had something other than a binary gender system and/or have understood masculinity and femininity in radically different ways to our current cultural understanding.

My thoughts are that identifying as non-binary potentially opens up the possibility for other people to be open about their experiences of gender diversity. The explosion terms for genders beyond man and women helps people to recognise that there are many different ways in which to identify, express and experience your gender, and hopefully find ways that are more comfortable and congruent for them, and communities of support around this. Of course, as with all things, identity labels have the potential to constrain options and close things down, just as they can expand possibilities and open things up. It's important to be cautious around new community norms about what a 'good' or 'proper' non-binary person would be like, any sense that people have to remain in fixed identity categories for a lifetime, and the tendency - as in any new group - for the most visible role models to end up being young, white, slim, non-disabled, wealthy, masculine-of-centre people.

Your book *Queer: A graphic history* was a huge success. Did you expect it to become so popular?

As I mentioned earlier, not at all. I am so glad now that I didn't pass up the opportunity! I think I owe Icon a lot of gratitude for asking me, and also for recognising what they had on their hands once we were writing the book. Initially it was planned to go straight into their 'introducing' series as a small book on queer theory alongside the ones on Marx, Freud and the like. However, they recognised the potential for much wider appeal - and how extraordinary Jules's illustrations were - and decided to go with a stand-alone book in a large glossy format initially instead. I'm sure that format and title are a big part of its popularity.

It's also very exciting that we've been able to follow up *Queer* with graphic guides on gender and sexuality, in order to delve much deeper into those topics. These subsequent books have also had the freedom to aim more explicitly at a general audience instead of staying too close to queer/gender/sexuality studies in an academic sense. Icon are hoping to publish books on many of the intersections we've talked about today from authors and illustrators with expertise in those areas, which will be incredibly helpful - I think - given how vital these areas are, how pivotal they have become, and how difficult people often find them emotionally.

We've also been able to gradually give our key characters working through the book more of their own character arcs and storylines, to bring the books somewhat close to a graphic novel despite being non-fiction. It's very fulfilling to keep playing with what is possible within this genre. Of course my dream - following Alison Bechdel - would be one day to make the leap from graphic novel to musical!

What are your plans for future work in the comics genre?

I'm very keen to keep working with Kiera and Jules on graphic guides if at all possible. A couple of publications that I would like to write in the coming years are on love and on mental health. However I'm giving myself at least a year off right now to adjust to being self-employed and to deal with various big changes and traumas in my life in the past year which have certainly given me even more motivation to write about relationships and mental health!

I also produce occasional zines and workbooks alone, and with Justin and Alex, which incorporate my own illustrations. Given that most of my creating time goes to writing or speaking, it's good to keep my hand in with some drawing, and I'd like to give myself more time for that in the coming years.

Finally I'm also slowly working on my own series of comics - perhaps to work towards an eventual graphic memoir or self-help/memoir mash-up. The focus of these is the plurality of selfhood: a theme which fits well for me with queer and critical social psychology understandings, as well as many Buddhist and therapeutic approaches. There is a burgeoning movement of mental health activists reclaiming diagnoses of Dissociative Identity Disorder[1] (previously Multiple Personality Disorder) and developing plural pride, at the same times as many trauma-informed therapies already conceptualise the self as plural and advocate for improving communication between - for example - inner child or inner critic states.

I've been personally working with plurality for some time now and have found it an immensely helpful way to make sense of my experience. I also feel it has some of the political potential I've spoken about to sit with - for example - both victim and perpetrator potentials in ourselves, and to allow that to inform our engagement with the wider world. Working - as I do now - as a writing mentor, these themes also come up a lot in the creative process as writers struggle with their inner critics, or find ways to return to earlier parts of themselves who are able to be freely imaginative, rather than caught up in the sense that they must be productive or create certain kinds of content or please certain imagined audiences. Plurality may also be helpful in enabling people - whether trans or cis - to communicate with past and present, and/or differently gendered, aspects of themselves.

I've used comics to time-travel through my life, and to support aspects of me that have become stuck by developing and bringing in other aspects who have the skills they need. I share the comics on my website as well as through free zines which take readers through the creative methods they might use to do the same kinds of work/play. Comics are definitely a big part of the future for me.

[1] DSM-5 300.14 (F44. 81); ICD-10-CM F44.81.

REFERENCES

Barker, M. J. (2016). *Queer: A graphic history*. London: Icon Books.

Barker, M.-J. (2018). *Rewriting the Rules: An anti self-help guide to love, sex and relationships*. Second edition. London: Routledge.

Barker, M.-J. (2019). *Good Practice Across the Counselling Professions 001: Gender, sexual, and relationship diversity (GSRD)*. BACP: Leicestershire.

Barker, M.-J. (2018). *The Psychology of Sex*. London: Routledge.

Barker, M. J. and Gabb, J. (2016). *The Secrets of Enduring Love: How to make relationships last*. London: Random House.

Barker, M.-J. and Hancock, J. (2017). *Enjoy Sex (How, When and IF You Want to): A practical and inclusive guide*. London: Icon Books.

Barker, M.-J. and Iantaffi, A. (2019). *Life Isn't Binary: On being both, beyond, and in-between*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Barker, M., Richards, C., Jones, R., Bowes-Catton, H., Plowman, T., Yockney, J. and Morgan, M. (2012). *The Bisexuality Report: Bisexual inclusion in LGBT equality and diversity*.

Barker, M.-J. and Scheele, J. (2019). *Gender: A graphic guide*. London: Icon Books.

Chödrön, P. (2000). *When Things Fall Apart: Heart advice for difficult times*. Shambhala Publications.

Dzodan, F. (2011). My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit. *Tiger Beatdown, 10*.

Gill, R. and Gill, R. M. (2007). *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hanh, T. N. (1985). A guide to walking meditation. *Fellowship, 51*(10-11), 23.

Harvey, L. and Gill, R. (2011). Spicing it up: Sexual entrepreneurs and the sex inspectors. In Gill, R. & Scharff, C. (eds.) (2011) *New Femininities and Sexual Citizenship* (pp. 52-67). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

hooks, b. (1981). *Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press.

Iantaffi, A. and Bockting, W. O. (2011). Views from both sides of the bridge? Gender, sexual legitimacy and transgender people's experiences of relationships. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 13*(03), 355-370.

Iantaffi, A. and Barker, M.-J. (2017). *How to Understand Your Gender: A practical guide for exploring who you are*. London: Jessica Kingsley

Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B. and Martin, C. E. (1948). *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Philadelphia: Saunders.

Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., Martin, C. E. and Gebhard, P. H. (1953). *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia: Saunders.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*. New York: The Crossing Press.

Owens, L. R. and Syedullah, J. (2016). *Radical Dharma: Talking race, love, and liberation*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Pearce, R. (2018). *Understanding Trans Health: Discourse, power and possibility*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Roche, J. (2019). *Trans Power: Own your gender*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Serano, J. (2016). *Whipping Girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Abingdon, UK: Hachette UK.

Thom, K. C. (2019). *I Hope We Choose Love*. Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Websites:
http://www.biuk.org/
http://criticalsexology.org.uk/
www.megjohnandjustin.com
www.rewriting-the-tules.com
https://senseaboutsex.wordpress.com/
http://travisalabanza.co.uk/

Citation: Ryan-Flood, R. (2020). Interview with MJ Barker. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 02. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7906

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 03
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

The Power of Butterflies: The Legacy of the Mirabal Sisters in an Exhibition by the Mexican Cartoonist Cintia Bolio

Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto [1]*, Iván Facundo Rubinstein [2]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

In the present work we analyse the exhibition *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas* (*Only Evas: About butterflies*) by the Mexican artist Cintia Bolio. This exhibition was presented from November 14, 2018, to March 3, 2019 at the Museum of Women, which is located in Mexico City, in the context of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Woman, a date which commemorates the Mirabal sisters, known as 'The Butterflies', who were murdered in the Dominican Republic by the dictatorship of Leonidas Trujillo on November 25, 1960. The exhibition was presented in a context characterised by the growing number of women victims of violence in Mexico. As we are going to see, in the exhibition analysed, Cintia Bolio seeks to publicise the types of violence that exist and why the struggle of the Mirabal sisters led us to reflection on gender violence in our daily life.

Keywords: Mexican comic, Cintia Bolio, feminist comic

THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN MEXICO

The #MeToo movement of 2017 spread around the world as a wave of opposition to the sexual assault and harassment that women suffer in their workplaces. Although it started with the stories of Hollywood's women, it soon became clear that many around the world suffer the same type of violence, no matter their country, age, job and race/ethnicity. That slogan was a reference to the namesake organisation that has helped survivors of sexual violence since 2006. #MeToo makes visible the omnipresence of gender inequity among the society; in that way, it rekindled a long-term movement of women that fights against the gender gap that has historically set women aside in public life. In Latin America the #MeToo was used by feminist movements and also by women who suffer (or had suffered) all kinds of gender-based violence. It is important to consider that the hashtags used to report violence against women in Latin America went beyond #MeToo: it is possible to mention the *#MiPrimerAcoso* (#MyFirstHarrasment), *#NiUnaMenos* (#NotOneLess) or *#VivasNosQueremos* (#WeWantUsAlive). This new generation of activism (mostly from urban contexts and with a wide knowledge of technology uses) was effective in making public the situation of women in Latin America (Gomez and Lozano, 2019).

In Mexico, the subordination of women takes place in every aspect of the daily life. The most common is in the house, a situation that leads some scholars to establish a difference between the 'private sphere' (the one in which traditionally the man can be restored from the bustle of work and the public space) and the 'domestic sphere' (that one in which the woman has to serve their husband and children) (Murillo, 1996). But even if women can get a good job and have a high position in a company, they are still subordinated to men: usually, women that have access to the top of the hierarchy are under more pressure because they have to demonstrate, all the time, that they can do the job. Also, their salary is lower, because they cannot receive the incentive compensations that their male colleges benefit from (car, holiday, bonus, etc.) (Vega Montiel, 2014: 207-208). In a national survey in Mexico, nearly one quarter of the respondents (23%) affirmed that women must ask for permission if they want to work (Galeana Herrera, 2015). Moreover, women's opinion is considered of being less worth than listening to than men's, and in all the cases they must take care of their family, even if the job is full time (García de León, 1994). Finally, other scholars (Molyneux, 2001; Vélez Bautista, 2006) have shed light on the concept of citizenship. They demonstrate that, although the concept seems to be neutral, in its origins it was based on the image of men. Therefore, women were excluded from it. This has several consequences when we focus on the women's

[1] *Postdoctoral Researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas of National Autonomous University of Mexico*, MEXICO
[2] *Professor of Political Behaviour at the National Autonomous University of Mexico*, MEXICO
***Corresponding Author:** nallelyhn@gmail.com

citizenship, because they are systematically excluded from the protection of the law; in many aspects they do not have rights (especially political rights) and are not seen as a political subject. Therefore, women are economically dependent (on their fathers, husband, but also on the State). Usually, this situation led to a welfare policy that does not change women's subordinated status (Rubio Castro, 1997; de Villota, 1998).

In Mexico, the situation for women is particularly dramatic. They live in what Marcela Lagarde called captivities or 'the political-cultural expression of the women's condition...in the patriarchal world' (2011: 60). This captivity is characterised by the privation of freedom by oppression. Women are captive because their vital autonomy has been taken, as well as their independence, their self-government, the possibilities of decision and their capacity of choice about their life and world (Lagarde, 2011: 61). This oppression can have one unique dimension (the oppression of the housewife in which she is attached to the kitchen, the cleaning, the children's care, etc.), but also can be double (the wife that has two labour journeys: at the workplace and at home) or triple (those who have ethnic ancestry and have two labour journeys and also suffered oppression because of their origins). The latter have suffered with more cruelty the oppression of the Latin American society which is not only classist, but also racist and Eurocentric.

The violence against women can present in different degrees: from the prohibition (explicit or implicit) of getting a job or the pressure to get married, to rape and murderer. And, notoriously, that is the case of the women of Juarez City, in Chihuahua, Mexico. During early 1990, corpses of women who had been tortured and raped began to be found. Most of them were young women (between 15 and 25 years old) who had to drop their studies and worked in *maquilas* (factories in the border between Mexico and USA). Their corpses were usually found stabbed, mutilated and/or raped. Since 1993 there have been more than 1500 femicides in Juarez City (Martínez Prado, 2018). According to the civil society *Red Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez* (Juarez City Women Table Network), during 2018, there were 89 women murdered, victims of femicide violence (an increase of 22% in the first semester, in relation to 2017).[1]

In 2007, the General Law for Women to Access a Life without Violence (LGAMVLV, by its Spanish initials) was launched. The LGAMVLV established a mechanism to eliminate the violence against women: the Gender Violence against Women Alert (AVGM, by its Spanish initials), which allows the state to implement direct actions and reassign resources. At the time we are writing this article, there are 13 states under AVGM[2] and 9 in process.[3] Nevertheless, the oppression of women in Mexico is still dramatic and severe.

In 2017 there were more than 3.000 murders of women in all the country. This represents an increase of 18% in relation to 2016 (2,813 cases) (Jasso and González, 2018), a trend that cannot be stopped by the State, and represents a femicide each 9 hours. This is consistent with the research of geophysicist María Salguero, who worked on the first Mexican Femicide Map, which was recognised by ONU Mujeres (ONU Women) and the Mexican Senate.

Violence against women is systemic: of 32 states, 24 have reported an increase of femicide (an increase of more than 80%). Even the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has several cases in its history. Since 2016 the University has received almost 500 complaints about sexual harassment (by students, security personal and professors). The cases go from verbal harassment and discrimination to sexual abuse, rape and murderer. Nevertheless, the murder is not the only menace.

In Mexico, the harassment in public spaces is higher, especially on public transport (that is why in 2007 the government of Mexico City allocated the first three wagons of a metro car to be used only by women and by children under 12-years-old).[4] Some institutions (such as ONU Women and Inmujeres), as well as companies, have been doing social advertising to confront this problem, but the harassment has still not disappeared. The campaign *#NoEsDeHombres* (#It'sNotFromMen) is a recent example.[5]

Sexual harassment is not the only way in which the patriarchy appears. As we have seen, the oppression of women in Mexico has several dimensions, including the cultural, political, social, sexual, and so on. In 2016, the Family Front, in alliance with catholic institutions, called a protest against the decision of the president Enrique Peña Nieto to legalise marriage between people of the same sex. Another example: after the general elections of 2018, in the state of Chiapas, 35 congresswoman and city councilwomen have been forced to quit, so their male colleagues could assume their position in the Senate. The political violence against women is also express in more

[1] More information about the organization can be find in their web site: http://www.mesademujeresjuarez.org/

[2] Estado de México, Morelos, Michoacán, Chiapas, Nuevo León, Veracruz, Sinaloa, Colima, San Luis Potosí, Guerrero, Quintana Roo, Nayarit and Veracruz.

[3] Campeche, Mexico City, Coahuila, Durango, Jalisco, Oaxaca, Puebla, Yucatán and Zacatecas.

[4] This action was not new. In 1970 there were two wagons for women (although it was only for two lines in working days between 6:00-10:00 am and 17:00-22:00 pm). In 2000 the Mexico City government allocated the two wagons to be used by women and children, permanently, in six lines.

[5] It can be find a final report of the campaign in the web site of ONU Women in Mexico: http://mexico.unwomen.org/es/noticias-y-eventos/articulos/2018/06/nosesdehombres-reporte

explicit ways: for example, the prohibition to women to assume an elective position, in Oaxaca, under the law of the tradition.

The rural population of the states is the most affected by violence. This is not only because of economic vulnerability, but also because of their social position and the lack of basic services (education, health, food security, drains, etc.). This situation leads on occasion to child marriage, undercover sales of children in exchange for money, animals or land. The age range is usually between 10 and 17 years; in all the cases, women married older men.[6] According to UNICEF and the Pan American Health Organization (OPS, by its Spanish initials), from a total of 32 million, 7 million Mexican mothers are younger than 16 years; this situation set Mexico as the first country of the OECD in relation to teenage pregnancy.[7]

During 2018, Mexico was called to appear in front of the committee of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).[8] In their final recommendations, the CEDAW committee stressed the necessity of putting end to all forms of violence against women and encouraged the Mexican State to take stronger action to revert the panorama. Between the more urgent areas that the State must focus its politics on, we can mention: the general context of gender violence; discrimination against women; access to justice; lack of gender equity; sexist stereotypes; damaging practices in hospitals; slavery and prostitution; obstacles to participating in the political arena. Although the states have usually five years to present their progress, the CEDAW committee considered that the context in Mexico is so disadvantageous to women that the country has to show its progress in 2020 (two years after its revision).

(a) (b)

Figure 1. The exhibition at Museum of Women. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein

This is the context in which the Museum of Women invites cartoonist Cintia Bolio to exhibit a collection for the International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women. In the next section we discuss the exposition, titled *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas*. This exhibition took place in the main gallery of the Museum between November 14, 2018 and March 3, 2019.

WOMEN AUTHORS AND FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS IN MEXICAN COMICS

The beginning of the modern Mexican comic coincides with the end of the armed struggle of the Revolution. These series filled the supplement pages of Sunday newspaper such as *El Heraldo*, *El Democrata* and *El Universal*,

[6] As the State recognized in its web site: https://www.gob.mx/sipinna/articulos/nacer-nina-en-mexico-desventaja-automatica-177743?idiom=es

[7] The full report can be read in the following link: https://lac.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ESP-EMBARAZO-ADOLES-14febrero%20FINAL_5.PDF

[8] The final recommendations can be read (in English or Spanish) in the following link: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fMEX%2fCO%2f9&Lang=en

where they were published from 1919 until the mid-1930s. During these decades, the comics had great presence in the newspaper stands. In the 1940s, during the 'Golden Age' of Mexican comic books (1940 – 1960), magazines such as *Paquín*, *Pepín* and *Chamaco* published millions of copies a week.

It was in this 'Golden Age' when women ventured into the genre of the comic. Yolanda Vargas Dulché, Elia D'Ezrell and Laura Bolaños started their career as a scriptwriter in the romantic series called *Rutas de Emoción* ('Routes of emotion') published in the 1940s (Aurrecoechea and Bartra, 1994: 358). In these first publications the authors consolidated an individual style that would lead them to be fundamental figures of Mexican comic in later decades. Vargas Dulché achieved great success with *Lágrimas, Risas y Amor* ('Tears, Laughter and Love'), while Elia D'Ezrell and Laura Bolaños did the same in *El Libro Semanal* ('The Weekly Book'). Although they were the writers and authors of the stories, it is necessary to say that they did not draw. Therefore, the representation of women in their comics was authored by the men who illustrated their stories

It is also necessary to mention that these women were not the first creators. In the genre of the cartoon, the existence of Ema Best (1895) has been documented. Only one self-portrait of her survives and there is no more biographical data. Another of the pioneers was the painter Carmen Mondragón, known as Nahui Olin (1893-1978) who exhibited four cartoons at the Academy of San Carlos in 1921 (MacMasters, 2000). In addition, there were possibly more creators but their names remain anonymous[9]. As the researcher Mariela Acevedo argues 'the situation of women and their crossing with comics can be seen -in a first approximation- as absent, while they are creative and captive in fables that narrate them' (2012: 2). It is in the 1940s where women achieved some visibility in the world of comics and later they will position themselves as commercially successful authors.

In the 'Golden Age' female figures also appeared as protagonists of a series. In *Adelita y las Guerrillas* ('Adelita and the Guerrillas'), created by José G. Cruz in 1939, the protagonist is a young woman named Adela Negrete who seeks to avenge her brother's death and therefore joins the Revolution. She is financially independent, responsible and educated heroine who wears fitted dresses, an aspect of fashion that defied the moral standards of the time. On the other hand, there is Borola Tacuche, from the series *La Familia Burrón* ('The Burrón Family'), published in 1949 by Gabriel Vargas, a character who is considered 'protofeminist' by the researcher Armando Bartra (2013). Borola refuses to accept the status of 'devoted Mexican mother'; she rebels against prescribed social status and advises women in their neighbourhood to avoid being hit by their husbands.

After the 1960s, the female figure appeared on the covers of magazines like *Águila Solitaria* ('Lonely Eagle'), *Chanoc*, *Kalimán*, or *El Santo*. Here women are drawn with a perfect figure: small waist, blonde and long hair, appearing in bikinis or tiny clothes, and accompanying popular heroes. On the side, there was the so-called 'female' comic, in which the woman was the protagonist of sentimental series such as *Lágrimas, Risas y Amor, El Libro Semanal* or *Espejo de la Vida* ('Life Mirror') where these figures appear as childish and dreamers, who await the arrival of the perfect man in their lives, or suffer because of problems in their marriage.

At the end of the 1970s, the magazine *El Libro Vaquero* ('The cowboy book') was published. This comic concerns histories set in an old Mexicanised west where the protagonists are Indians and cowboys. This comic is characterised by showing voluptuous women in the drawings, in scant clothing without being totally nude. This is the same case of the magazines so-called *Sensacionales* ('Sensational') ─that were very popular in the 1980s and 1990s─ although these, in addition to showing half-naked women, already show sexual situations. But, seeing the success of these publications, other comics appeared that went to the field of pornography, for example, *El Sofá del Placer* ('The Sofa of Pleasure'), *Cama Caliente* ('Hot Bed'), *Colegialas Ardientes* ('Burning Schoolgirls'), *Mercados y Marchantas* ('Markets and Sellers') and *Fantasías Eróticas* ('Erotic Fantasies'). The researcher Ricardo Vigueras (2012) points out that these publications followed the aesthetics that triumphed in the 1970s and that *pornofumetti* reflected with authors such as Leone Frollo. The author emphasises that, despite what we might think, 'there is no kind of denigration in women or in the sexual practices that are shown, and in addition, some of these magazines always insist on an idea: women must not be violated' (Vigueras, 2012: n.p.). Despite this, it is clear that there is a graphic objectification of women.

As we see in this brief review, the women drawn always have being present in the paper stories. The Argentinian cartoonist Ana Von Reuber (n.d.) said that the spike heels of Barbarella and the waist of the Wonder Woman printed on paper what men wanted to see in women of each era, without neglecting the attentive eye of the readers who searched the strips for the latest fashion craze.

In the field of art in México, during the 1970s, some women artists had begun to address issues such as the place of women in society, beauty stereotypes, non-normative bodies and the classification formulated based on

[9] There are very few books that talk about female authors as we will expose below. In the book *La caricatura en México* (1954), by Rafael Carrasco Puente, he mentions the work of Ema Best; later in *Un siglo de caricatura en México* (1984), by Eduardo del Río 'Rius', he incorporates other women authors as Palmira Garza. Subsequently, Agustín Sanchez González makes a review of the women authors of comic and cartoon *Diccionario biográfico ilustrado de la caricatura Mexicana* (1997) and *Las moneras llegaron ya* (2003).

patriarchal canons which historically has been given to art made by women (Giunta, 2018: 114). The researcher Felipe Gómez said that while international feminist comics were born in the 1970s, which were derived from underground comics, it was not until the early 1990s that the feminist comic manages to appear in Mexico (2018: 7). He considers that the diversity and appropriation of themes is an aspect that differentiates the 'feminine' comic of the Mexican Golden Age, from the feminist comic:

This feminist comic comes from the tradition of the humorous strip and focuses on reflecting, criticizing and subverting the values of patriarchal society to denounce gender as a cultural and social construction. This comic proposes to involve other physical models of humanized and not necessarily sexualized, idealized or deformed women, of various ages and conditions. (Gómez Gutiérrez, 2018: 7)

In this movement of new authors of comics, artist Cecilia Pego gained popularity with the comic *Terrora y Taboo*. Additionally, she published her political cartoons and comics in several newspapers and magazines. Currently, she has left the cartoon to devote herself full time to painting. On the other hand, the artist Cintia Bolio remains active as a creator. It is necessary to point out that these women considered themselves as feminists unlike Yolanda Vargas Dulché, Elia D'Ezrell and Laura Bolaños, who were also important authors of the past decades.

CINTIA BOLIO: A FEMINIST ARTIST

Cintia Bolio has not been the only comic author woman in Mexico, but she is the artist who has sustained a line of feminist content throughout her career. Through her political caricature and comics, the artist has sought to denounce the oppression that women experience within the patriarchal system. As she explained:

I started in 1996 in the magazine *El Chamuco*, in politics cartoons, but I became interested in women's issues. I was in a male-dominated guild. In addition, we, the women, educate us to be submissive, obedient and fulfilled. (Blancas, 2016: n.p.)

This artist was born in Mexico City in 1969 and has 23 years of comic art experience. Bolio is the author of the series such as *Huesos* (Bones) since 2008, *Puras Evas* ('Only Evas') since 2011, and *Albúm de Familia,* ('Family Album') since 2012. Her work has appeared in newspapers such as *La Jornada* and *Milenio* and she has published anthologies such as *La Irreverente Sonrisa* ('The Irreverent Smile'), in addition to exhibiting in different countries. She is also the representative for Latin America the founder of the international movement Cartooning for Peace-*Dessins pour la Paix* convened by the United Nations (UN). In 2017, she won the International Prize for Human Rights and Journalism 'Tlaltecuhtli', awarded by ComuARTE. In Mexico, the National Autonomous University of Mexico has invited her to give workshops in faculties, preparatory schools and different institutions, where the prevention of gender violence is addressed through comics.

A TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

Before talking about this exhibition, it is necessary to talk about the place. The Museum of Women opened near the centre of Mexico City on March 8, 2011, in the context of International Women's Day. According to its founder, Patricia Galeana, the aim of the museum is the dissemination of a new culture of equity and respect for the Human Rights of Women. She has said in several interviews that the cartoon is a magnificent means of communication with the general public (Montes Vázquez, 2019).

It is important to note that almost since its foundation, the museum has relied on the work of Cintia Bolio to provide information to the public on women's rights and the elimination of violence. In collaboration with the artist, the Museum invited Cintia to give a cartoon workshop at the Santa Martha Acatitla prison. In this way, 14 prisoners told their life story. Other examples of this work are the two special comics made in collaboration with the Museum of Women and the Federation of Mexican Women (FEMU): in 2014 it published *Puras Evas: Cómo ser dueña de tu cuerpo sin ser criminalizada en el intento* ('Only Evas: How to own your body without being criminalised in the attempt') and in 2015, *Puras Evas: Los 10 machamientos. Cultura patriarcal y obstrucción del acceso de las mujeres a la justicia* ('Only Evas: The 10 counterclaims. Patriarchal culture and obstruction of women's access to justice'). In addition, in the museum, Bolio has presented different thematic and individual exhibitions, among them *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas*, which I will discuss.

The pieces that open the exhibition *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas* are the three portraits of the Mirabal sisters. Cintia Bolio took as a reference the photographs of these women at an early age, which are the most widespread, and which served as a model for the engraving that illustrates the 200 pesos bill of the Dominican Republic.

(a) (b)

Figure 2. On the left: Bolio C. (2018) Cartoon portraits of Mirabal sisters and a representation of the Justice [Drawing]. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein. On the right: detail of the 200 pesos bill of Dominican Republic, with Mirabal sisters. Photo credit: The Central Bank of the Dominican Republic.

Above the portraits is a picture of the statue of Justice, also known as The Lady of Justice, which is a blindfolded woman who carries a scale in one hand and a sword in the other. The scale represents equity and, for this reason, it is in equilibrium at the midpoint. The woman, who wears a white robe and has long hair, also has butterfly wings. In this case, the type of wings resembles those of the famous and symbolic monarch butterflies, which migrate from the north of the American continent (Canada and the United States) to the forests of Mexico. Over the time it takes them to make this journey, four generations of monarch butterflies are born and die. It is not a coincidence that the artist chose this species since the trip made by these butterflies makes them a symbol of resistance and perseverance.

THE MIRABAL SISTERS: THE THREE 'BUTTERFLIES'

Known as 'Las Mariposas', Patria (February 27, 1924 – November 25, 1960), Minerva (March 12, 1927 – November 25, 1960) and María Teresa Mirabal (October 15, 1936 – November 25, 1960) were born in the province of Salcedo, Dominican Republic (today the town is called Hermanas Mirabal). These women belonged to a well-to-do family, had studied university careers and had at the time of their death, almost a decade of political activism against the regime of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. A fourth sister, Bélgica Adela 'Dede', had a less active role in political activism against the government and managed to save herself from the fate of her sisters.

On November 25, 1960, members of the secret police intercepted the car in which the Mirabal sisters were travelling. The women were beaten and subsequently hanged. At the time of death, they were between 24 and 36 years old:

It is the beauty of the butterfly that attracts a person to touch its wings, something that ultimately harms the insect. It was the bravery that the Mirabal sisters had mixed with their beauty that hastened their deaths. Their resistance towards a government that was repressive to its citizens was something to be admired. [...] By rejecting traditional gender roles and resisting the oppressing authority, the Mirabals proved to be role models women everywhere (Mendoza, 2017: 54).

Since then, the Mirabal sisters have become a global symbol of women's struggle. For this reason, every November 25 they are remembered on the International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women, which was declared in 1999 by the UN in honour of Patria, Minerva and María Teresa. This date was proposed during the First Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounter (EFLAC), held in 1981 in Bogotá, Colombia.

The story of the Mirabal sisters was also widely known through the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995), by the Dominican Julia Álvarez. The researcher Anna Maria Karczewska has described how the novel gives access to Dominican history and memory, creates a voice for victims of terror, and lets them be heard on their own terms (2017: 29). Alvarez's novel also was adapted for a film, directed by Mariano Barroso (2001) and a play theatre.

If the Mirabal sisters lived, how and why would they fight today? They would probably extend their struggle to combat violence against women. Gender violence presents alarming numbers in Latin America, a region where more than nine women are killed every day by sexist violence. It is the most violent area in the world for them

outside of a context of war, as revealed by the UN in 2018 (Reina, 2018). These figures reveal that there is much to be done, and we must never forget the fight of the 'butterflies'.

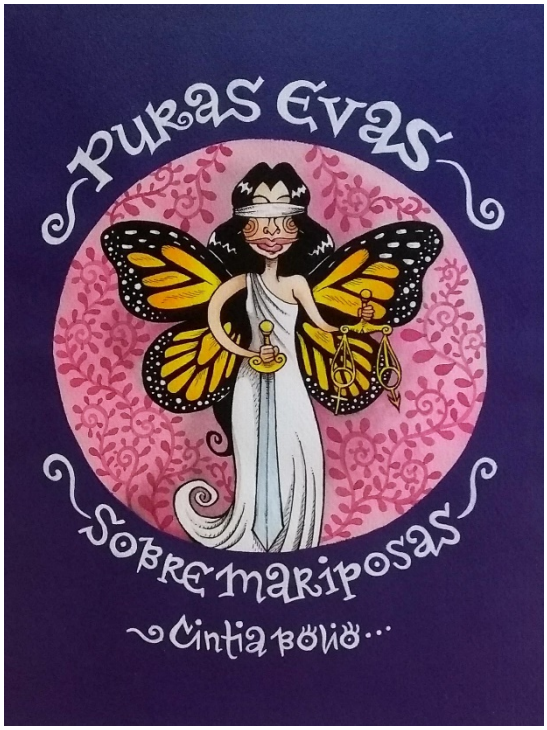


Figure 3. Bolio, C. (2018). *Justicia* [Drawing]. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein.

In the next part of the article we will analyse the central pieces of the exhibition. Firstly we talk about two comics: *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas* (this comic shares a title with that of the exhibition) and *Rezagos y Rezagos* ('Backwardness and Backwardness'), 2016, and the series that talks about different types of violence. In all the cases we are going to demonstrate how Cintia Bolio managed to explain in a simple, direct way some situations that are conceptually complex (such as femicide, for example). Working with cartoons, Bolio uses a several rhetorical figures (such as metaphor, personification, comparison, and synecdoche, among others). It is not the purpose of this article to describe all the types she used, but to demonstrate how all these resources are used together in order to convey a clear political message. The works will be examined semiotically to identify the forms, themes and concepts in the combination of artistic motifs. In this way, we can see the correlation between form and content, as well as the environment or historical moment that frames them. Due to space constraints, we do not analyse the whole exhibition; instead, we select the images most related to feminist concerns; there remains for future studies further analysis of other illustrations of Cintia Bolio or other women cartoonists in Mexico and Latin America.

The socio-semiotic approach (Verón, 1993) recognises the social dimension of any discourse: it is not possible to understand what is the meaning (the sense) of any discourse if we do not take into account, at the same time, the historical context in which that discourse was produced and received; the historical and contextual dimensions are crucial to understand the meaning of the sign. In *The Art of Describing*, Svetlana Alpers affirmed that art should be understood in relation to a bigger economy of visual representations and uses the widely accepted term of 'visual culture' to underline the cultural elements (1987: 318-319). Reading the images -in this case the vignette- in their context enriches the understanding of the object of study.

We use different methods of analysis: rhetoric, thematic or enunciative. We use referential analysis when we considered that the thematic dimension of the discourse has a special importance in relation to the current context of Mexico. In other cases, we show how the stylistic dimension has meaning by itself, and thus it cannot be considered only as a kind of decoration of the message. Finally, we analyse the different uses of rhetorical figures to explain how Bolio manages to condense a wide variety of information into a single image.

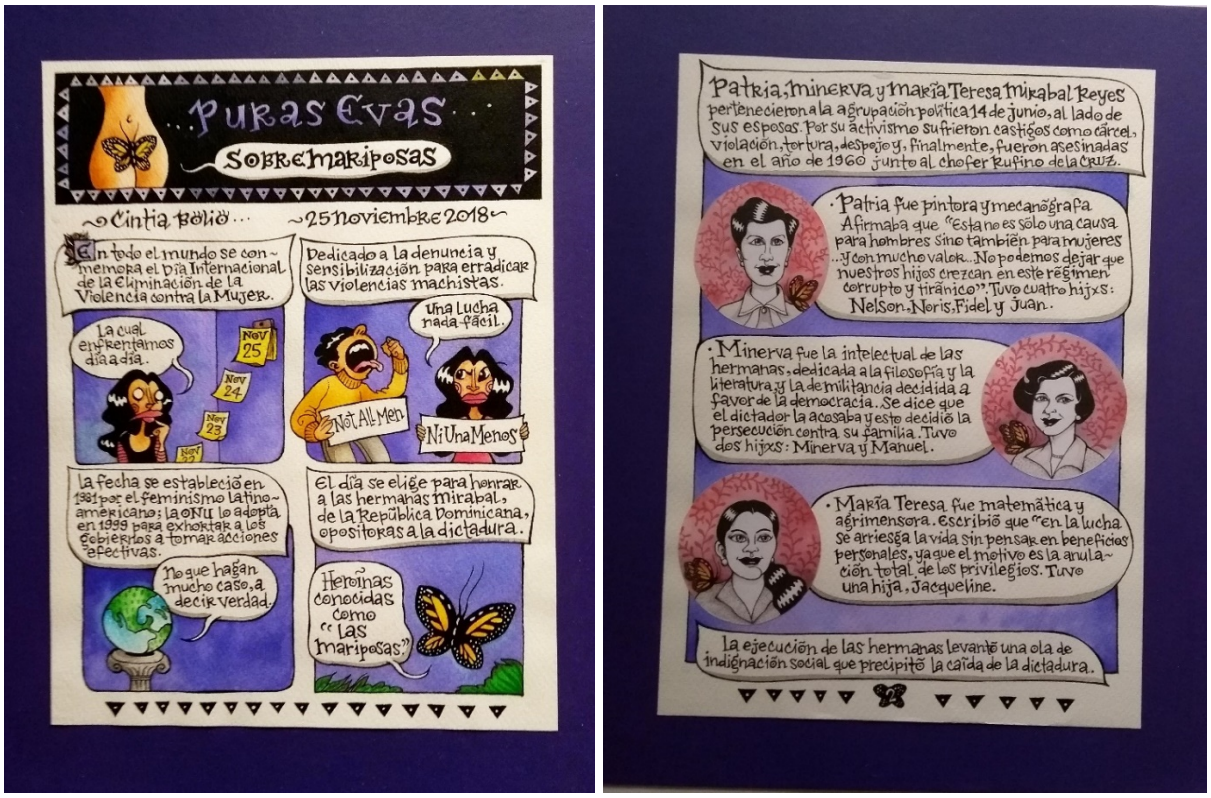
The exhibition, *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas* (shown from November 14, 2018 to March 3, 2019) consisted of 32 artworks; 7 were exhibited in a cabinet and 25 on the wall. Although all the images in the exhibition have a high political content, we selected only 5 works for the corpus of analysis with images that directly address issues such as maternity, abortion, rape and psychological violence that demonstrate awareness of the power structures that exclude women and the recognition of common gender based experiences (Giunta, 2018: 261).

PURAS EVAS: SOBRE MARIPOSAS

The comic strip *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas* gave its name to the exhibition and functions as a link between the historical context of Mirabal sisters and the current situation of women in Latin America. It explains the story of the sisters and argues how the situation apparently has not changed at all. As Jelin (2002) demonstrated, the past is the result of conflicts between actors with different interests. In the case of the strip *Puras Evas: Sobre mariposas*, the past which is represented is the official one: the murderer of Mirabal sisters and the commemoration of that day as the International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women. Nevertheless, there is a second, underlying narrative that critiques the present in relation to that past. It can be understood as an exemplary use of memory, which consists of a model to understand new situations, with new agents (Jelin, 2002: 33). The official past (which recognises the critical situation of women) is linked to the present of women in Latin America, as we shall see.

This comic is composed of four vignettes with a title at the top. The text of the first vignette says that the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is commemorated all around the world; the second one explains that this day is dedicated to report contemporary violence against women; the third one explains that this day was adopted by the feminist movements of Latin America in 1981, and then adopted by United Nations in 1999 with the objective of encouraging governments to take effective action in order to eradicate violence against women; the fourth one remembers that this day was chosen specifically in order to commemorate the murder of the Mirabal sisters by the Dominican Republic dictatorship. Inside the first vignette the female character explains that women suffer daily violence ('we face [violence] each day'). In the second vignette, the woman says that the fight against violence is not easy; at her side, Bolio draws a man shouting and carrying a poster with the slogan 'NotAllMen': it represents a common and regressive reaction of men when the feminist movement reports sexist attitudes or aggression. The third vignette is the most critical: suggesting that the United Nations has adopted the Earth Day, but that it does not really care. Finally, the last vignette is a convergence of the two narratives, as we see next.

The text and the dialogues of the characters (woman, and planet Earth) works like a counterpoint between the historical discourse and the current situation of women. For its part, the fourth vignette is the encounter of these two temporal narratives: the text addresses the importance of Mirabal sisters, and the drawing is of a butterfly which is a symbol of them. The chronology of the narratives function as a flashback: it starts in the present and goes directly to the past, to the origin of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and thus mirrors the present with the past as a way of marking the lack of political progress for women.



(a) (b)

Figure 4. Bolio, C. (2018). *Puras Evas. Sobre mariposas* [Drawing]. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein

It is important to note the predominance of the violet colour in the strip: violet is the colour that represents feminist movements all around the world, and function as a visual reminder for the reader. Violet is also present in the title *Puras Evas*, the title shows a butterfly located on the genitals of a generic woman. The uses of sexual attributes are common in these types of comics (for example *Clítoris* magazine, edited by Mariela Acevedo in Argentina since 2011), because the sex difference is seen as fundamental to gender binarism (Scott, 1986). The sex attributes function as a synecdoche: the whole person is represented by a part of her (in this case, the genitals). In the comic analysed, the vagina is overcast by a butterfly; this is a metaphor: every woman is a butterfly; therefore, the Mirabal sisters represents all women, no matter their class, age, race or religion. All women are *Evas*.

REZAGOS AND REZAGOS

The second cartoon we have selected, *Rezagos y Rezagos* shows characteristics of women in Latin America which is the unequal situation of rural and urban women, noticeable in countries with Indigenous populations. This inequality is commonly ignored by many of the politicians and decision makers. In this cartoon, Bolio draws two characters: what we can consider an urban or intellectual woman and an Indigenous woman. The first one is an orator. The lectern has the sign of the conference *Beijing+20*, in which the delegates of United Nations gathered to do a review and appraisal of the BPA implementation.[10] The conference took place 20 years after the Beijing Platform for Action and was an important review, at the international level, of the achievements of BPA. In the cartoon, the woman stands at the lectern and proclaims that 'The XXI Century will honour its name when we can achieve full equality!' On the other hand, using irony, the woman on the right (dressed as an Indigenous woman) point that 'For us, getting to the XX Century will be successful'. This Indigenous woman is stereotypical with the exception that she is not represented as a victim, but as someone with agency (Steimberg, 2013). In this case, Bolio chooses to use the stereotype to signal the agentic capacity of Indigenous women.

Figure 5. Bolio, C. (2015) *Rezagos y Rezagos*. [Drawing]. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein.

[10] The full report can be read in the following link: Ten-year Review and Appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly held during the forty-ninth session of the CSW, from 28 February to 11 March 2005. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/english/49sess.htm

In this cartoon it is possible to find another form of counterpoint. The orator represents the official vision of the United Nations. By her clothes and stance, it is possible to assume that she belongs to the upper classes and has forms of cultural capital; she is also 'higher' in the visual layout of the image. In contrast, the woman at the lower right is dressed like a rural woman, with a traditional skirt, a shawl (with is commonly used to carry their child) and *huaraches* (a kind of Mexican sandals); also, her features are associated with local Indigenous peoples, as well as her skin colour. The situation for women in Latin America is heterogeneous; while some of them are fighting for political rights or have concerns about sexual identity, others have to face problems related to hunger, economical subordination, sexual violence and State violence, among others. Bolio manages to highlight the specific disadvantages that rural and working class Mexican women suffer in comparison with the situation of women from urban and middle-class areas.

TIPOS DE VIOLENCIA MACHISTA

In the series of titled drawings *Tipos de Violencia Machista* ('Types of Macho Violence') that Bolio made specifically for this exhibition, we select four types of violence: 1. violence against reproductive rights; 2. femicide violence; 3. sexual violence; and 4. symbolic violence. These four types of violence were categorised by the General Law for Women to Access a Life without Violence (LGAMVLV);[11] therefore, it is possible to assume that the aim of the series is to publish the different ways in which violence is expressed.

The first thing that we notice in this series is the symbolic use of the violet in the frame of the cartoons and as a background (just as in the case of *Puras Evas*). But there is also the use of paper cuttings to represent the legal text of the LGAMVLV. This uses the indexical dimension of the cartoons (Eco, 2016: 268-271; Verón, 1998: 127). The paper cuttings work as a barrier that separates the comic style from the legal text.

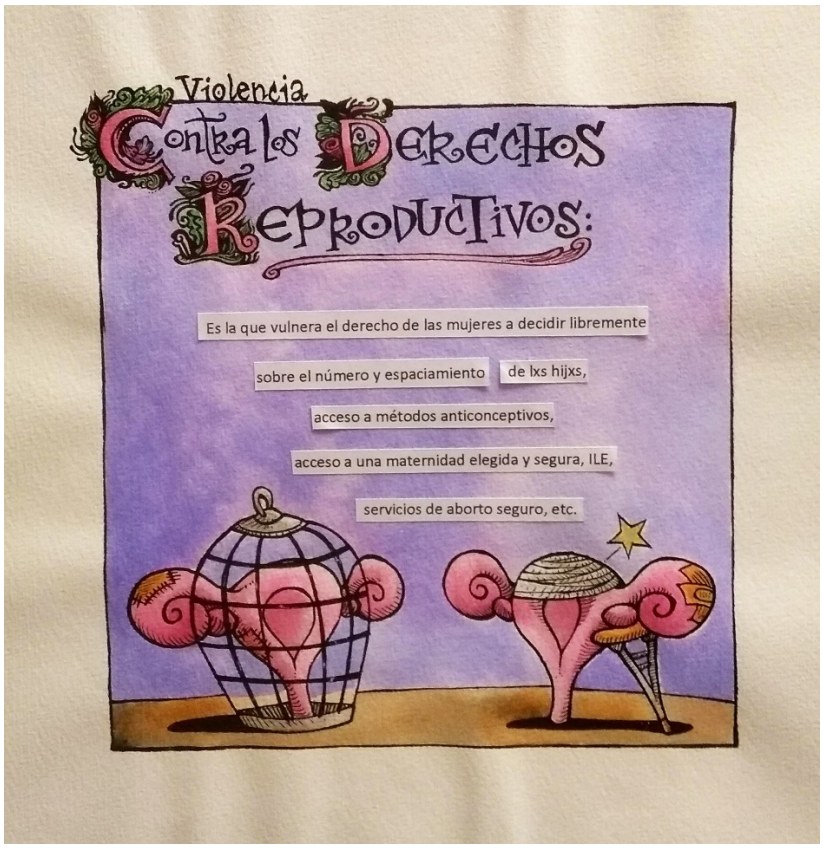


Figure 6. Bolio, C. (2018) *Violencia Contra los Derechos Reproductivos*. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein.

[11] The General Law for Women to Access a Life without Violence (LGAMVLV, by its Spanish initials) was launched in 2007; it established a mechanism to eliminate the violence against women: the Gender Violence against Women Alert (AVGM, by its Spanish initials), which allows the state to implement direct actions and reassign resources.

The work titled *Violencia Contra los Derechos Reproductivos* ('Violence against Reproductive Rights') shows the situation of women in Mexico through the uses of a synecdoche: the ovary represents the woman suffering the situation described by the law. In the text we can read: '[Violence against reproductive rights] violates women's right to decide freely the number of children, their access to contraceptive methods, access to a safety and chosen maternity, legal pregnancy interruption, safety abortion services, etc.'. The pictures represent two different situations: women cannot choose freely about their life (represented by the ovary imprisoned) and those who suffer violence because of their election (represented by the ovary injured).

Figure 7. Bolio, C. (2018) *Violencia Feminicida.* Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein.

The second work of the series is *Violencia Feminicida* ('Femicide Violence'), which represents one of the cruellest aspects of the Mexican daily life: 'It is a product of human rights violations and can reach homicide and other violent forms of death for women. It is the extreme form of chauvinist violence'. In this drawing, note the absence of colour. This is particularly relevant because Mexico has a very strong visual style in relation to iconic skulls and colourful *catrina* figures.

In this strip, the two skeletons appear humanised. Death says 'my job is very cruel' and appears to feel guilty. Murdering women is not the 'natural job' for Death, but rather of the men who use femicide violence against women. Although Death is commonly represented as the figure who 'takes' life, here it is only as the consequence of men's cruelty to women.

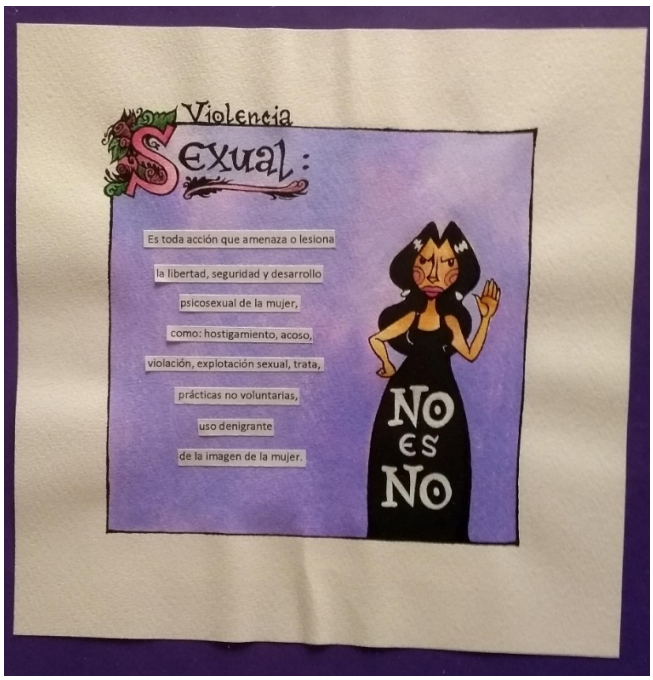


Figure 8. Bolio, C. (2018) *Violencia Sexual.* Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein.

The third work is *Violencia Sexual* ('Sexual violence') and is, probably, the most explicit of the series. The woman standing at the right, dressing in black, has the slogan '*No es no*' (No means no). She is looking at the spectator and holding her hand high up: this is a simulation of face-to-face visual contact and therefore a challenge to an aggressor. The mimesis of face-to-face visual contact (Verón, 1983) has the property of breaking the narrative diegesis (similar to breaking of the fourth wall, in theatre). Secondly, in this operation it is suggested that the spectator has the role of being the sexual aggressor; therefore, especially in the case of male spectators, it will question directly his attitudes and way of being.

In the text, sexual violence is defined as 'every action that threatens or damages the freedom, safety and psychosexual development of women, such as: harassment, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, forced activities, degrading of woman's image'. This is especially important because, as we have seen, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation is kind of generalised violence that most women in Mexico have to face in their daily life.

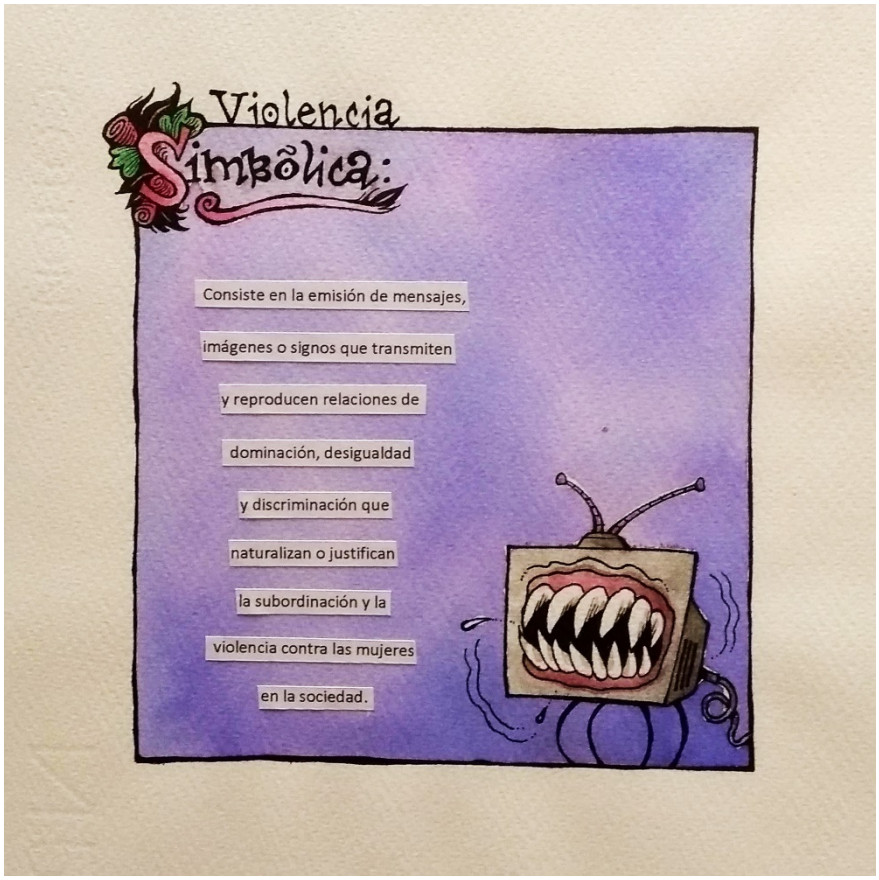


Figure 9. Bolio, C. (2018) *Violencia Simbólica*. Photo credit: Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Rubinstein.

The last work of the series that we analyse is *Violencia Simbólica* ('Symbolic Violence'). This kind of representational violence is defined in the text as 'messages, images or signs that transmit and reproduce relations of domination, inequality, and discrimination, and naturalise or justify the subordination of and violence against women'. The drawing of the television presents a classic figure: a threatening device that represents a menace to women. Its sharps fangs and saliva make it looks like a kind of barking beast, even perhaps a *vagina dentata*. This alludes specifically to the Mexican media context in which the television, magazines and radio spread injurious stereotypical images of women, mostly hyper-sexualised.

CONCLUSION

The work of Cintia Bolio is direct and does not use a complex language: she can make complex themes easy to understand to the broader public. In the comic *Puras Evas*, Bolio exposed the link between the past and the present of women in Mexico through the uses of two narratives that set up a temporal dialogue between them: the official discourse and the political position of the enunciator (Cintia Bolio). In *Rezagos y Rezagos*, she uses the stereotype to emphasise the critical situation that rural Indigenous women suffer when compared to urban women. And last, in the series *Tipos de Violencia Machista*, the uses of the rhetorical figure of the metaphor and the mimesis of face-to-

face visual contact leads the viewer to understanding the different kinds of chauvinistic violence; each type has an image that represents it in a simple and direct way, so it can be understood by the broader public.

The exhibition makes clear and direct links between the history of Mirabal sisters with the current situation of women in Mexico. Among her cartoons, Bolio seeks to publicise the types of violence that continue to exist and why the struggle of the Mirabal sisters leads us to reflection on gender violence in our daily life. This is especially important for women of Latin America, who suffer daily from extensive instances of gender-based harassment and violence. We can also say that it is the first time in Mexico that a museum has used comics as a main tool to disseminate such information amongst the population. A possible reason is that the Museum of Women is looking to attract a younger audience through exhibitions that have graphic narrative. But what was the impact of the exhibition? And what was the target? These are questions that remain for a future prospective analysis. With this first study we also intend to contribute to the visibility of women within the history of the comic.

REFERENCES

Acevedo, M. A. (2012). Una aproximación al cruce entre 'lo popular' y 'lo femenino en las historietas. *Avatares de la Comunicación y la Cultura*, *3*, 4-19.

Alpers, S. (1987). *El Arte de Describir. El arte holandés en el siglo XVII*. Madrid: Hermann Blume.

Aurrecoechea, J. M. and Bartra, A. (1994). *Puros Cuentos III. La historia de la historieta en México 1934-1950*. Grijalbo - Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes: México.

Bartra A. (2013). Lo que va de Borola Tacuche a Simone de Beauvoir. *Revista Cuadrivio*, December 29. Available at: http://cuadrivio.net/dossier/lo-que-va-de-borola-tacuche-a-simone-de-beauvoir (Accessed 10 January 2020).

Bartra, E. (ed.) (2002). *Debates en Torno a una Metodología Feminista*. Ciudad de México: PUEG, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco.

Blancas, E. (2016) Cintia Bolio: 20 años criticando las desigualdades de género a través del cómic. *MujeresNet*. Available at: http://www.mujeresnet.info/2016/10-11/cintia-bolio-20-anios-criticando-desigualdades-de-genero-a-traves-del-comic.html (Accessed: 10 January 2020).

De Villota, P. (ed.) (1998). *Las Mujeres y la Ciudadanía en el Umbral del Siglo XXI*. Madrid: Editorial Complutense.

Galeana Herrera, P. (2015). *Géneros Asimétricos. Representaciones y percepciones del imaginario colectivo. Encuesta Nacional de Género*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

García de León, M. A. (1994). *Élites Discriminadas (Sobre el Poder de las Mujeres)*. Barcelona: Anthropos.

Gómez Gutiérrez, F. (2018). Cómics 'femeninos' y feministas en el México del siglo XX: de la representación a la autodesignación. *Descentrada. Revista insterdisciplinaria de feminismos y género,* 2, (2), e054. Available at: http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art_revistas/pr.8910/pr.8910.pdf. (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Gomez, N. and Lozano, M. (2019) La Descolonización del Discurso Feminista Latinoamericano en (e)stereotipas. *Journal of International Women`s Studies*, *20*(6), 94-110.

Giunta, A. (2018). *Feminismo y Arte Latinoamericano. Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI.

Harding, S. (1987). Is there a feminist method? In Harding, S. (ed.) *Feminism and Methodology* (pp. 1-14), Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Jasso, C. and González, K. (2018). Brechas en la medición de feminicidios en México. *Animal Político*. Available at: https://www.animalpolitico.com/blogueros-causa-en-comun/2018/09/10/brechas-en-la-medicion-de-feminicidios-en-mexico/ (Accessed10 January 2020).

Jelin, E. (2002). *Los Trabajos de la Memoria*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.

Karczewska, A. (2017). The Mirabal sisters and their *testimonio in* Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*. *Crossroads: A Journal of English Studies*, (1), 28-36.

Lagarde, M. (2011). *Los Cautiverios de las Mujeres. Madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*. México: Siglo XXI Editores.

Lizalde, E. (1954). El dibujo y la risa. La caricatura en México, de Rafael Carrasco Puente. *Revista de la Universidad de México*. Available at: https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles-files/4a0052e2-b365-4412-b050-87cef0798a7d (Accessed 11 January 2020).

MacMasters, M. (2000). Nahui Olin se revela caricaturista y pionera del género en México. *La Jornada*. Available at: https://www.jornada.com.mx/2000/04/01/cul1.html (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Martínez Prado, H. (2018). En 25 años van 1,779 feminicidios en Ciudad Juárez. *El Heraldo de México*. Available at: https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/estados/en-25-anos-van-1775-feminicidios-en-ciudad-juarez/ (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Mendoza, J. (2017). To be a woman: Gender and the death of the Mirabal sisters. *Oscillations*, Spring, 49-54.

Medina, F. (2016). Josune Muñoz: 'Debe haber algún filtro para que no se publiquen los materiales que fomentan y glamurizan la violencia contra las mujeres'. *AFCAR Media*. Available at: https://afcarmedia.com/2016/02/21/josune-munoz-debe-haber-algun-filtro-para-que-no-se-publiquen-los-materiales-que-fomentan-y-glamurizan-la-violencia-contra-las-mujeres/ (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Molyneux, M. (2001). *Género y Ciudadanía en América Latina: Cuestiones históricas contemporáneas. Debate feminista* (Vol. 23), 3-66. México: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de Género (CIEG), National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Montes Vázquez, A. (2019) Las reclusas de Santa Martha Acatitla y la caricatura. Entrevista a la historiadora Patricia Galeana. *El regio de Tamaulipas*, 23 de junio. Available at: http://www.elregiodetamaulipas.com/nota.php?idnota=35462&idseccion=5&v=0 (Accessed 10 January 2020).

Murillo, S. (1996). *El Mito de la Vida Privada. De la entrega al tiempo propio*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.

Reina, E. (2018). América Latina, la región más letal para las mujeres. *El País*. Available at: https://elpais.com/sociedad/2018/11/24/actualidad/1543075049_751281.html (Accessed 10 January 2020).

Rubio Castro, A. (1997). *Feminismo y Ciudadanía*. Sevilla: Instituto Andaluz de la Mujer.

Scott, J. (1986). Gender: A useful category of historical analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 9(5), 1053-1075.

Steimberg, O. (2013). *Leyendo Historietas: Textos sobre relatos visuales y humor gráfico*. Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia Editora.

Vega Montiel, A. (2014). Igualdad de género, poder y comunicación: Las mujeres en la propiedad, dirección y puestos de toma de decisión. *Revista de Estudios de Género. La Ventana*, *5*(40), 186-212.

Vélez Bautista, G. (2006). Género y ciudadanía. Las mujeres en el proceso de construcción de ciudadanía. *Espacios Públicos*, *9*(17), 376-390.

Verón, E. (1983). Está ahí, lo veo, me habla. *Revista Comunicativa. Enunciación cinematográfica*, *38*, 90-120.

Verón, E. (1993). *La Semiosis Social. Fragmentos de una teoría de la discursividad*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Vigueras, R. (2012). La historieta pelangocha mexicana: Una aproximación (de ser posible) reivindicativa. *Tebeosfera* (2nd. Ed.), 9, n.p. Available at: https://www.tebeosfera.com/documentos/la_historieta_pelangocha_mexicana_una_aproximacion_de_ser_posible_reivindicativa.html (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Von Rebeur, A. (n.d.) Las mujeres que están dibujadas. *Tebeosfera*. Available at: http://www.tebeosfera.com/1/Seccion/DMH/01/MujeresDibujadas.htm (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Citation: Hernández Nieto, L. N. and Rubinstein, I. F. (2020). The Power of Butterflies: The Legacy of the Mirabal Sisters in an Exhibition by the Mexican Cartoonist Cintia Bolio. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 03. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7907

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 04
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Chicks Attack! Making feminist comics in Latin America

Amadeo Gandolfo [1]*, Pablo Turnes [2]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide insight, through the voices of the participants, on the current state of female comic artists in Argentina. We start with a brief historical overview: what was it like to be a minority in the Argentine comics industry? Historically, female comic creators have occupied a subordinate and even anonymous position in comparison to their male counterparts. However, since the 1980s, the Argentine comics industry has seen a change. This decade saw the appearance of several important women cartoonists in tune with the growing and expansive feminist movement of the 1970s. The tendency of female cartoonists moving to the forefront has grown exponentially over the years and in the last 25 years the number of female cartoonists in Argentina has increased significantly. The years 2015-2019 have seen a huge growth of such discussions and perspectives, coinciding with the birth of the massive *Ni Una Menos* ('Not One Less') feminist movement, which denounces femicides, and with the near-approval of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy law in 2018. This latter process sparked activist collectives such as *Línea Verde* ('Green Line') and *Femiñetas* ('Femignettes') which took upon themselves to raise awareness of the necessity of the IVE (the acronym for Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy in Spanish), among other issues.

Keywords: Argentina, comics, feminism, authorship, engagement

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to reflect on the current state of female comic artists in Argentina. With this in mind, a brief historical review is necessary: what was it like being a female comic author in Argentina during what was known as the 'Golden Age' of the Argentine comics industry (1930-1960)?[1] Historically, female comic creators in Argentina have occupied a subordinate and even anonymous position in comparison to their male counterparts. This mirrors what Trina Robbins has discovered concerning female comics creators in the United States during the Golden Age of comics (Robbins, 2013; Robbins, 2017). Robbins is a major scholar in the branch of comic studies we are attempting to follow here. She started working as a cartoonist in the 1960s, she was active within the underground comix movement, and very critical of the misogynist and sexist attitudes within it. She became very active generating publications and spaces for women cartoonists in the 1970s and 1980s, publishing *Wimmen's Comix*, one of the first anthologies composed entirely of female cartoonists. At the same time, she became an important historian of the form, focusing on the history of women cartoonists in the United States, and releasing several books on the topic. As Robbins has found out, the American comics industry employed women cartoonists since its inception, but they were confined to comics which were 'comparatively light – cute animals and kids, pretty girls without a care in the world, rotund grandmas spouting homespun philosophy' (Robbins, 2013: 64). When Dale Messick started working on Brenda Starr, female reporter, men attacked her because they believed she 'was trespassing on male territory' (Robbins, 2013: 64) by drawing an action strip. This was further discouraged when the Second World War ended:

[1] For further information on how the comics industry originated and developed in Argentina see Vazquez, L. (2009). *El oficio de las viñetas. La industria de la historieta argentina*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

[1] *Assistant Professor for the optional subject 'The B Side of Sociology' at the Sociology Department of the Universidad de Buenos Aires*, ARGENTINA
[2] *Staff Researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Universidad de Buenos Aires*, ARGENTINA
***Corresponding Author:** amdgandolfo@gmail.com

> (…) the kitchen movement took a different form. Although women continued to draw lighter strips throughout the 1950s, the men took back their action strips. (Robbins, 2013: 90)

The result of this process was a progressive disappearance of female authors while comic books became more and more focused on superheroes, erasing prominent female cartoonists from American comics history.

In Argentina, one of the first female authors we have noticed is Ada Lind (Laura Quinterno), the sister of Dante Quinterno (1909-2003), founder of the *Patoruzú* comics empire. Laura Quinterno co-created *El Gnomo Pimentón* ('Paprika the Dwarf') one of Quinterno's lasting properties. She was also the first female author to work on a newspaper comic strip with *Rayito and Clavelina*, which appeared in *El Mundo* newspaper.[2] *Rayito and Clavelina* was a 'cute kids' comic strip in which a brother and a sister had magical adventures in fantasy lands.

In terms of being recognised the landmark female creators who achieved a certain degree of prominence in Argentina during the first five decades of its industry would do so through their association with other, more famous, male cartoonists. Exemplary of this pattern was Cecilia Palacio, the daughter of Lino Palacio (1903-1984). Her father was one of the most recognised cartoonists, with a geometric and elegant style line, creator of a multiplicity of schematic characters (that is, characters with only one or two defining characteristics, which they then repeat incessantly in each strip, and from which stems the humor). Cecilia Palacio was a prominent golf player and had finished her studies at the School of Fine Arts. She began her career inking some strips and after several years, her father ceded her the use and ownership of three of his characters: Ramona (a Spanish maid who understands everything literally), Tarrino (a man with extraordinary luck) and Doña Tremebunda (an impetuous and strong-willed woman). She seemed content with this arrangement and continued her father's creations until 1992, when she retired.

There are a couple of other historical examples we would like to highlight here. One is Martha Barnes, the most important female cartoonist in Editorial Columba's staff.[3] Barnes worked there for decades, since 1949. Columba (1928-2001) was one of the most significant publishing houses of Argentina, noted for its large output of material, and for being the home of Robin Wood, one of Argentina's greatest scriptwriters. She also worked for DC Comics and Eerie Publications, becoming one of the earliest cartoonists from Argentina to work for the U.S. comics industry. Despite this, her name and work do not take center stage in the history of Argentine comics.

Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge the work of Blanca Cotta, a cartoonist who started working in the 1940s but rose to prominence during the 1950s and 1960s. Her work was tied to a singular line of work: illustrated recipes. She wrote simple but fun and hearty recipes for the modern woman,[4] and accompanied them with her marvellous line work and cartoony characters. Cotta illustrated hundreds of recipes in a striking step-by-step style (which was also a panel-by-panel layout), which endeared her to children and mothers everywhere in Argentina. However, her work is often forgotten when talking about comics, not only because of her gender, but also because of the content of the culinary comics she did, which were traditionally considered the territory of women and girls, unfit to belong to the same class as the great action and adventure comics which were produced by men.

Since the 1980s, however, things have changed a bit in the Argentine comics industry. That decade saw the appearance of several important women cartoonists in tune with the growing and expansive feminist movement of the 1970s. We can mention artists such as Patricia Breccia, Maitena Burundarena, Cristina Breccia, Petisuí (Alicia Guzmán) and María Alcobre. The process through which more female creators have entered the comics industry has grown exponentially over the years and in the last 25 years the number of female cartoonists in Argentina has increased significantly.[5]

---

[2] *El Mundo* was published between 1928 and 1967. It was one of the most popular tabloid-size morning newspapers in Argentina throughout its history. Editorial Haynes, its publishing house, also owned a radio and several magazines with a wide circulation.

[3] Barnes was not the only one, but she certainly was the most prominent. Other female authors who worked for Editorial Columba include artists Laura Gulino, Idelba Lidia Dapueto, Noemí Noel, Gisela Dester and Lucía Vergani and scriptwriter Francina Siquier. Their contributions to Argentine comics have been scarcely analysed, and a serious work of research concerning their body of work is long overdue.

[4] Cotta belonged to a new generation of cooks who prized quickness and effectiveness over a traditional version of womanhood. They replaced the complicated and time-consuming recipes of Petrona Carrizo de Gandulfo – a famous cook who hosted radio and a TV shows between the 1930s and the 1980s, with recipes that took into account the fact that many mothers were now working mothers who had to juggle a career alongside kids and marriage.

[5] A good way to represent this pictorially is the timeline the Chicks on Comics collective put together for their exhibition at Proa in 2017. If you see the first rings of the timeline, which cover the period 1900 –1950, only a handful of names appear. But when we move closer to the present day, the allotted space for names is barely capable of containing the number of women cartoonists. This timeline has been expanded into a full-fledged investigation and exhibition soon to open in Buenos Aires by Mariela Acevedo, a researcher from Argentina, who is also a cartoonist and editor responsible for *Clítoris* Magazine, one of the most interesting queer/feminist publications of late in Argentina.

This growth has expressed itself in the publication of several works by women cartoonists, but also in different initiatives which aim to group the artists and gain strength from numbers. A good example of this phenomenon can be found in *Clítoris* magazine. Edited by Mariela Acevedo, *Clítoris* published four issues between 2011 and 2012 and later converted itself into a series of anthologies (there have been two of these so far) published by Hotel De Las Ideas. The magazine took a decisive political position regarding feminism and intersectionality: there are comics and articles by trans people as well as cis women in both magazines and anthologies.

The growth of female comic creators has had the additional positive consequence of allowing other gender minorities to start producing their own comics. Nowadays, the feminist comics scene in Argentina is positively intersectional. This is reflected, for example, in the mission statement and scope of the *¡Vamos Las Pibas!* ('Go Girls') festival. A manifesto printed on a zine edited by Agustina Casot, the organiser of the festival, reads:

> We girls can write, we can draw, and we can do it however we please. That's why we aim to remove prejudices over the themes and styles of comics made by women, lesbians, transvestites and trans women. (Casot, 2018, 22)

This is also present in the way minority creators have reclaimed genres usually reserved for men, such as adventure, action, and superheroes, and diversified them, making them a vehicle for telling other types of stories which express their interests and experiences.

The years 2015–2019 have seen a huge growth of such discussions and perspectives, coinciding with the birth of the massive *Ni Una Menos* ('Not one less') feminist movement, which denounces femicides, which has been defined by Diana Russell and Jane Caputi, as an extreme in a continuum of abuse towards females and feminised bodies (Caputi and Russell, 1993: 424–426). In 2012 the Argentine legal system incorporated a modification which included the figure of gender violence and femicide, although not as a separate criminal offense, but as an aggravating circumstance concerning homicides.[6] This modification, which was the result of the prolonged struggle of several organisations of civil society, introduced the concept into mainstream discussion and helped to raise awareness about the issue, something which sparked the *Ni Una Menos* movement.[7] Nevertheless, the problem is far from solved: looking at the official statistics up to June 2019 there were 133 femicides in Argentina, at a rate of one every 24 hours.[8]

The other important event was the near approval of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy law in 2018. This latter process, which saw thousands of women in the streets during each day of debate in the Congress, sparked a couple of collectives which took upon themselves to raise awareness of the necessity of the IVE (the acronym for Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy in Spanish). One was *Línea Verde* ('Green Line'), a collective of illustrators and cartoonists who uploaded images to a common Instagram and Facebook accounts. Another was *Superheroes for Legal Abortion*, in which several cartoonists drew their favourite characters sporting the green handkerchief which is the movement's symbol.

Festivals focused on women and queer creators have also sprung up. The most noteworthy amongst them is *¡Vamos Las Pibas!* ('Go Girls!'), originally headed by Agustina Casot and Andrea Guzmán, in which all the expositors are female or queer, and which saw a huge success during its first iterations. The festival also spawned a catalogue called *Pibas* ('Girls'), published in 2019 by Hotel de las Ideas. This catalogue gathers 22 authors with wildly differing styles.

Finally, we can also mention *Femiñetas* ('Femignettes'), an 'illustrated feminist newspaper' according to its creator, Rosario Coll, who was born in Rosario (Argentina) and is currently living in Barcelona. The newspaper gathers contributors from both sides of the Atlantic and is a hub of discussion and exchange between Spanish and Argentine feminism. Two issues have been already published, while a third is currently in preparation.

This timeline, captured sequentially, does not presume to be an exhaustive enumeration of all the initiatives, collectives, artists and publications which currently discuss feminine, feminist and queer representation in Argentine comics. It is meant merely as a brief overview. To better understand the current situation in this article, concerning female creators of comic books in Argentina, we approached a varied group of female comic book authors and asked them about several aspects of their work: their connection with feminism and queer sexualities, the importance of collaboration in comics creation, the techniques they use, the topics they discuss in their comics, their influences and the way these influences connect to a wider history of female comics artists in Argentina. We

[6] "El femicidio ahora ya es ley", Página/12, 15/11/2012, recovered from: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/sociedad/3-207885-2012-11-15.html

[7] The touchstone for this movement was a massive march on June 3rd 2015, which took place in 80 different cities around Argentina, including the capital, Buenos Aires. The objective was to denounce femicides and demand authorities to take actions to prevent the high murder rate that affected women in particular. The movement quickly become an international phenomenon and has inspired similar movements in most Latin American countries, Europe and Asia.

[8] "Aumento de femicidios", Página/12, 31/05/2019, recovered from: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/197292-aumento-de-femicidios

spoke with the Argentine members of the international comics collective Chicks on Comics (Clara Lagos, Caro Chinaski and Delius [María Delia Lozupone]), with Sukermercado [Paula Boffo], and with Paula Sosa Holt. Our interviews were held in different bars in the city of Buenos Aires and they were conducted in an informal manner. We decided to group the interviews according to several topics which appeared consistently across them: the beginnings of the interviewees' involvement with comics (or, in the case of Chicks on Comics, their inception as a group); the networks of sociability established by the artists; their relationship with the feminist movement and ideas; how they handle their craft and the creative decisions they take; and, finally, how their works are dialoguing with pre-existing genres of comics.

Mariela Acevedo, in a landmark article, reconstructed the two main lines of enquiry concerning women in comics, extrapolating them from a broader feminist cultural criticism approach:

> (…) the first one is that which analyzes the images of women (in TV, in novels, in art history and, here, in comics). The second, also known as gynocriticism, looks, in the production of authors, the traces of female experience. (Acevedo, 2016: 177–207)

We will not analyse the textual images of women here. Rather, we aim to give voice to the artist protagonists and let them narrate their own experiences. In this respect, our approach is closer to gynocriticism, but rather than trying to interpret their experience ourselves, we believe their own narration of events and ideas to be more important.

THE INTERVIEWS

First of all, we have Chicks on Comics, a comics collective founded in 2008 with the aim of establishing a dialogue between comic book artists living in different parts of the world. The original idea was concocted by Powerpaola [Paola Gaviria] and Joris Bas Backer, and since its inception the group has opened its doors to several artists from a wide array of countries: Caro Chinaski, Clara Lagos, Sole Otero and Delius [Argentina]; Lilli Loge and Ulla Loge [Germany], Maartje Schalkx [Netherlands], Chiquinha [Fabiane Langona, from Brazil], Weng Pixin [Singapore] and Julia Homersham [UK]. Currently, the group is composed of Bas Backer [Netherlands], Powerpaola [Ecuador], Zane Zlemesa [Latvia] and the aforementioned Caro Chinaski, Clara Lagos, Delius, and Weng Pixin.

This diverse collective works in a variety of styles and engages in long-distance conversations between the artists, which are then posted to Tumblr (http://chicksoncomics.tumblr.com/). They have organised several exhibitions of their work. The most important one was held at Proa Foundation in La Boca (Buenos Aires) between January and February 2017. This was a landmark exhibition, since it was held at one of the most noteworthy contemporary art spaces in the city of Buenos Aires, it gave the collective a greater notoriety in mainstream media, in addition to the variety of materials and styles employed by the artists. They have also published several fanzines and magazines of their work. In 2018, the collective won the II Iberoamerican Cities Graphic Novel Award with their book *Las Ciudades Que Somos* ('The Cities We Are'). Secondly, Paula Sosa Holt comes from the world of illustration. She started making comics with her daily strip *Pip and Pep*, a one panel strip that humorously delves into the life of a couple somewhere between their twenties and their thirties. She followed this up with *Vainilla Kids*, a strip telling the adventures of a trio of slacker friends (one of whom is a cat), who like to drink beer, watch TV and smoke pot. She has also illustrated *Escuela Pública de Animales* ('Public School for Animals'), a children's book written by Malena Fainsod. Finally, Paula Boffo, also known by her *nom de plume* Sukermercado, is an impressive new voice on the Argentine comics scene. A member of the comic workshop given by comics artist Fernando Calvi in Buenos Aires, Sukermercado is also a student of animation and budding author. She has participated and edited the anthology *Telecomics*, which houses the productions of several students from Calvi's workshop. In 2017 she won one of the awards given by the Editorial Municipal de Rosario in their LGTBI contest with her comic *Fabulosa El Dorado* ('Fabulous El Dorado'), which tells the story of a young man who connects emotionally with a trans woman. Last year she published *La Sombra Del Altiplano* ('Shadow of the Plateau'), a revenge story starred by a *kolla* (a young native woman from Northwest Argentina) who rescues her sister from a prostitution ring. She also published *Si Mojás Me Enciendo* ('I get Turned on if You Wet Me') a romantic porno-queer comic.

We chose these artists because we believe each of them represented an important development concerning women and graphic narratives in Argentina. Chicks on Comics highlights the importance of collaborative action, something which has structured many of the initiatives undertaken by female creators struggling for visibility. Moreover, as the first all-female collective in Argentina, Chicks on Comics trail-blazed a path which many artists are now traversing. Finally, Chicks on Comics also highlights the importance of transnational collaboration, and

the decentring of discussions from the national sphere to analyse the same topics from a wide variety of perspectives.

Paula Sosa Holt, on the other hand, represents the hybridity of influences and media which is present nowadays in Argentine comics production: coming from the world of illustration and kids' books, Sosa Holt mixes these inspirations with a style that owes a lot to recent indie comics from the United States, Canada and Australia, to produce strips which appeal to long-standing readers of comics and to newer readers who discover them through social media. The social media presence of Sosa Holt is also a big part of her success: she currently has around forty-thousand followers on Instagram, something unprecedented for an Argentine comics creator. This points toward the way changes in technology have made it easier for diverse voices to emerge.

Finally, Sukermercado [Paula Boffo] is part of a wave of new queer voices in the Argentine comics scene, and as such her comics take part – more than any other treated here – in the discussions regarding gender identity, transgender rights, bisexuality and homosexuality. Furthermore, Boffo mixes these topics with pre-existing narrative genres (action movies, porn) which usually have been associated to male toxicity. Through this operation she decentres and recovers these genres for a different, diverse audience and injects her works in the long-standing debate about representation in media.

The following sections will be a series of interviews with the above-mentioned artists. We hope these interviews will show how the experience of being a minority comic creator in Argentina has changed with time; how feminist theory and politics impacted on their work; how they relate to the traditions of Argentine comics; and how they approach their work from an ideological standpoint but, also, from a craft standpoint.

BEGINNINGS

How did the Chicks on Comics project come about?

Maria Delia Lozupone [Delius]: "In 2008 [Power] Paola and Joris [Bas Backer] met in Paris because they had both won the same scholarship. Talking in a bar, they came up with the idea of founding a collective with the objective of raising awareness about the work of female cartoonists, because they thought it was something that was sorely needed. They divided the task of gathering artists; Paola did it with the Spanish-speaking side: Sole Otero, Clara Lagos and I. Joris contacted two German colleagues, Lilli and Ulla Loge, and Maartje Schalkx, a classmate of hers in the art school in the Netherlands, who at that point was living in England."

Caro Chinaski: "Back then Sole, Paola, Clara and I shared a space in the blog *Historietas Reales*."[9]

And what was the first thing you did?

Delius: "First we opened a blog, in September 2008. It was there that the conversations between Paola and Joris started and the dynamic settled in: we had to answer with a panel to the panel that came before. Two years later, in 2010, we put together the first show in LDF Gallery, in San Telmo [Buenos Aires]. It consisted of the first 100 panels with an English translation below."

Why did you choose the format of a conversation in panels?

Clara Lagos: "What was attractive for us at the beginning was to see what people that hailed from very different places thought about a common topic. One of us threw a subject on the table and we started contributing that way, each one from her own corner of the planet. When we started inviting people, our criterion was that they should always come from a different part of the world."

Delius: "When we were discussing abortion, Weng Pixin said that in Singapore abortion was legal."

Clara Lagos: "Or in the Netherlands, where it's legal since 1986. At some other point in time we started discussing gentrification. For those of us who lived in Berlin it was a thing, and for those of us, in Buenos Aires, it didn't mean anything. There was a huge cultural difference… I must confess that at some point in time I didn't know what I was doing in Chicks on Comics because it was so hard for me to explain complex issues in just one panel."

Caro Chinaski: "Anyway, that was also an excuse to produce material that could be publishable. Some of those dialogues ended up appearing as a fanzine."

Delius: "That was a natural step, from digital to paper. We must also take into account that we did it in a blog, which requires very little investment. We used the social networks, and the production that first appeared there naturally passed onto paper. But that happened a while after we started."

[9] *Historietas Reales* [Real Comics] was one of the most important comics' creators' collectives of Argentina. Hosted in a blog roughly between the years 2005 and 2009, the aim was to upload a daily page of autobiographical comics, each day by a different author. The collective, which originally was composed only of Argentine authors, grew to include artists from Bolivia, Uruguay and Colombia and produced an astounding amount of material.

Figure 1. 'Chicks on Comics' from *Chicks on Comics* Tumblr site. Chicks on Comics (2015). © Ulla Logue, Caro Chinaski, Delius, Powerpaola.

Tell us about your beginnings as a cartoonist.

Paula Sosa Holt: "My relationship with comics started because of my love of drawing. When I was younger, I had the utopian idea that I wanted to illustrate books' covers. It's something I really like. In fact, I have done it recently with some poetry books. I like the idea that you can sum up the concepts inside a book in an image. Then I discovered children's illustration. I studied in Sótano Blanco ('White Basement') and I loved it, I never abandoned it."

What was your first comics job?

Paula Sosa Holt: "While I was studying children's illustration, at the same time, I don't know why, I started to study comics with Mariano Díaz Prieto, in his workshop which is called *El Gato Verde* ('The Green Cat'). He proposed to me to do one strip a day, and I realised that I found it quite easy. I took everyday dialogues and illustrated them. I also joined Powerpaola's workshop on autobiographical comics. When I showed her what I had done, she asked me why I didn't upload it somewhere. I wasn't so sure. Her advice was for me to start showing my work, so I did it from my Instagram account. But it meant exposing myself and that frightened me a little."

Until then, what was your relationship to comics? Did you use to read them?

Paula Sosa Holt: "I am not a great reader of comics, I always found them too expensive… I read quite a bit in digital format, but I like books, I like to have a lot of books. I have a lot of children's books."

But children's books are expensive…

Paula Sosa Holt: "Back then not so much, because I had a friend who worked at Rivadavia Park[10] who got me children's books at half price. I bought like four books a week, even some I didn't like so much, but I studied the techniques. I was interested in children's literature by itself. When they ask me about comics influences, I don't know what to say. I like to read them, but I don't feel they have a direct influence on my work. I'm more influenced by cinema, especially the mumblecore genre, conceptually speaking. I like the dialogues they have, which are generally improvised, and their idea of the everyday."

You started making comics at Fernando Calvi's workshop?

Sukermercado: "Actually, I made comics before that, when I was a teen. And when I was younger too, I did them for myself. When I was about 12, a friend would write the scripts and I'd draw on A4 sheets. But I didn't dare to make my own fanzines; I thought that, in order to make comics, I had to write a super formal script. I used to go into the internet and look up tutorials on how to do it, I didn't understand a thing! They spoke about the Marvel Method and stuff like that and I'd think 'What is this!? I'll never be able to make it!'"

I felt that I didn't know how to write, because I had always drawn, so when I tried, I couldn't make it or I didn't like what came out. That's when I contacted Fernando [Calvi], in order to start a scripting workshop, but there were no more places. So, I signed up for the full comics workshop and I started writing more and to work as a full-fledged author. Once the wheel was a bit more oiled, it started moving and it kept on going by itself. I just finished a comic and I'm already thinking about the next three I want to make."

And what was your relationship with Argentine comics?

Sukermercado: "I started to know Argentine comics when I started attending Calvi's workshop. Once in a while I'd buy *Fierro*[11], some things I liked and others I found heinous. I liked what Calvi, Lucas Varela, Gato Fernández and Ignacio Minaverry did; authors who have something to do with what I do. But it was through the workshop and through the talks we had there that I started shyly going to events and then the enormous tsunami of Argentine comics broke over me. Before that I just knew the more mainstream stuff, like Liniers [Ricardo Siri] or Kioskerman [Pablo Holmberg], whom I really liked because it was like Liniers but different [laughs]. In fact, I named myself Sukermercado in part because of the pseudonym Kioskerman, I wanted a nom de plume kind of like that. I was 15 when I made it up. My last name has nothing to do with Suko, in high school they called me Suki, playing with it I arrived at Sukermercado because of the band, Supermerk2[12]. Between that and Kioskerman, I thought it was a cool name [laughs]. I feel it has a "sudaca" feel I like and I think of it as part of my identity. Even though my family comes from Italy, I'm here and I live here and these are my circumstances, so I feel impacted by South America. Although my roots come from elsewhere, I identify with this place."

SOCIABILITY

When you started, did you notice any kind of response? When did you start to feel like a collective?

Delius: "I think the first exhibition was really important. There are some videos where you can see the public and there are people whom I didn't know at the time and who went to the show anyway. There were a lot of blogs at that moment, it was before social networks, contacts were made by inviting people whose blogs you followed. We made a big open call around the topic of love and many people collaborated. It was included in the exhibition as a part made exclusively by invitees. There were around 40 pieces of work from different countries. In retrospective, we lead off the game and we realised that we were all reading each other. From the first moment that was present: to show our work and to see the work of others. Then came the exhibition at PROA [Foundation], which was a breakthrough and gave us a lot of visibility, but it also wore us down."

Clara Lagos: "We made other shows before, like the 2011 one in Colombia, in Manizales. We were struck by the cultural differences there. Colombia is a really sexist country and that showed when girls came up to us to tell us 'I'm going to draw too!' For us it was something of a common thing, why wouldn't they draw? That was really good, because they saw the exhibition and we got close with people who really needed it. We organised a fanzine

[10] Parque Rivadavia is a popular park located in the district of Caballito, in the city of Buenos Aires. It's there where the commerce of used books and magazines can be found.

[11] *Fierro* magazine is one of the most important anthology comics magazines from Argentina. Its first run lasted from 1984 to 1992 and is fondly remembered by local comics fans because of the quality of the material they choose to print and for being the first home of many important works by Alberto, Enrique and Patricia Breccia, Carlos Trillo, José Muñoz, Carlos Sampayo et al. The second run took place from 2006 to 2019 and showcased a younger generation of cartoonists alongside some classics.

[12] A notorious *cumbia villera* ('cumbia from the slums') band from the early 2000s.

workshop with Camila Torre Notari and we had girls who couldn't believe that they could do something like that. There were some male colleagues who wouldn't speak to me, for example.

And, on the other hand, in 2013 we went to Berlin thanks to a scholarship. And when we were there, I was the one asking if we could do this or that [laughs]. To make a fanzine you could go to a copy shop where you could find any kind of paper you wanted, in any type of colour you wanted. You could drink tea while working. You designed your stuff on a computer and sent it to print directly. It was paradise for a fanzine maker!"

It always grabbed my attention the way you work as an open collective. There are regular members, but others come and go, they change. How do you handle those porous borders?

Delius: "I don't know if they are so porous… [laughs]. The idea of an invited author was present from the beginning, but we always proposed a certain topic to them."

Caro Chinaski: "So, they don't do whatever they want [laughs]."

Delius: "There is a fixed staff, the people who keep the project going, the ones who are active. That group has had changes in personnel, it was something that evolved naturally, according to the circumstances each of us found ourselves in. When someone feels that she can't or doesn't want to continue, she can leave and then we decide if we incorporate someone else."

Caro Chinaski: "It depends on how much you can commit yourself. What happened to me was that at some point in time I couldn't handle anything, so I left because I wasn't offering the group what the group needed from me.

For me there's this image, of a small steep hill, and if someone stops because her leg is hurting, then there are two or three others that help her continue. It's like a living thing that moves in one direction, and when someone falls because she becomes less interested, or because of time or strength constraints, everyone else pushes her forward."

Delius: "There's something really loving in the group. The girls sent me a message urging me to participate in the book [*Las Ciudades Que Somos*, their latest graphic novel], they told me that I couldn't be absent. And perhaps that's what I needed, to be pushed a little. Partners exist not only to tell you 'we have to do this, we have to do this other thing,' but also to lovingly include you. Amongst the ones that live nearby and with whom there's fluid contact, there's also a friendship. And that is also a double-edged sword. A group is not necessarily the sum of our individualities, but it has a group identity. We're not a band where each one of us just plays an instrument, we all have our solos."

Clara Lagos: "We're a music festival! [laughs]"

Delius: "It's like a jam session."

How did you enter the comics and fanzine circuit?

Paula Sosa Holt: "When I was studying at Sótano Blanco I met two girls - Titihoon and Erika Coello – with whom we decided to put together a drawing group. We got together once a week to draw. That helped me to get close to fanzines, because when you're alone is harder to muster the courage to enter that scene. And that was good, suddenly we were twelve people getting together each Tuesday and making fanzines. We put together a show and that's how we became a bit more known. Afterwards the group dissolved, but each of us remained in the scene."

What is it about relationships that attracts you? I see it a lot in your work: friendships, couples…

Paula Sosa Holt: "I think relationships interest me because one works with what one is closer to, and when I'm interested in something, I pay a lot of attention. When I was doing *Pip and Pep*, the dialogues with my partner gave me a lot of material. Then I started to pay attention to dialogues with friends and so on. What I make is related to what I'm paying attention to at the time."

Would you say you are a pessimist or an optimist when it comes to human relationships?

Paula Sosa Holt: "[Thinks] I don't know how to answer that… what does it mean to be an optimist regarding a relationship?"

There are 'people persons', people who like to be surrounded by other people; and people who don't. Your strips make me feel like you are a really sociable person.

Paula Sosa Holt: "I like to engage one-on-one. I feel really uncomfortable in group situations, I feel like I can't relax. That's why I like couples' conversations, because I feel like I'm myself."

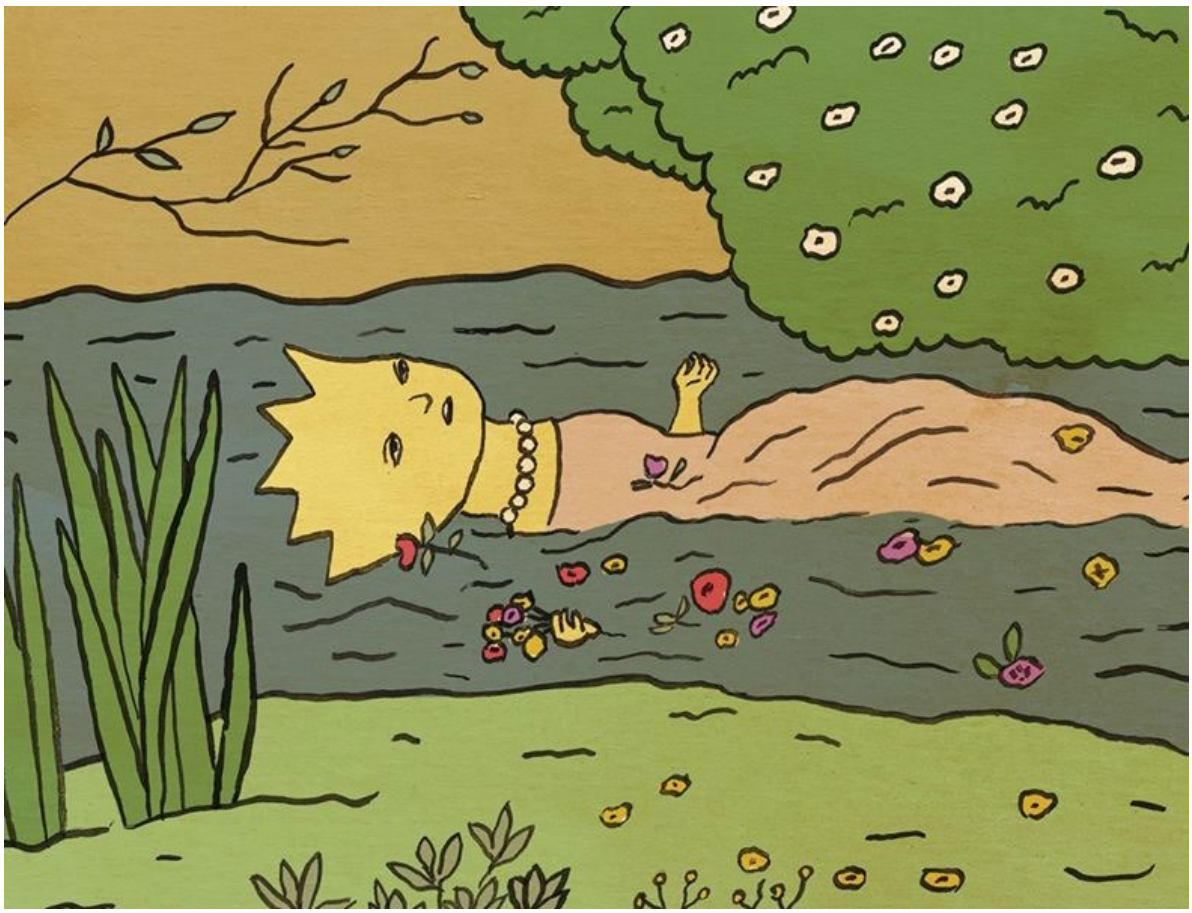


Figure 2. *La Depresión de Lisa.* Paula Sosa Holt (2016). © Paula Sosa Holt

And there are the animals too, like in ***Vainilla Kids*** *where the cat acts as a sort of go-between amongst the humans.*

Paula Sosa Holt: "I still don't understand that. I don't know what's my thing with anthropomorphic animals. I have two cats and I love them… That's why Mugre is human, but is a cat also, and behaves like a cat."

You started making comics having no previous relationship with the tradition of Argentine comics.

Sukermercado: "Tradition is something I couldn't care less about… It's okay, but we're in 2019 and there are other things going on. I have to live in this moment. Obviously it's cool to know where we come from, as to have a better understanding of the present, but you have articles saying that everything died in 2001. Mister, let me invite you to the *¡Vamos Las Pibas!* festival, and then see all that women have been doing lately, like erotic and porn comics… We've done a lot of work! And that's just mentioning women, we have men too. I think I was lucky to enter the field at this moment, in a pack with other women, with queer people, this field which was a bit inhospitable if you were a woman, if you were bisexual. There are people with different identities leaving a mark, a lot of very talented people, a lot of people who are just starting. Younger people, experimenting with new ideas, new questions. That's attractive and it makes me feel more comfortable."

Does that mean that when you started you weren't comfortable?

Sukermercado: "When I started, I realised all of this was happening. When I started attending Calvi's workshop the only other woman there, besides me, was Dani Arias. I sat next to her, we started talking and we became friends almost immediately. She was a part of the In Bocca al Lupo studio, and I went with them to my first *Crack Bang Boom*[13] in 2016, I was kind of an adopted child. I didn't understand a thing! They told me Juan Saénz Valiente[14] was there and I hadn't read any of his stuff, I didn't know him. Or I ran into Sole Otero and I didn't know who she was either. So, I dived in and all this new material started coming up. I think this is related with the current social and political context, a moment in which feminism is super strong, where queer sexualities are bringing a lot of topics to the table, right in the middle of a political moment in which the right is on the rise."

[13] One of the biggest comics' conventions in Argentina, held annually in the city of Rosario (Province of Santa Fe) since 2010.
[14] Comics creator responsible for *La Sudestada*, one of the more lauded graphic novels of 2015.

Figure 3. 'Fabulosa El Dorado' from *Historietas LGBTI*. Sukermercado (2017). © Paula Boffo

FEMINISM

Do you feel that the development of the feminist struggle has modified the topics you deal with as an artists' collective? Or did you align yourselves with those topics naturally?

Delius: "I think there's been a mixture of things: our work changed in a natural way. But not only what I do with Chicks on Comics, all my work. Before I make an affirmation, or a joke, or some drawing – and here we should ask ourselves if we're not losing a degree of spontaneity in some things – I think about what I want to say, what the content will be, making an effort so it doesn't affect my outlook so much. After all, if I want to speak about romantic love, although now it's considered old fashioned, I can say 'I believe in romantic love.' Just because we're feminists it doesn't mean that we're going to say that it doesn't exist anymore. We have a lot of freedom to talk and to carry out our conversations, but we can't be ignorant of certain things, we're not going to play dumb. If a law against abortion comes up, we will say something if we have something to say and if we want to do it. But perhaps we're not like other, more head-on collectives aiming for a clash. We have an artier side."

Clara Lagos: "Perhaps that was what Maartje, who left recently, didn't like so much: she needed a more outspoken, committed group. Perhaps I do it without realising it, because I don't set out to talk about these topics. But that's my way. Perhaps Maartje hoped we would speak more directly about abortion and other topics."

Caro Chinaski: "I think it all has to do with flexibility: if one of us wants to bring up those topics she can do it and we discuss it amongst ourselves because it has a place in what we do; the one that doesn't want to talk about them doesn't have to. Perhaps Maartje's need back then was for all of us to head in the same direction, and that was something that had never happened to us. We have always accompanied each other, but each of us goes down their own path; we listen to each other to know what the other person, who's not me, is thinking."

I wanted to ask you about your relationship to the history of comics. What effects did it have on you the making of the history spiral [during the Proa exhibition]? Did that reconfigure your relationship to comics and its history and allowed you to recover part of that submerged history?

Clara Lagos: "To see it written on the wall was shocking. The more we thought about it, more names started to appear."

Delius: "We looked it up in the internet and then we double checked the information. We had help from Judith Gociol.[15] While we talked, we started to realise that many women had been through the same things we had. It's related to our identity as women cartoonists. That's why the act of writing those names on the wall was so significative, it meant we were leaving a mark. And to leave a space also, so names that were left out could be incorporated later. In relation to the future, the repercussions are unexpected, we opened a door and anyone who wants to come in can do it."

What's your political position as an author of comics?

Paula Sosa Holt: "I've now started making strips which I consider are feminist, but until recently I felt like, even though I'm feminist, I wasn't going to touch those subjects. It always seemed more important to have a story in which the topic could be touched upon although it wasn't at the centre of it all, to have something in the comic which was more than just the issue I was discussing. Making a feminist pamphlet in the shape of a comic doesn't interest me.

I was recently invited to participate in *Femiñetas*, it's a publication directed by a woman from Rosario [Florencia Coll] who lives in Barcelona and, as part of her thesis in Communication Studies, she put together a feminist journal. It's distributed in Argentina and Barcelona. I published a *Vainilla Kids* strip in the first issue and for the next one I put together something made especially for the newspaper. That gave me the impulse to start making strips that touch upon topics such as jealousy and the deconstruction of jealousy. The idea is that each strip talks about an aspect of life we should deconstruct, and to make it accessible to everyone. For that approach to work, I find it's key to speak in first person, rather than to point with your finger in an accusatory manner."

I think what you say it's really interesting, because the problem is how to escape the obvious, which is also the easiest thing to make and say. Especially if you think that this will appear in social networks, which always risk looking for the easy like.

Paula Sosa Holt: "There's a formula, I think, that's widely used, and which consists in putting a sexist guy saying something and right next to him the author as a character correcting him. That is useful for reaching a larger audience, but I don't know if that's what I want… I want to say something I like. I can't do something I'm not comfortable with, I need it to be good for me."

[15] Researcher on comics from Argentina and one of the people responsible for the Archive of Comics and Graphic Humor held at the National Library of Argentina.

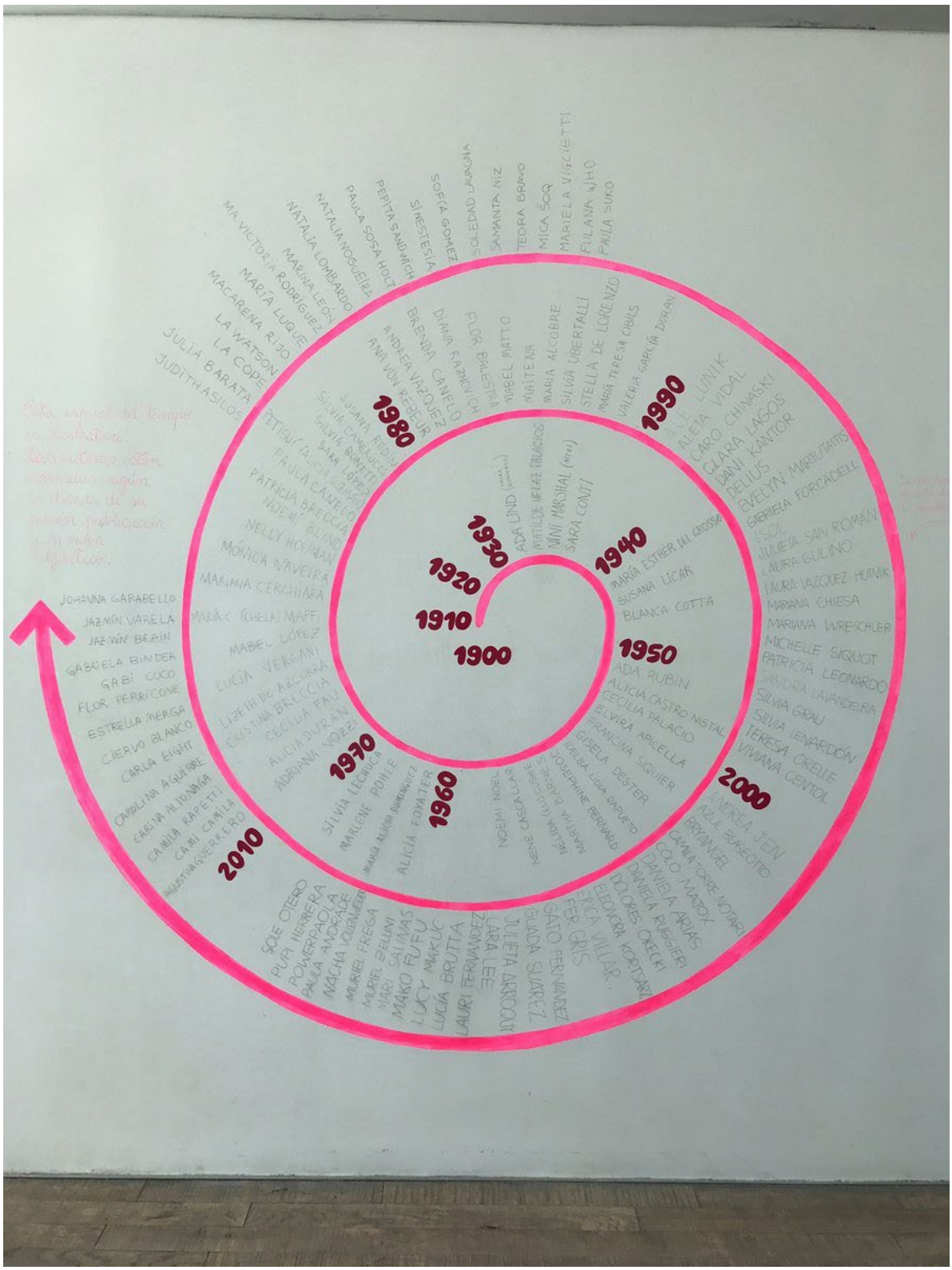


Figure 4. 'History Spiral' from *Chicks on Comics* exhibition at PROA, Buenos Aires. Chicks on Comics (2017). © Chicks on Comics.

I wanted to ask you about your porno works: the first one I saw was the one you exhibited at the Recoleta Cultural Centre [in the exhibition Deseo y Problemas] and I liked it a lot. It was a story I hadn't seen before, for sure not in comics, and neither in mainstream porn. When you make things like that, are you thinking about your own desire? Or in the desire of people you know? How do you choose which things to show?

Sukermercado: "What I did for *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo* was to take the same protagonist of that story you mention, because I love that character. In this story, I show a weaker side of her. There's a structure that is like a

Figure 5. *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo*. Sukermercado (2017). © Paula Boffo.

romantic story with an underlying porn structure: she can fuck everyone, but she finds a trans boy that she likes and she gets nervous, clumsy, she runs into him when she's in her pyjamas buying stuff at the supermarket. Things like that.

I did it taking inspiration from my own desire, because I felt that if I didn't do it like that it wouldn't be sincere. I believe that the personal is political, and I also believe that the personal is filled with shortcomings that, many times, go against what you believe. We shouldn't punish ourselves for being unable to instantaneously fulfil the model of deconstruction we are creating, because each of us has its own times and paths. In the porn story there were many points of view that were my own, but told from a sensitive side. There's a B plot about a girl who has a violent boyfriend, it doesn't have the prominence the other story has, but it's there because I want to talk about

that. What do we do when something like that happens to one of our friends? How do we tell him or her that that person is bad for him or her? I chose to do it from the sincerest place possible. Because I'm a woman and because of the way we are raised, there are things that I believed were the norm until a few years ago. For example, when a sexual partner wants to negotiate with you about the use of condoms. I thought that was normal and I was going to have to put up with it. But that shouldn't be normal. Or the fact that our own pleasure isn't taken into account in a sexual encounter with a man. That's the consequence of a porn sex education. The man comes and the scene is over. Why? If there are two people involved… or more [laughs] They teach you that things are like that and that's it. That's why we should all make a communitarian effort to demolish these ideas by sharing data and teaching each other. After that, if someone else reads something into it, that happens because the work is no longer mine. I own up to what I did, but I can't avoid if someone reads something in a way I did not intend. I prefer for that to happen than for the piece of work to not exist."

Since you are a part of it, and there are more women cartoonists than ever, how do you consider the relationship between the medium and language of comics and feminism?

Sukermercado: "I believe that we, as people who produce fictions and content, have a responsibility. All my life I noticed that there is a certain recurrence of certain leads and main characters. We've all seen those stories that can't pass the Bechdel Test. None pass the Bechdel test! It has to do with representation. There are voices that come from other places so you can't avoid it if they bring other narratives. They speak about other realities, there are privileges these voices don't have; therefore, there are things that are coming to light, that I don't know if they necessarily are thought from a theoretical feminist perspective, but rather have to do with being honest with what we are narrating, to speak from our point of view. Unavoidably, that can be constructed as a feminist perspective, I don't have any problem with it because I identify as feminist. What comics I have done were done because I needed to tell those things in order for those stories to exist, rather than thinking about them just as feminist comics.

I think that's something that's happening a lot with the current comics production: we need to tell certain stories because otherwise you can't find them. It's what Luciano Vecchio did with *Sereno*: he wanted an openly queer superhero, so he had to create it. I would have loved to read something similar to what I create now when I was 16, when I watched gore movies and I was obsessed with that ultraviolent style. When those films or comics were over, I had to say: 'it's great but it's super sexist.' So, it's about that, to explore genres and narratives from another place of enunciation and to question them, just like porn. If I do porn, since I am a bisexual woman, inevitably it will imply another discourse because I live and have lived different realities."

That's really cool, because, for example, porn fulfils a pedagogical role in the sense that it teaches you how sex works, mechanically speaking. But the idea of affection is completely outside of its discourse. The consequences of having sex with someone are never present.

Sukermercado: "I've just finished a workshop where we studied the history of porn. The genre is so wide as to be practically immeasurable. But right in the middle of it there's the mistreatment and objectification in mainstream porn that was introduced in the 1970s, when sexist and normative rules of desire were imposed. I documented myself for *Si Me Mojás*... I had to see pictures of pussies because it's not enough to know how my vagina looks like, or how the dicks I know look like. I have to know how a skin folds or how a tit falls; how to draw a fat body or how the tit of a trans woman looks like. I don't know, so I have to research, or to ask the trans people I know where to look, where I can find real bodies that aren't aestheticised or standardised towards a mainstream model."

CRAFT

How did you decide what to do for ***Las Ciudades Que Somos****?*

Delius: "Paola had been a jury in the first edition of that prize. My impression was that she saw an opportunity for us to participate in the second edition. We knew the bases, which are really open, really interesting. They don't ask for an enormous number of pages, the books can come from anywhere in the world, they don't demand that you have a Spanish bank account. So, Paola encouraged us to participate. We chose the cities and each one of us did her part."

Clara Lagos: "I thought about Buenos Aires, but we quickly came to realise that many of us were going to be talking about the same city."

Caro Chinaski: "I think the first decision was the format: landscape and printed in yellow and black."

Delius: "There's also the concept of the journey, the ticket… Each story has a cover which is the ticket for the journey."

Figure 6. Cover for *Las Ciudades Que Somos*. Powerpaola (2019). © Chicks on Comics.

Caro Chinaski: "The plane ticket, the train ticket, and also the 'memory ticket' that comes from our recollections. We are all passengers who go to a place."

Clara Lagos: "That was what I was concerned about: how to connect all the stories, but in the end, everything worked out."

Caro Chinaski: "When you read the book, each story is really different."

Delius: "That worked against us during the selection process. Some people believed that that difference amongst the stories made the book lose unity, so it wasn't a 'graphic novel'."

So, the stories are joined thematically but not argumentatively.

Delius: "Not argumentatively. They have the city as scenario, as a shared thing."

Clara Lagos: "It's the title that ends up conferring sense to it."

Caro Chinaski: "When you read it, you can feel it has a communal spirit that wasn't really planned."

Delius: "The book says that cities can be very beautiful, that they have their own characteristics, that a thousand things can happen there, and that they can make you feel lots of things, but those emotions are mostly related to the people who live in those cities. When they gave us the award, they played an audio that had been recorded by Maliki [Marcela Trujillo, a Chilean cartoonist] in which she perfectly described each one of the stories. And it's true, as she said, that there's a female gaze, that you can perceive that. They are all stories about women that go through different situations, or that experience stress, or fear, or reminisce, or rejoice; all of those emotions in relation to the place."

How did ***Pip and Pep*** *come about?*

Paula Sosa Holt: "I had uploaded like 40 strips of *Pip and Pep*, and Santigo Kahn[16] wrote to me telling me that he would like to put out a book with all that. I had made scripts for more stories, he liked what I showed him, and he gave me the go ahead. Then there were some strips that were left out of the book, because they worked better on the internet. We organised the material and it was published.

[16] Comics editor from Argentina, responsible for *Maten Al Mensajero* ('Shoot the Messenger') one of the most active comics publishing houses in the country.

Figure 7. *Pip y Pep*. Paula Sosa Holt (2017). © Paula Sosa Holt.

I believe *Pip and Pep* was something I needed to do; I couldn't avoid it. That I had a lot of scripts and drawing is not something that worries me; I can resolve that quickly. Each day I uploaded a strip to the internet, that also gave me an adrenaline while making them. Now I have calmed down, because that immediacy is not so good, you become a junkie, getting high with *likes* [laughs]."

After Pip and Pep, you started ***Vainilla Kids****. How was that?*

Paula Sosa Holt: "I felt it was a progress. In *Pip and Pep*, I took the decision to resolve everything in just one panel, and one only. It's good to choose a structure and respect it. When I was invited by *Fan, el Programa*[17] to make a strip, although they couldn't pay, I took it as challenge: every Thursday I had to have a strip ready. In a trip to Villa Gesell, I resolved the idea and the characters. I set out to tell stories in four panels, and every once in a while, to make a one panel comic, focusing on just one character in a more introspective way."

Do you always work with a script?

Paula Sosa Holt: "Yes. Actually, I write an idea rather than a script. I have an app that I carry around where I jot down ideas. Then I go over what I have, and I mould those ideas, I give them shape. Sometimes I write things and when I come back to them, I can't understand them."

[17] A radio show hosted by Hernán Panessi which publishes one comic per day in their Face Book page.

Figure 8. *Vainilla Kids*. Paula Sosa Holt (2018). © Paula Sosa Holt.

Do you include the dialogues in those notes? Or the dialogues come afterwards?

Paula Sosa Holt: "It depends, sometimes I write a dialogue, sometimes a picture, or just a phrase or a gag and then I have to see how I get to that gag. That's what's most fun for me. However, I'm a bit on bad terms nowadays with the idea of the gag; I want to escape from it a bit. In *Vainilla Kids* I used that resource a lot and since *Vainilla Kids* is now over I want to do something else. At this point in time my purpose is to write a strip a day, each one totally different from the previous one, I haven't finished them yet but I have the scripts. Perhaps some ideas won't go anywhere, but I will keep using the same graphic style. I feel it's an exercise to get back to drawing, because with my other strips it comes a moment in which I draw the characters by heart."

It's interesting because it seems like you're making your own creative process more complex.

Paula Sosa Holt: "At first, I wanted my new strip to be a six-panel strip [laughs]. But finally, I stayed in four. To have six panels per page I'd draw a graphic novel, which is what I want to do. First, I want to lay down the entire story as a script. It's quite complicated, I'm used to following my impulses. If I have an idea, I have to do it. But I'll get there… I want it to be about polyamory."

Do you write the script first or do you just go ahead and draw the story?

Sukermercado: "Yes, I write it first. Initially, I had a hard time, but I like it now. It's something that makes me feel… complete? And it makes me feel like I'm paying attention to the right things at the right time. That's something Calvi told me: 'when you write, you're not thinking about what will be easy to draw.' The exercise of writing is really good to free yourself and be able to create a plot; to work the characters, the dialogues, the structure, to have a beginning and ending so it's not a just an undefined blob. That doesn't mean I can pull it off, I still have a long way to go. But that's the idea: to train myself in structure, because when I didn't write it, some things went over me. To write a long story it's necessary to understand what you have to do from the writing side."

Do you see yourself doing something longer? A continuous series, with characters. Or a continuation of La Sombra del Altiplano…

Sukermercado: "At some point in time I will continue it. I have to decide how to do it, because I developed it as a one shot. It was the birth of a heroine (or anti-heroine) and I have to see how not to repeat the same story. I'm working on something longer, a graphic novel. It's also something that happens when you start making comics: we all wanted to make something epic, 250 thousand pages, with characters you love… And afterwards you find out you have to advance step by step, starting with fanzines first. The story I submitted for the LGBTI anthology was important in that respect. When they accepted that story, I dared to do something longer and make it work. So, I did *La Sombra* and *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo* and now… I want more! [laughs] I want to develop characters, tons of characters. I want to tell a longer story. I have a lot to say and the space is never enough. The graphic novel format would allow me to do that."

I wanted to ask you about your drawing style. In La Sombra everything's black and white; but other works of yours are really fluorescent and colourful. How do you choose the materials?

Sukermercado: "I'm insufferable and I get bored really quick, so I switch techniques as a way to not repeat myself. Within the things I can handle I like to play with extremes; I need something fresh and something that enthuses me. I like to work with markers. Painting is hard for me. I tried to use watercolours or ink mixed with water, but the result was too pasty. I couldn't generate a contrast. So, I left it behind. Afterwards, I digitalise my drawings with Photoshop and I play with the RGB and saturation. I take advantage of the possibilities of the screen. Sometimes I like things that explode in your face. I think it has a lot to do with cyberpunk, which I always liked, thinks like *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Alita*, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, *Blade Runner*. But, also, with having grown up in downtown Buenos Aires. I always walked the city at night, with those aggressive lights that come up to your face. I belong to the *porteño* gen which makes me run a lot and juggle a thousand things at the same time. But it's something that makes me be myself and that interests me aesthetically: the city as a nihilist and defeatist space, no future, the decadence and aestheticisation of trash."

GENRE

I believe that in each of your works there are really personal points of view. Not precisely autobiographic, but there's always an author that's telling things. Have you thought about using characters which aren't yourselves, so you can tell one story as a collective?

Delius: "I think your question has to do with fiction. In the book presentation for *Las Ciudades Que Somos* some people spoke about 'biofiction'. I hadn't heard the term before, it was mentioned by the editor of Sexto Piso [the publishing house that put out the book], Santiago Tobón: he called them 'six biofiction stories'. In my case, it's fiction since it's quite a fantastical, futurist story that never happened to me. The main characters are a mother with her daughter; the daughter is almost like my daughter, Nina, and the mother is almost like myself. But there's fiction. After the presentation, talking to people, we coincided that even though it's autobiographical, there's fiction. When you make a comic with it, it's no longer reality."

What were your fanzines about?

Paula Sosa Holt: "With Antolín [Andrés Olgiatti] we made one about *Rocky* (1976), the idea was to make one fanzine per movie, but in the end, we only made one [laughs]. We took lines from the movie we liked, and each of us made three drawings. It's interesting because each of us did our own interpretation of the story. I also did another fanzine about Lisa Simpson, called *La Depresión de Lisa* ('*Lisa's Depression*'), I took different scenes from different episodes as a reference, starting with one in the first season where she's depressed, that's actually what gave me the idea. It consists of four illustrations of Lisa, with references to movies or other things."

In La Sombra Del Altiplano there are a lot of references to B-movies, gore, bad movies from the 80s, but with a feminist message. How did you work to appropriate those masculine genres and used them to tell a feminine story?

Sukermercado: "I've liked action stories since I was little. I like stories with heroes, fights, beatings. That's why I liked *Sakura*, *Sailor Moon*, *Mulan*… those were stories that weren't about the day to day of the characters, but rather they were heroines. Then I started liking violent action, gore stuff. For example, *Kill Bill*, that has revenge as a topic, that feeling that sticks in your throat and you have to let it out.

There was a time during which I went a lot to the [horror movie festival] *Rojo Sangre*; I downloaded Japanese movies with buckets of blood. I also consumed a lot of manga and anime with those themes. When I made *La Sombra* I wasn't thinking about all of those things. Juana [the main character] is a character that occurred to me while I was watching an interview that Santiago del Moro[18] did with a woman from [the northern province of] Salta. He asked her 'Since you're an immigrant, how do you feel in Argentina?' And the woman from Salta

[18] Argentinean late-night television host.

Figure 9. *La Sombra Del Altiplano*. Sukermercado (2017). © Paula Boffo.

answered: 'No, I'm Argentinean. You think all Argentineans are like you, blonde and white, but you forget that we *kolla* are also Argentineans' Del Moro was frozen. I saw that and I drew a *kolla* child with machetes. Then someone wanted to make that an animated short. It didn't come to pass because I would have had to animate it all by myself and it was a big NO. I had also seen a play, *La Fiera*, directed by Martín Tenconi Blanco. It's a one man show about a girl who's possessed by the spirit of the *yaguareté*[19] and goes to rescue her sister, or friend – I don't remember now– from a brothel. It has rap, it has a mixture of modern and folkloric elements, because you have the tradition of the were-*yaguareté*, the beast that goes out at night and kills people. And I was also watching *Devilman Crybaby* while I thought about the action scenes."

[19] *Yaguareté* (*Panthera onca*) is a type of jaguar native to the Americas, and it can be found in Northeast Argentina.

It's true that you use that violent gore as a catharsis, which is something that people usually like; the fact that the character's an avenger who can act as a vehicle for our own desire of revenge, of our resentment and darkest side. But you also issue a warning: when you surrender to the red, there's no turning back. And the main character, which is like an avatar of revenge against the patriarchy, surrenders her humanity. We are living in a moment in which the discourse of zero tolerance and though laws on crime is ascendant, capitalised on by the right. And, at the same time, that right generates violence. And that takes me to something I always wonder about: what place does violence have in political change?

Sukermercado: "We're in a delicate point in time regarding all those things. I don't have a fixed position either. *La Sombra* was a catharsis for a lot of hate, for a lot of accumulated anger against an oppressive system. But we must also understand that if we surrender to that, building from hate is condemning yourself. So, to balance things up I made a romantic porno, a cute porno [laughs]."

CONCLUSION

The surge in new female comic creators in Argentina, which is strongly related to the collapse of the Argentine comics industry in 2001 as a result of the national economic crisis,[20] produced mixed results. It caused, on one hand, the precarisation of the working conditions for comics artists who had previously held regular, salaried jobs as employees of publishing houses with successful periodical publications. The bankruptcy of these publishing houses would leave the youngest generation of Argentine comics artists 'orphaned', with no other means of getting their work in front of an audience but by producing and editing their own magazines. These attempts at replacing yesteryear's industry would prove to be short-lived and irregular, but it would spawn narrative and graphic experimentation.

On the other hand, despite the precariousness and instability of the cultural industry economy, the end of the comics industry would unleash new creative potential which perhaps had lied dormant until then. Without the rules of the market that constrained new perspectives and narratives – notably, the participation of women as creators -, new trends would start to emerge in what we could consider the first post-industrial generation of comics artists in Argentina. This period meant a progressively accelerated expanded entrance for women as authors for the first time in Argentine comics history. Furthermore, female participation projected new approaches beyond classical binary divisions: LGBTI+ comics have been gaining a significant presence in the last few years.

Also, these exchanges have allowed the establishment of an international – mainly Latin American – network, something that goes beyond the classic 'national industry' perspective which had been developed through the 20th Century. In this way, Argentina offers a place for many Latin American creators to share and experiment with their work, since it's a country with a tradition in comics making – something not that common to the rest of the South American countries -; but also with a more active and relatively progressive civil society which allows the existence of movements with demands for more feminist and LGBTI+ rights.

These profound changes experienced by the field of comics production at the beginning of the 21st Century demanded new strategies for surviving the new context. Some of those strategies would consist of working for foreign publishing comics industries (such as in the USA, and European countries such as France, Italy and Spain), but also to start making use of new available digital technologies including the Internet and the blogosphere that experienced a rapid growth during the first decade of the 21st Century.

The latter would allow the recomposition of an audience, new exchanges between authors and the possibility to make oneself known without the need to work for an editor in a publishing house. This would also allow more creative liberty, since the filter would not be set by industry standards but by the new logic of direct interaction with the audiences via the commentaries section of blog pages. Thus, for a generation of comics artists whom had learned the craft in the 1990s, the challenge would be to adapt to new technologies and production logic. At the same time, a new wave of creators would start producing directly for the internet. If successful, their works would eventually get printed and circulated in print.

This also resulted in the creation of new independent publishing houses that turned to the graphic novel as the new leading format, leaving behind the need to publish a monthly or weekly comics magazine. Another important factor in the reactivation of comic production in Argentina would be the support of public institutions. This means, state policies that funded prizes, conventions and promotion. Comics conventions such as *Tecnópolis* (2013-2016) and *Crack Bang Boom!* (2010 to date), among others, would allow artists and independent publishing houses to access a more massive audience, while strengthening ties between them and establishing a sense of community.

[20] During Fernando de la Rúa's presidential term (1999-2001), Argentina entered the 21st century heavily indebted, with the highest unemployment rate in its history (25% of the population) and a deep economic recession. A popular uprising would force President De la Rúa to resign in the last days of December 2001, two years after he had taken charge. Argentina's economy would eventually grow again, but it would never recover its former economic indicators.

Within this context, independent festivals sprawled and proved to be resilient to government changes and economic upheaval. These new circuits are key to sustaining artists' efforts to continue producing comics while allowing them to be in direct contact with audiences which have diversified during the last few years.

As we have seen in the case of Chicks on Comics, the more 'artsy' approach to comics has led to more contacts with art institutions – contacts which traditionally have been scarce. Usually, this also implies having to overcome the prejudice and biased ideas around comics as a denigrated art form, formerly carried by said institutions. This has been possible in part thanks to the transnational networks created thanks to the changes in communication technologies, which helped develop strategies on how to profit from international funding programs and negotiations with art and state institutions.

Younger generations of comics artists, to which Paula Sosa Holt and Sukermercado belong, have accessed comics circuits built over this foundation and boosted by the new dynamics provided by social media, which replaced weblogs. However, they also have the possibility of printing their (originally) digital comics thanks to the existence of a functional network of small publishers.

Without a doubt, this liberation of creative forces is related to the way independent comics in the late 1980s and early 1990s experienced an 'authorial turn', and an 'autobiographical turn', which has focused on the authors' personal experiences and obsessions. However, while this narrative trend sometimes seems to find a limit in its solipsistic view of things, contemporary Argentine comics seem particularly affected by the political landscape that sees a new feminist wave spot on the centre of the debate and the demands for societal change. Topics such as sexuality, gender, the political dimension of private life and the interrogation as to what it means to live in a society – and what kind of society – can be said to be the aesthetic, ethical and ideological core of contemporary production in Argentinean comics.

Needless to say, this does not mean there is a homogenous discourse on how to face these issues. As the different testimonies and dialogues have confirmed, there are many different points of view depending on the author and their approach to comics. This is closely related to the way newer generations have distanced themselves from the classical Argentine comics tradition and canons, while embracing other sources of inspiration and influence – from manga and superheroes to experimental or mainstream films, art, design, illustration, and so on. This is reflected in the declarations of Paula Sosa Holt and Sukermercado.

Therefore, the changes provoked by the end of the industry at the beginning of the 21st Century led a new generation of comics artists to develop a different approach to their work. This approach is related to the connection with others in a larger network of creative relationships, and with the way comics have shifted from a way of earning a living to a more or less autonomous form of expression. This shift bowled over much of the gate-keeping practices and structural inequalities which impeded the significant entrance of women in the art form. What is more, the introduction of new influences such as manga, animation and autobiographical comics, which challenged the classical action and adventure comics which had formerly been the mainstream in Argentina, helped attract more diverse reading audiences composed in large part of women who would, in time, make the jump into production.

Moreover, as a result of the authorial turn, comics as an art form started to be regarded as a personal expression of certain issues, acknowledging not just the need to reach an audience by entertaining them, but also by taking a stand and engaging politically with certain current issues, contributing to activist demands in the public arena. This is seen in the way comics made by women authors have incorporated feminist demands and concerns in an almost organic way, sometimes worked into the story (as is the case of *La Sombra Del Altiplano*) and sometimes with in a more militant approach (as is the case of collectives such as *Línea Verde*). In the face of a new economic crisis and a wave of political conservatism engulfing the region, Argentine comics face – once again – a challenge to sustain themselves in the near-future. It remains to be seen what will happen and how artists and collectives will endure the coming times. One thing is sure: imagination, creativity and commitment is still their commodity, one that becomes even more valuable the more unstable Argentine reality becomes.

REFERENCES

Acevedo, M. (2016). Crítica cultural feminista e Historietas. Notas para una discusión, in Gutiérrez, M. A. (ed.), *Entre-Dichos-Cuerpos. Coreografías de los géneros y las sexualidades* (pp. 177–207). Buenos Aires: Godot Ediciones.

Casot, A. (ed.). (2018). *Vamos Las Pibas 2*. Buenos Aires: self-published.

Robbins, T. (2013). *Pretty in Ink: North American women cartoonists 1896-2013*, Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.

Robbins, T. (2017). *Babes in Arms: Women in comics during the Second World War*. New Castle: Hermes Press.

Vazquez, L. (2010). *El Oficio De Las Viñetas. La industria de la historieta argentina*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

FURTHER READING

Chicks on Comics. (2015-present): https://chicksoncomics.tumblr.com/
Chicks on Comics. (2019). *Las Ciudades Que Somos*. Madrid: Sexto Piso.
Chinaski, C. (2012). *Hija De Vecina*. Buenos Aires: Atlántida.
Delius. (2017). *No Puedo Vivir Sin Música*. Buenos Aires: Tren en Movimiento.
Lagos, C. (2018). *Materniti*. Buenos Aires: Maten al Mensajero.
Powerpaola. (2013). *Virus Tropical*. Buenos Aires: Random House.
Sosa Holt, P. (2017). *Pip y Pep*. Buenos Aires: Maten al Mensajero.
Sosa Holt, P. (2018). *Vainilla Kids*. Buenos Aires: Maten al Mensajero.
Sukermercado. (2017). *La Sombra Del Altiplano*. Buenos Aires: Barro Editora.
Sukermercado. (2017). *Si Me Mojás Me Enciendo*. Buenos Aires: La Pinta Ediciones.
VVAA. (2017). *Historieta LGTBI*. Rosario: Editorial Municipal de Rosario.

Citation: Gandolfo, A. and Turnes, P. (2020). Chicks Attack! Making feminist comics in Latin America. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 04. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7908

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 05
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Drawing Dangerous Women: The Monstrous-Feminine, Taboo and Japanese Feminist Perspectives on the Female Form

Sara Sylvester [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

During the twenty-first century, global developments with graphic texts have seen positive changes in the representation of characters and storylines representing female-led narratives and perspectives. Recent Japanese graphic texts offer an instructive window into concerns about feminist comics and graphic novels which not only represent a vital intervention in terms of contemporary Japanese feminist politics but also reinforce their relevance as feminist art activism within a global frame. Taking into account the popularity of manga worldwide this article argues that the growing range of Japanese texts with clear feminist messages marks an intervention on behalf of female creators in keeping with the theory and practice of contemporary feminist discourse. Additionally, this Japanese evolution illustrates the ways in which second wave feminism, particularly feminist art, has impacted women on a global scale. Consequently, the article explores the important role of intersectionality alongside themes relating to the body and sexuality, subversion of the monstrous feminine, feminist activism by considering the narrative of Rokudenashiko's graphic memoir *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy* (2016).

Keywords: Monstrous-feminine, manga, memoir, feminist activism, kawaii

INTRODUCTION

During the twenty-first century, developments in graphic texts have seen positive changes internationally in the representation of characters and storylines representing female-led narratives and perspectives. Recent Japanese graphic texts offer an instructive window into concerns about feminist comics and graphic novels which not only represent a vital intervention in terms of contemporary Japanese feminist politics but also reinforce their relevance as feminist art activism within a global frame. This article brings into question the political utility of manga as a platform for feminist resistance.

The case study chosen in this article, featuring Megumi Igarashi's (under the pseudonym Rokudenashiko) graphic memoir *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy* (2016) provides an opportunity to consider the form's potential as a cross-cultural medium, whilst also marking an increase in female characters and female-led titles in Japan. *What is Obscenity?* (2016) is a collection of short comic strips that originally appeared in the liberal newspaper *Shukan Kinyobi* (*The Japan Times*). Each short comic strip is interspersed with text sections which provide the reader with more information about Japanese law, the criminal justice system and Japanese media. As a multimodal text, it also includes embedded photographic images as well as an interview with the film director Sion Sano. The narrative documents Igarashi's arrest on December 3, 2014 for alleged violation of Japanese obscenity laws – she became 'the first woman in Japanese history tried on grounds of obscenity as spelled out in Article 175 of the Criminal Code of Japan' (McKnight, 2017: n.p.). The narrative describes her confinement, and continued activities after her release, before backtracking to tell the story of how Rokudenashiko became a 'vagina artist' (see **Figure 1**). It is important to note the significance of the term '*manko*' at this stage, and its taboo status in Japan, since the word is used throughout the manga memoir not only to refer to herself – 'I am MANKO (vagina) artist' (Rokudenashiko, 2016: 4) - but also importantly in relation to one of the central characters of the manga, Ms Manko. In terms of reception, building upon her newsworthiness after her arrest and trials, *What is Obscenity?* (2016) both in Japan and internationally has furthered Rokudenashiko's international reputation as an artist and activist.

[1] *Associate lecturer at the School of Journalism, Media & Culture, Cardiff University*, UK
*Corresponding Author: sylvestersm@cardiff.ac.uk

Rokudenashiko's graphic memoir (see **Figure 1**), which could also be referred to as a graphic biography, graphic book, comic book, picture novella or 'autographics' (a term coined by Whitlock, 2006) will through this study be identified as a graphic memoir or more aptly, manga memoir, since it can be perhaps perceived as 'the most important narrative mode of our contemporary culture' (Miller, 2000: 423). Whilst 'the graphic memoir genre is not yet as established as it is in the West' (El Refaie, 2012: 6); this article asserts that the text could also be identified as a manga memoir since Rokudenashiko's book highlights the 'flowering of the graphic memoir genre' (El Refaie, 2012: 223) in Japan. It also signifies the international power of this sub-genre which 'occurs now across cultures in a global network of sequential art' (Whitlock, 2006: 969).

Taking into account the popularity of manga worldwide, this article argues that the growing range of Japanese texts with clear feminist messages marks an intervention on behalf of female creators, which is in keeping with the theory and practice of contemporary feminist discourse. It also argues that this Japanese creative evolution illustrates the ways in which second wave feminism continues to impact women on a global scale. However, it is important to clarify from the outset that this article is not discussing second wave feminist activism as such, but rather focusing on how feminist art practice continues to challenge stereotypical gender roles.

By specifically focusing on the power dynamics presented through Rokudenashiko's text, this article considers how gender roles, female sexuality, and the rise of the Japanese feminist movement can be exemplified through the graphic memoir format. Through a detailed close textual examination of *What is Obscenity?* (2016) taking a critical feminist perspective, this research seeks to determine the importance of women-led graphic novels and comics as well as mark their continuing evolution in Japan. The author chosen for this research reflects a contemporary work that firstly, has been successful in mainstream society and secondly, has drawn global media attention. Consequently, this research asserts that Rokudenashiko's depiction of women, the female form and femininity in this graphic memoir can highlight the ways in which graphic novels are intricately embedded in the complex interaction between gender, globalisation and nationalism. Equally, the impact of second-wave feminism-influenced art can be clearly identified through the ways in which the style, medium, narratives and representations of women are presented in *What is Obscenity?* (2016). As a multimodal text, Rokudenashiko's representation of '*manko* art', communicated through a combination of modes, will be discussed in detail through the consideration of female genital art from a feminist perspective with a specific focus on the work of artist Hannah Wilke (1940 – 1993), and what psychoanalytic theorists such as Julia Kristeva (2002) and Barbara Creed (1986) have labelled the 'monstrous-feminine'.

Comparisons can be drawn between the approaches both Wilke and Rokudenashiko adopt through their 'performalist' self-portraits, particularly when considering the ways in which both artists through their work reclaim the female form, whilst also satirising patriarchal taboos surrounding female genitalia. This provides a starting point in order to explore the influence of Wilke's work on a global scale, second-wave feminism's continued influence on comics, and the importance of graphic memoir in relation to the idea of 'I become my art, my art becomes me' (Wilke, 1975). Clear similarities can be drawn between both artists' use of their bodies to demystify the female genitalia - from Wilke's signature vaginal sculptures created in terra cotta, porcelain and latex, to Rokudenashiko's vulva sculptures which have included works such as a chandelier, a remote control car, necklaces and iPhone cases, as well as the infamous kayak[1]. In this context the Japanese artist furthers the feminist activist art movement to transform stereotypes through the form of the Ms Manko diorama which has been mass produced as manga, figurines and stuffed animals in her attempt to influence traditional Japanese cultural attitudes.

In a similar way to scholarly discussion of the representation of women in horror films (Creed, 1986) the treatment of women in comics has also been discussed for many years (Simone, 1999; Murray, 2011; Cocca, 2014) primarily focusing on the objectification of women, and their portrayal as overtly sexual, submissive and inferior. Taking the stance that patriarchal ideologies have impacted the ways in which women are depicted in manga and comics globally, Rokudenashiko's use of 'cute' *manko* exemplifies how the 'monstrous-feminine' as a feminist creation can accentuate the significance of gender and female sexuality. Ms Manko personifies the 'cute' or *kawaii* style popularised in Japan. Whilst the widespread use of the term *kawaii* is quite a recent phenomenon, Sharon Kinsella plots its expansion between the 1970s and 1990s, defining the term *kawaii* as 'essentially mean[ing] childlike' (Kinsella, 2013: 220) and associating it with a range of attributes such as: 'sweet, adorable, innocent, pure...vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behaviour…' (Kinsella, 2013: 220). The hyper-cute *kawaii* Ms Manko humorously subverts the deadly symbol of the *vagina dentata*; a narration that is repeated throughout the comic strips within the book as a mischievous play on the fear of castration and protest against traditional Japanese attitudes to the public representation of female genitalia. Subsequently this research aims at addressing the following questions:

1. What is the significance of Rokudenashiko's use of manga memoir, as a multimodal medium, in presenting an experiential reportage depiction of real events?

[1] Rokudenashiko was arrested in July 2014 and found guilty of breaking the Japan's obscenity laws in 2016 after she distributed data that enabled recipients to make 3D prints of a kayak modelled on her genitals.

2. How does Rokudenashiko construct her identity and that of Ms Manko in her narrative, in order to enact feminist activism?

The article will begin with a historical overview and literature review of western feminist art, graphic novels and memoir narratives. Then, Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis framework will be adopted, drawing on visual and textual discourse and social theories. Through critical discourse analysis, feminist ideologies found within *What is obscenity?* (2016) are uncovered. This is achieved by following Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis in which the text is socially positioned. During the first decades of the twenty-first century, comics studies has developed significantly, as have the research methods of textual interpretation used, which have encompassed formal, semiotic, and narratological as well as cultural, historical and political analysis (Bramlett, Cook and Meskin, 2012; Chute, 2008; 2010; Duncan, Smith and Levitz, 2015; Gardner, 2012; Groensteen, 2007, 2013). Taking a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach (CDA) following Fairclough (1993, 1995, 2013), a three-dimensional model was adopted as the main analytical framework. Through the use of micro and macro analysis, a CDA framework allows the opportunity to examine in depth the intricacies of 'the production, distribution and consumption of a text' (Fairclough, 1995: 135). The findings suggest that second-wave feminist ideologies prevail in this manga memoir. Finally, a call for a multi-modal analysis is made as it would better represent the language – text and image – found in graphic novels and comics.

Figure 1. 'I make manko art', Chapter 1 from *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Rokudenashiko. 2016. © Rokudenashiko.

The content of *What is Obscenity?* (2016) suggests a continuation of Max Skidmore's (1983) assertion that the comic medium is both a mirror and instigator of social change. Both are potentially important here, as Rokudenashiko's text is not simply a reflection, but a critical intervention in Japanese society that engages with her national and international readership. Rokudenashiko's text is not only an exemplary appropriation of manga which extends the narrative representation of feminist activism, but, through the depiction of the *kawaii* mascot, the character of Ms Manko also subverts the 'monstrous-feminine' (see **Figures 1**, **3** and **6**). The artist, through her graphic novel, disrupts patriarchal mythologies of cultural misogyny in order to highlight Japan's hypocritical views of male and female genitalia. The work in turn demonstrates the continued importance of the body for women artists and highlights the influence of second-wave feminism in relation to sexual politics and the demystification of female sexuality.

Consequently, I will suggest that Rokudenashiko's manga memoir signifies important implications for researching the relationship between graphic texts produced by female creators in Japan, and the global influence of feminist visual representations of women; I also explore how these are located within the context of Japanese culture, and the history of graphic narrative texts.

HISTORY OF JAPANESE GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS

It is necessary to begin with a brief account of the historical background of Japanese manga, since 'the nature of comic art makes the form ideologically interesting' (McAllister, Sewell and Gordon, 2001: 3). This is followed by a detailed examination of the themes and ideology in Rokudenashiko's work to illustrate the ways in which she provides a feminist critique and vision within Japan**.**

Firstly and significantly, '[o]f all the productions of Japanese popular culture in the second half of the twentieth century, perhaps the most well-developed and commercially important has been comic art: manga magazines and books…' (Thorn, 2004: 169). By the end of the twentieth century, the largest comics industry in the world was found not in the United States, but in Japan (Sabin, 1993: 199).

Japan has 'a thriving comics culture' (El Refaie, 2012: 6); currently a trend in popular culture worldwide, the term 'manga' refers to comics that originate from Japan. Certain conventions employed in manga are different from that of western comics, for instance it is important to note that traditional Japanese manga reads from right to left, the reverse of western comics and graphic novels, which read from left to right. In original manga-style books, the action, the word bubbles, and sound effects are all written in this direction. In Japan, manga's success can be attributed to low production costs (with the exception of covers, they are usually printed in black and white) and a diverse range of genres and audiences which can be simply categorised into four kinds: '*shonen*' for boys, '*shojo*' for girls, '*seinen*' for adults, and '*rediisu komikku'* for women.

Simply defined, manga is the title given to Japanese comics, a medium that has developed into a global cultural product; its impact as a medium is unquestionable since it appeals to an exceptionally diverse range of audiences (Bouissou, 2008). Kinsella identifies manga as a medium which 'carries an immense range of cultural material' (Kinsella, 2005: 3). Kinsella's examination of post-war Japanese cultural politics through adult manga specifically considers the ways in which national political discourse has been mediated through this form and has provided a vehicle to question social taboos. Out of this has grown a broad range of Japanese graphic novels and comics; however, of most interest is *shōjo manga*, a genre aimed primarily at a young female audience, typically characterised by a focus on personal relationships. It is the visually distinctive style of *shōjo* that will be considered in more depth in relation to Rokudenashiko's manga memoir, in order to consider the disruptions of masculine language and symbolism, to represent a kind of *écriture féminine* (Kristeva, 2002).

From this position this article will consider the ways in which *What is obscenity?* (2016), as a manga memoir, depicts a valid representation of 'authentic, home-grown, modern Japanese culture with its roots in Japanese social experience' (Kinsella, 2005: 3). The graphic memoir, as a sub-genre, has made a significant contribution to comic production globally, exploring a 'variety of genres and covering every topic, subject, and experience under the sun: from LGBTQ autobiographies, histories of slavery, and PTSD memoirs to journeys of forced migration, war-torn communities, and global upheavals, among many others' (Aldama, 2019: 3). Memoir and personal narratives have long been established as key points for feminist artists and scholars to contest dominant movement narratives, recast and reclaim conventional gender stereotypes, and use their experiences to refine movement ideas and goals (Taylor, 2008). Whilst autobiography is, and continues to be, a successful sub-genre in the form of graphic memoir, particularly for western feminist comic artists such as Alison Bechdel, Jennifer Hayden, A. K. Summers and Una, as indicated earlier, 'it is not yet as established [in Japan] as it is in the West' (El Refaie, 2012: 6).

Just prior to the critically acclaimed debut of the graphic memoir *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2008), Malek (2006) identifies such texts as a 'phenomenon of the memoir genre' thus reinforcing the continued popularity of this form, hybridised by feminists, and demonstrating how 'memoir gives its readers an author as guide, an informant whose presence lends a unique perspective to the historical moment' (Adams, 1999: 8). Indeed, exploration at the

end of the twentieth century of the popularity of women-produced memoirs is signalled by Carolyn G. Heilbrun's assertion that '[w]omen have only recently begun in large numbers to recount their lives' (Heilbrun,1999: 35). Similar to graphic novels in the early twenty-first century, such as Marjane Satrapi's successful *Persepolis* series, Rokudenashiko's *What is Obscenity?* (2016) demonstrates the global interest in memoirs which 'have been experiencing a great surge of popularity' (Malek, 2006: 360).

With the growth of female manga creators in Japan, there is a clear resurgence of manga memoirs as a way to present alternative female voices and subvert dominant cultural narratives. Rokudenashiko's manga memoir is identified by McKnight (2017) as directly influenced by experiential reportage which is defined as 'documentary in its depiction of real events, but focaliz[ing] the story through a writer's eyes, body, and pen' (McKnight, 2017: n.p.). As a feminist activist text, Rokudenashiko's 'first-person voice compounds the fact-finding impulse of reportage with the highly interpretive visual and story conventions of *shōjo* manga' (McKnight, 2017: n.p.). Taking the stance of Alan Moore that '[a]ll comics are political' (quoted in Sabin, 1993: 89), the question concerning how graphic novels and comics fit in with the socio-political context of Japan, given the different ranges and roles in which these texts operate, is of high ideological importance particularly for the role of alternative voices such as Rokudenashiko in the creation of resistant, cultural-identity-based feminist activism.

THE INFLUENCE OF SECOND-WAVE FEMINIST POLITICS IN JAPAN

Feminist perspectives on art first surfaced alongside the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s, from a combined involvement in political activism in the contemporary art world and critiques of the historical traditions of the arts. As Meskimmon puts it:

> Current feminist art theory remains engaged with the body, but works with embodied subjectivity to explore alternative conceptions of women's agency… New approaches to 'the body' help us to rethink the past histories of women's art practices as much as to produce critical work on contemporary art. (Meskimmon, 2008: 389)

This field developed alongside postmodern debates about culture and society that have taken place in many academic disciplines in the last fifty years through the questioning of western patriarchal dominance. Lippard's assertion that "'Feminist art" is a political position… It is also developing new forms and a new sense of audience' (Lippard, 1980: 362) demonstrates the continuing importance of a feminist approach to contemporary art theory, which is associated with a persistent need to critically examine the issues surrounding western traditional values and theories when engaging with art, in order for them to be addressed and challenged by feminist artists and scholars alike.

Lippard's article reflects upon how the re-evaluation and critique of these values opened up possibilities to question the art world structures and power relations that were dominant in the 1970s. It was at this time that artists, frustrated with the existing structures of the art world, instigated the creation of an alternative scene in which they had control over the type of art they created and how it was exhibited. This led to a blurring of the boundaries between what the art world considered fine art and other art forms, as artists, particularly women, began to experiment with performance, photography, video art and book art. Through these alternative artistic modes and via exploration of popular culture, an array of approaches was fostered that developed concepts such as post-minimalism and conceptualism. Now seen as the beginnings of post-modernism, women played a significant role in the questioning of dominant ideology and breaking down the barriers of the traditional art world. The feminist movement played a crucial role in the development of postmodernism, particularly through art. Women artists formed collectives and through unified sisterhood began to reject the established art canon (Pollock, 2013: 23) which led to the consideration that whilst '[d]ifference is what it's all about, [it's] not just gender difference' (Lippard, 1989: 29) thus signalling how women artists signalled intersectionality, and were not only concerned with issues of gender but also with race, ethnicity and sexuality.

The feminist art movement, in perceiving that '[f]eminism is an ideology, a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life' (Lippard, 1980: 362) focused on the fact that few women were represented in galleries and museums and that they were excluded from the canon of art history, all of which greatly influenced their own contemporary art practice. Feminist content argued that gender is socially, rather than naturally constructed. Other devices used to subvert the hegemonic notions of high culture were produced by the validation of art forms not considered high art, such as craft, video and performance art. Many feminist artists explored an aesthetics that arose out of female experience - the female body, women's history, and individual autobiography. 'The 1970s might not have been "pluralist" at all if women artists had not emerged during that decade to introduce the multicoloured threads of female experience into the male fabric of modern art' (Lippard, 1980: 362) Furthermore, the feminist

art movement, which had distrusted the cult of genius and questioned the classification of greatness, thus placed an emphasis on the concept of pluralist diversity rather than traditionally held beliefs (Pollock, 2001: 23-39).

In refuting the universalising narrative of male humanist art, feminist art theory widened the boundaries of the field of study, it is clear that the radical idealism of the 1970s has continued to inform feminist art practice into the twenty first century. It is perhaps pertinent here to acknowledge criticisms of the cultural politics of the second wave (Evans, 1995; Brooks, 2002; Zack, 2005), namely, that earlier generations over-emphasised white, middle-class, heterosexual women's experiences and discounted the viewpoints of women of colour, poor, queer, lesbian and transgender women as well as women from the non-western world. According to Lise Shapiro Sanders, 'third wave feminists have come to emphasise the diversity of women's experience over the similarities amongst women,' with a particular focus on addressing the inadequacies of second-wave ideology for dealing with women's experience beyond its 'white, middle-class biases' (Sanders, 2007: 7).

The image of the female body has long been a disputed issue for feminists of different generations in which 'each wave of feminism has fought its own battles of body image' (Richards, 1998:196). Whilst the first two waves fought to establish women's rights and further advance women's status accordingly, for feminist waves that have followed the importance of diversity of individual identity has placed 'image and body (…) at the centre of feminist analysis' (Richards, 1998: 196) encouraging women to define femininity for themselves, celebrating the diversity of sexualities, femininities, in order to further the idea of empowerment.

Similar to the rise of the feminist movement in the west during the 1960s and 1970s, a women's liberation movement, '*uman ribu*, typically known as *ribu*' (McKnight, 2017: n.p.), also emerged in Japan from the New Left and radical student movements. The influence of the feminist movement in Japan by the end of the 1970s, similarly to the United States, Europe and the United Kingdom, focused on labour, sexuality and equality (Mackie, 1988: 63). However, whilst their high-profile activities attracted significant media coverage, protests were often ridiculed and attracted little public sympathy. Nevertheless, the legacy of such feminist activity, has unquestionably furthered the advancement of feminist debates in contemporary Japan (Gwynne, 2013: 326).

Whilst there has been scholarly attention examining the aftermath of second-wave feminism in contemporary Japan, particularly in terms of the current state of twenty-first century feminist activism (Gwynne, 2013); Chilla Bulbeck has noted there is a tendency within hegemonic feminist discourse to perceive feminist activism as a distinctly western form of politics (Bulbeck, 1998). As Kano (2018) asserts 'it is not easy to define what the term "feminist" might mean in Japan today' since, according to Mina Roces, throughout most of the twentieth century Asian women activists have 'disliked the word "feminism"' because of its association with a western vision of feminism (Roces, 2010: 1). In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may agree with Joel Gwynne (2013) who justifiably argues 'that any polarisation of "Western" and "Asian" feminisms is highly problematic and reductive' (Gwynne, 2013: 326).

With this in mind and by drawing on the cultural significance of manga as a product to expose gender bias, I will now turn to situate Rokudenashiko's creation of *manko* art and Ms Manko within an academic discourse on feminist activist art.

THE BODY, THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE AND HANNAH WILKE

Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's pioneering work, *The Second Sex* (1949), where approaches to the understandings of sexual difference that focus on the phenomenology of embodiment have been developed within feminism in a much more subtle and complex way, we can understand her concept of sex difference. Within this feminist phenomenological focus on anatomical difference as shaped by social norms, *sex* is perceived not as an essentialist concept but, rather, selects one significant aspect of *social* location. With this in mind it is important to acknowledge that art is typically made with and appreciated through the body. It is the body that has been the preferred subject matter of the visual arts throughout history, thus it is quite logical to presume sex, realised in this way, would make a difference to the appreciation and production of art.

French feminist philosophy that emerged in the 1970s was more focused on 'the body' exemplified in the work of Hélène Cixous who explored the concept of *écriture féminine*; they argued that writing and philosophy are *phallocentric,* therefore focusing on 'writing from the [female] body' as a subversive exercise in response to this (Cixous and Clément, 1975; Irigaray, 1985). Although Luce Irigaray's approach to writing the body differs from Cixous's perspective, both scholars envisaged parallel systems that singularised a female-centred creativity which was distinct from androcentric or humanistic (read: male) styles. Their ideas of the 'feminine' have proven invaluable in the development of wider feminist thought.

Feminist art challenges the traditional norms of art, of the oppositional trope of male subjectivity/female objectivity. It questions what it means to speak of 'female experience' in relation to the production of art, enquiring instead what a specifically 'feminist' art practice might be, and in doing so examining how women artists have tried to circumvent the problem of the objectification of the female body. Much has been written about women artists

and their focus on the personal, as well as the feminist focus on women's identity (Nochlin, 1971; Jones, 1998; Pollock, 2005; Knafo, 2009; Meskimmon, 2012). An essential aim is to gain artistic autonomy without being incorporated into a masculine aesthetic. To gain this autonomy, many women artists have had to, and continue to, challenge the negative construction that women are inferior. It is important, for the contextualisation of contemporary female artists and for the acknowledgement of their achievements to be aware of these aims. These concerns are still valid today, as contemporary women artists not only produce art works with feminist content, but very likely get them accepted by art institutions due to the foundations that were newly laid by their female predecessors.

Disruption of the female body, an aim that was influenced by the sexual politics of second-wave feminism, can also be observed in feminist film theory. Continuing the focus on the female body an iconic source has been Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993). Creed, through the critical analysis of horror films examines the ways in which women are represented as victims; simultaneously, she argues that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body. She picks up on the *'vagina dentata'*, a primal myth discussed by Freud (1909) in the castration complex, suggesting that women's genitals contain teeth. Specifically, Creed asserts the castrating vagina evinces the 'monstrous-feminine' or 'what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Creed, 1993: 1).

Another key influence on feminist artists is Wilke (1940–1993), through her exploration of the body and in her consideration of female identity. The nude body is omnipresent in her work and its self-representation is the vehicle by which Wilke exposes personal and political themes. Her use of female body imagery played a crucial role in feminist art criticism in the 1970s. In her series of photographs entitled *S.O.S - Starification Object Series* 1974 -1982, Wilke used her nude body as a backdrop with vulvas randomly stuck to her body that have the appearance of scars. *S.O.S.* attacked the physical representation of women and more importantly their derogatory treatment in society. Wilke parodies popular images of women in this series of photographs, while her glamorous and seductive guises simulate those of traditional advertisements and pin-up poses of women, the viewer's eye is drawn away to focus on these scar marks covering her body. This series of work openly questions the ways in which women's bodies are objectified; Wilke's body presents a paradox – on the one hand, an object of desire for men - whilst also evincing the distasteful and repellent.

Wilke's work disturbed relationships between the self and the other in performance, a practice that has continued to drive other feminist artists across all creative mediums also intent on challenging the dominant scopophilic binary. '[U]sing her body as statement became a trademark of Wilke's work' (Tierney, 1996: 45) and there are strong links between the works of Wilke and Rokudenashiko's in their exploration of the body in performance, where the artist's own body and life is employed as material, in this case through a graphic novel. 'Rokudenashiko's works draw on parts of this history, such as personal liberation and making life experience the grounds for liberation' (McKnight, 2017: n.p.). Rokudenashiko redeploys Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine in a specific challenge to the Japanese taboo surrounding female genitalia. In her *kawaii*, Ms Manko, a figure presented in her manga memoir, is a good example, its monstrous cuteness menaces patriarchal Japan in an attempt to liberate women's sexual agency.

The analysis now turns to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic framework of visual communication which asserts that the three metafunctions of linguistics can be extended to visual communication. From this stance, the image is perceived to be a resource for complex representation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Multimodality provides a framework for visual communication and a useful way to measure and evaluate the ways in which images play significant roles in meaning making and for examining the interrelationships between communicative modes. Equally, in her useful discussion of the visual and verbal interpretive skills required for scholarly work on the comics, Whitlock (2006) stresses the importance of the 'vocabulary of comics' where 'its grammar is based on panels, frames, and gutters that translate time and space onto the page in black and white' (2006: 968).

Figure 2. 'And most babies are born through one', Chapter 1 from *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Rokudenashiko. 2016. © Rokudenashiko.

VISUAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF ROKDENASHIKO'S *WHAT IS OBSCENITY?*

Throughout *What is Obscenity* Rokudenashiko draws herself simply, as a happy, smiling woman, similar to representations of her in photographs within the book (see **Figure 1**). This contrasts with her Japanese pseudonym which is translated as 'Good for nothing'. The character Ms Manko makes her appearance in the first comic strip and is the first image with which the reader is confronted. Outside the frame, anchored in the right-hand side of the comic strip title, Ms Manko's mouth is always fixed as wide-open, almost in a sign of protest, which is incongruent with her 'cute' representation. One explanation for this construction could be the appropriation of kawaii culture (Kinsella, 1995) as a medium for political protest; whereby the artist presents female genitalia as a fictional cute character to signify the openness and naturalness of the female body. Ms Manko is simultaneously taboo yet also distinctly kawaii, acts as an embodiment of positivity, thus becoming a symbol of feminist resistance.

In a panel that demonstrates the way Rokudenashiko creates her art, she poses, partially squatting, to imprint plaster onto her genitals. She adopts the classical artistic convention of using flowers to decorate her 'deco pussy'. On the other hand, the last panel on page 8 (**Figure 1**) illustrates a mixed crowd's response to the artist's *manko* work. Men are portrayed as reduced to a dark mass of sinister entities in **Figure 2**, which anchors their derogatory comments – 'horny', 'dirty girl'. **Figure 3** continues to characterise men as opposed to the artist's work, whilst the characterisation of Rokudenashiko sitting demurely as the police confiscate her art works is juxtaposed with the speech bubbles of her repeatedly saying '*manko*'. The taboo nature of the word is characterised through the men's

reactions to her, and later by the panel of the policeman laughing, and joking that 'We're hot boxing *manko*' which adds to the absurdity of the situation for the artist and reader. **Figure 6** depicts a press conference where Rokudenashiko is characterised in a serious manner, openly questioning Japanese society as she states that she 'is an artist with a mission'. Rokudenashiko portrays herself using a very simple and iconic manga style. Similarly, Ms Manko is illustrated in a comparable style. Aesthetically, the drawings cannot be considered elaborate: it is in their simplification of the facial features through which they can achieve 'universal identification' (McCloud, 1994: 36). Given the universal reach and appeal of Japanese manga globally, the *kawaii* depiction of Ms Manko further strengthens this position of generalism.

Given that the comic strips in the text are largely black and white, colour, or lack thereof, still serves textual, cultural and social functions, as it is a 'semiotic mode' in making meaning (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 344). Indeed, the use of black and white graphics supports the traditional style of manga. The cover of the text, like traditional manga, is coloured. It is important to note that *What is Obscenity?* (2016) is unusual I in that it includes coloured photographs, the magazine front covers of *Shukan Kinyobi [The Japan Times]* documenting Japanese public protests, as well as a final comic strip in full colour titled 'This is my story' (2016: 167). When analysing the colours used in the manga memoir, it is assumed colours are both 'expressionistic' and 'iconic' (McCloud, 1994:188) and function to semiotically link the memoir narratives and the identity of the artist. The cover of *What is obscenity?* (2016) features the image of a Ms Manko diorama, presented in soft pastel pink colours against a bold turquoise background which establishes a focus on Rokudenashiko's *manko* artwork. Panchanathan et al. (2000) claim that colours can be used for gender role socialisation: the pastel colours used on the front of and in the text thus reinforce the childlike and *kawaii* image, as well as femininity. Such presentation of Ms Manko could be considered as subverting the usual demure and submissive kawaii representations in order to question traditional societal norms.

What is Obscenity? (2016) is a typical example of a comic in which gutters are used to separate different scenes in adjacent panels so readers can easily interpret the narrative and make sense of changing scenes between panels. By merging the panels across the gutters, the effect of Rokudenashiko's account of events is speeded up. Since this graphic memoir can also be labelled as a multimodal text layout, features associated with traditional manga – graphic novels and comic strips which are typically printed in black and white - are disrupted through the inclusion of montage, of photographs, passages of text and excerpts from interviews.

In the second dimension of Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework, discursive practice involves considering how texts are constructed, circulated and interpreted, hence CDA analysis usually draws on conversation analysis and pragmatics (Fairclough, 1995). However, such an approach is not suitable for analysing Rokudenashiko's multimodal manga memoir, in which conversations are rarely present. Therefore, the analysis will focus on how the text was produced based on Rokudenashiko's autobiographical practices in which her and Ms Manko's personalities and identities can be discursively interpreted.

CHARACTERISATION OF ROKUDENASHIKO AND MS MANKO

Rokudenashiko introduces herself, her art practice and activism in a Foreword in *What is Obscenity?* (2016). At the end of this preface, she encourages herself not to express doubt but simply go ahead. The book is divided into five sections, documenting chronologically the events that led to her arrest, confinement and court case; it concludes with a comic strip from the perspective of Ms Manko detailing the events. The development of Rokudenashiko's emotional response to proceedings can be seen gradually, as the narrative develops: initially at times humorous, (**Figures 1** and **3**), the narrative also includes traumatic and frightening lows during her confinement which lead to the slow burning build-up of anger and determination to demystify female genitalia in Japan (**Figures 4-6**).

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND PRACTICES

The visual characterisation of Ms Manko and Rokudenashiko is similar in style, throughout the text, both character's open mouth implies protest and possibly one of continued shock and distress. Graphic novels and comics are richly laden with such codes by means of 'reductive iconography', by which both the artist and reader depend on stereotypes to communicate (Royal, 2007: 7; Eisner, 2008). Given the nature of Rokudenashiko's art work and its documentation in her manga, particularly through Ms Manko, this inevitably reductive iconography is utilised to its full potential. The significance of *What is Obscenity?* (2016) lies in the way in which the manga memoir as feminist activism reflects the impact of social structures, as well as in the narrative construction of principal characters.

Just as western feminist artists in the 1970s used their bodies as material to convey cultural statements whilst also simultaneously causing 'middle-class outrage at public nudity' (Tierney, 1996:45), Rokudenashiko similarly documents through her graphic novel the outraged responses by Japan authorities to her explicitly feminist art based on her own vulva, for which she was arrested and stood trial (see **Figures 2** and **3**). Barry and Flitterman's (1980) consideration of how feminist artist practice can work towards productive social change acknowledges the 'importance of giving voice to personal experiences; the expression and documentation of women's oppression as well as their aspirations' by identifying four categories in the 'typology of women's artmaking' (1980: 35-36). Similarly to Wilke, Rokudenashiko's work could be interpreted as a 'glorification of an essential female power' (1980: 37). Rokudenashiko's graphic memoir as an artwork that has as its aim to document her experiences, thus turns her into a subject, rather than an object for the male gaze, challenging conventional notions of, and taboos around, female sexuality.

Rokudenashiko's graphic novel *What is Obscenity?* (2016) is part of a larger graphic memoir phenomenon. *What is obscenity?* (2016) is a prime example of Japanese feminist activist production (see **Figure 6**) as a site for experimentation within various genres - here, that of art, memoir and graphic novel. Rokudenashiko's *What is Obscenity?* (2016) is a unique form of Japanese feminist activist production, in that it blends the genres of memoir and graphic novel to present the narrative of Rokudenashiko as a feminist political and cultural activism.

Figure 3. 'Manko. Manko…', Chapter 2, from *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Rokudenashiko. 2016. © Rokudenashiko.

Rokudenashiko's drawings provide resonance for Japanese and non-Japanese readers alike whilst also recalling the importance of the manga genre, as well as the historical importance of the arts within Japan. Such an amalgamation reflects the importance of Japanese comic and graphic novels not only from a national but a global perspective. Rokudenashiko's *What is Obscenity?* (2016) use of graphic memoir allowed feminist protest about Japanese culture, through blending western feminist art with Japanese manga. Rokudenashiko's graphic memoir has enabled new hybrid cultural forms to emerge which are influenced by second-wave, western feminist art, but also Japanese graphic novels and comics.

Figure 4. 'I am an artist with a mission', Chapter 17 from *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Rokudenashiko. 2016. © Rokudenashiko.

Rokudenashiko's graphic memoir demonstrates the power that the graphic novel wields in Japan as an activist or subcultural instrument, thus embodying the concept that

> [w]omen are shedding the skin of respectability and the conventions designed for them by men, or by men for themselves. In the process, they begin to write of what they know, and not of what they are allowed to know, or expected to know, or, above all, permitted to tell. They will inevitably annoy many male readers (Heilbrun, 1999: 42).

Rokudenashiko's subversion of 'cute' and her reclaiming of manga's representation of the female body is certainly a powerful force that has successfully shaken and annoyed the patriarchal establishment (see **Figure 6**). Rokudenashiko's manga memoir, in a similar way to Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2008) put into focus the hypocrisy

of Japan's laws in relation to perceived female acts of obscenity and allowed the artist to address issues of the representation of women, highlighting the double standards in relation to female genitalia.

The English translation is bound in the original Japanese right to left format, thus reflecting the traditional style, *tategaki,* of writing. Whilst the beautiful manga style drawings depict the serious central theme of Japan's conservative stance toward female sexuality, Rokudenashiko also incorporates within the text elements of *kawaii-kei*, cute style, a sub-genre of manga which are customarily directed at a young female audience. The hyping of *kawaii* styles within Japan as well as globally constitutes part of a countercultural subversion of mainstream styles. Ms Manko, whilst appealing to the *kawaii* aesthetic of 'sweet' and 'adorable', also subverts this because of what Ms Manko directly represents – the female genitalia. As a provocative protest symbol of *manko,* art is neither vulnerable nor weak. Taking the premise that 'Cute is one element of the vast popular culture which has flourished in Japan…overwhelming and threatening traditional culture' (Kinsella, 2013: 252), Rokudenashiko, through her depiction of Ms Manko utilises *kawaii as* a form of popular culture focused on escapism and nostalgia to explore traditionally held Japanese perceptions of female sexuality. *Kawaii* signifies worship of the childlike; Miki Kato asserts that '…cute fashions idolise childhood because it is seen as a place of individual freedom unattainable in society' (Avella, 2004: 214). Thus Ms Manko, as a 'cute' representation of female genitalia, not only acts as a mascot for Rokudenashiko's identity as a *manko* artist, whilst asserting individual freedom; the character also signifies her protest against the hypocrisy of Japanese obscenity laws where 'Even the utterance of *manko* was a taboo, and absolutely forbidden since I was a child, and I've found myself respecting the archaic convention against saying it, even despite myself' (Rokudenashiko, 2016: 4).

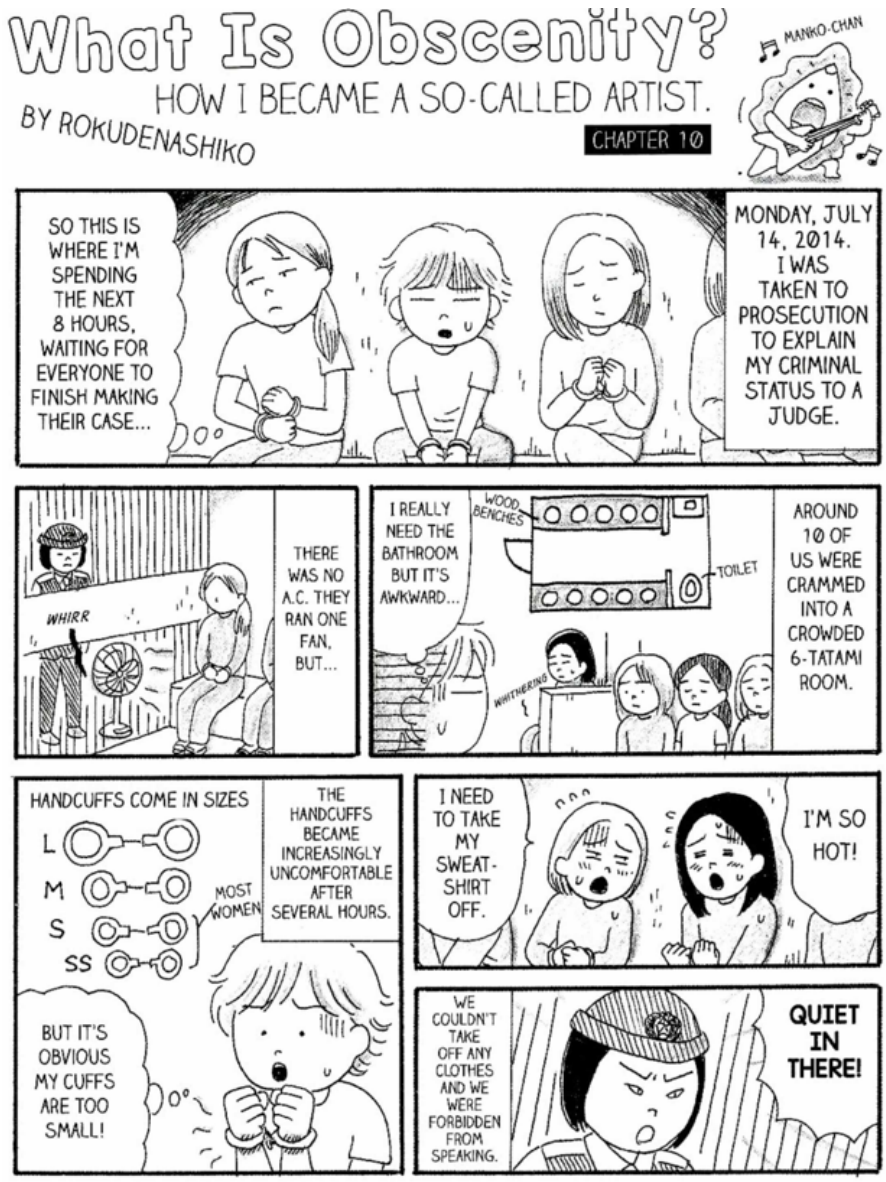


Figure 5. 'Monday July 14, 2014', Chapter 10 from *What is obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Rokudenashiko. 2016. © Rokudenashiko.

The rise in popularity of kawaii consumer goods as well as the custom of dolls as mascots is deeply embedded within Japanese culture (Avella, 2004: 213); Rokudenashiko by creating Ms Manko uses the popularity of cute characters within Japanese society to promote her feminist agenda by communicating publicly her campaign to break the taboo on the depiction of female genitalia in Japan. Thus, this borrowing of *cute* to create the character Ms Manko ironically juxtaposes the monstrous-feminine interpretation of female genitalia. The cute, pastel pink, anthropomorphic creature with minimal features, eyes that are simple dots which make her look shocked, the open-mouthed expression revealing small teeth, evoking images of the *vagina dentata* - juxtaposes the appropriation of *kawaii* aesthetics - 'basic elements of cute: round, little, simple, lovable' (Avella, 2004: 217) - with the monstrous-feminine 'that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject' (Creed, 1986: 44). Thus Ms Manko as a comic character can be perceived as a powerful feminist emblem.

Rokudenashiko echoes elements of *écriture féminine* through her graphic novel. Using a borrowed patriarchal language, her eccentric use of image and text undermine and subvert traditional manga significations. Articulating the repression inherent in phallocentric taboo terminology through her utilisation of a 'monstrous-cute' graphic style, her semiotic (Kristeva, 2002) subverts oppression, exposing women's negative and marginal status in the name of a liberatory project. Rokudenashiko's use of Ms Manko subverts the masculine symbolic and documents the artist's disruption of power using the form of the graphic novel as a form of exploratory language.

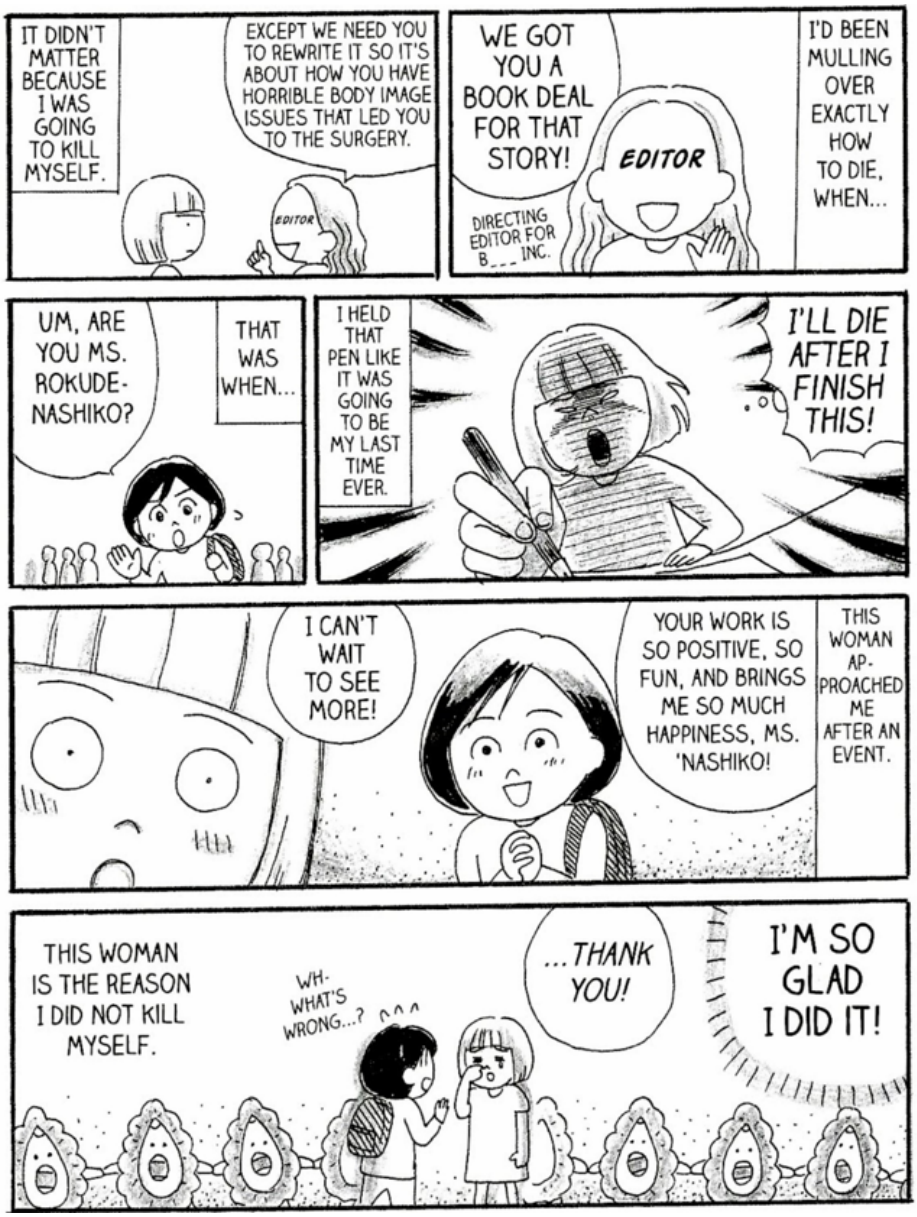


Figure 6. 'Why I became a manko artist', Chapter 5 from *What is Obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Rokudenashiko. 2016. © Rokudenashiko.

Throughout Rokudenashiko's account, despite her horrifying ordeal, the contextual information exposing the Japanese legal system and her continued mission to demystify the female body, this manga memoir is presented in a bright and light-hearted way 'Though this way was kind of a joke at first, now I am joking around with every ounce of my body and soul' (Rokudenashiko, 2016: 4) - making her experience and protest wholly relatable to many readers. Her use of direct address – 'Nice to meet you. My name is Rokudenashiko' (Rokudenashiko, 2016: 8) - and her self-reflection as narrator 'I only realised after I started making this work exactly how biased this country was against *manko*' (Rokudenashiko, 2016: 150) greatly contributes to the value and relatability of her memoir.

CONCLUSION

> By challenging the idea that a woman's body is a medium for promoting national economic growth using artistic forms that rely on digital materialities, she [Rokudenashiko] extends the feminist critiques of women's relation to property that began in the 1970s (McKnight, 2017: n.p.).

The context in which *What is Obscenity?* (2016) was written and published speaks to the success of this feminist protest graphic memoir. This article has highlighted the significance of Rokudenashiko's appropriation of *kawaii* and the manga memoir as a way of articulating her feminist message, given the centrality in popular culture both of cuteness and the graphic novel genre, and the extent to which these elements have flourished and been widely embraced not only on a national but on a global platform. Through her use of the graphic novel, Rokudenashiko transforms the genre to which she contributes, as well as re-situating global comics more generally as an emergent textual form for women. Utilising a multidisciplinary approach clearly demonstrates, here, the empowerment that Rokudenashiko projects through textual means. Consequently, the significance of the manga memoir lies in its potential for staging an autobiographical feminist protest narrative, reinforcing the assertion that 'all autobiographical comics have a persuasive purpose' (El Refaie, 2012: 179). Rokudenashiko's identity as a feminist artist is articulated in the manga memoir narrative throughout the portrayal of herself and through the presence of Ms Manko. Successfully appropriating and in turn subverting *kawaii* practices, her use of a combination of semiotic modes in visual and literary representation demonstrate that sequential cartoon strips and texts are invaluable resources for the construction of autobiographical narratives of feminist activism and critique. To this end, *What is Obscenity?* (2016) revives and updates the sexual politics of second-wave feminism, thus demonstrating the power and potential of the Japanese manga memoir as contemporary feminist activism.

REFERENCES

Adams, K. (1999). The way we were. *Women's Review of Books*, *16*(12), 8.

Aldama, F. L. (2019). Introduction to focus: Graphic nonfiction. *American Book Review*, *40*(2), 3.

Avella, N. (2004). *Graphic Japan: From woodblock and Zen to manga and kawaii*. Brighton, UK: RotoVision.

Barry, J. and Flitterman, S. (1980). Textual strategies: The politics of art making. *Screen*, *21*(2), 35-48.

Bouissou, J.M. (2008). Why has manga become a global cultural product? *Esprit*, *7*, 42-55. Available at: https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ESPRI_346_0042--why-has-manga-become-a-global-cultural.htm (Accessed: 18 February 2020).

Bramlett, F., Cook, R. and Meskin, A. (2016). *The Routledge Companion to Comics*. New York: Routledge.

Brooks, A. (2002). *Postfeminisms: Feminism, cultural theory and cultural forms*. London: Routledge.

Bulbeck, C. (1998). *Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women's diversity in a postcolonial world*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Chute, H. (2008). Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative. *PMLA*, *123* (2), 452-465.

Cixous, H. (2004). The newly born woman. In Rivkin, J. and Ryan, M. (eds.), *Literary Theory: An anthology* (pp. 348 – 354). London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Cocca, C. (2014). The 'Broke Back Test': a quantitative and qualitative analysis of portrayals of women in mainstream superhero comics, 1993–2013. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *5*(4), 411-428.

Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the monstrous-feminine: An imaginary abjection. *Screen*, *27*(1), 44-71.

De Beauvoir, S. (1949/2011). *The Second Sex* (translated and revised by C. Borde and S. Malovany-Chevallier). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Duncan, R., Smith, M. J. and Levitz, P. (2015). *The Power of Comics: History, form, and culture*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Eisner, W. (2008). *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist*. New York, NY: WW Norton and Company.

El Refaie, E. (2012). *Autobiographical Comics: Life writing in pictures*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Evans, J. (1995). *Feminist Theory Today: An introduction to second-wave feminism*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.
Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language*. New York: Routledge.
Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.
Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, *4*(2), 133-168.
Freud, S. (1909). Analysis of a phobia in a five-year old boy. In Strachey, J. (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 10, pp. 1–150). London: Hogarth Press.
Gardner, J. (2012). *Projections: Comics and the history of twenty-first-century storytelling*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Groensteen, T. (2007). *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Groensteen, T. (2013). *Comics and Narration*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
Gwynne, J. (2013). Japan, postfeminism and the consumption of sexual(ised) schoolgirls in male-authored contemporary manga. *Feminist Theory, 14*(3), 325-343.
Heilbrun, C. G. (1999). Contemporary memoirs: Or, who cares who did what to whom? *The American Scholar*, *68*(3), 35-42.
Irigaray, L. (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Jones, A. (1998). *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
Knafo, D. (2009). *In Her Own Image: Women's self-representation in twentieth-century art*. New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses.
Kano, A. (2018). Womenomics and acrobatics: Why Japanese feminists remain skeptical about feminist state policy. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, *2*(1), 6. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc.201806
Kinsella, S. (2013). Cuties in Japan. In Moeran, B. and Skov, L. (eds). *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (pp. 220-254). London: Routledge.
Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge
Kristeva, J. (2002). *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Lippard, L. (1989). Both sides now (a reprise). *Heresies*, *24*, 29.
Lippard, L. R. (1980). Sweeping exchanges: the contribution of feminism to the art of the 1970s. *Art Journal*, *40*(1-2), 362-365.
Mackie, V. (1988). Feminist politics in Japan. *New Left Review*, *167*(5), 3-76.
Malek, A. (2006). Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production: A case study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series. *Iranian Studies*, *39*(3), 353-380.
McAllister, M. P., Sewell, E. H. and Gordon, I. (2001). Introducing comics and ideology. *Comics and ideology*, pp.1-13.
McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The invisible art*. New York: HarperCollins.
McKnight, A. (2017). At the source (code): Obscenity and modularity in Rokudenashiko's media activism. In M. Steinberg and A. Zalten (eds.), *Media Theory in Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Meskimmon, M. (2012). *Women Making Art: History, subjectivity, aesthetics*. New York: Routledge.
Meskimmon, M. (2008). Feminisms and art theory. In Smith, P. and Wilde, C. (eds.), *A Companion to Art Theory* (pp.380 – 396). Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
Miller, N. K. (2000). But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir? *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, *13*(2), 421-436.
Murray, R. (2011). The feminine mystique: Feminism, sexuality, motherhood. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *2*(1), 55-66.
Nochlin, L. (1971/2003). Why have there been no great women artists? In Jones, A. (ed.), *The feminism and visual culture reader* (pp. 229-233). London: Psychology Press.
Panchanathan, S., Park, Y. C., Kim, K. S., Kim, P. K. and Golshani, F. (2000). September. The role of color in content-based image retrieval. In Proceedings 2000 International Conference on Image Processing (Cat. No. 00CH37101) (Vol. 1, pp. 517-520). IEEE.
Pollock, G. (2013). *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the writing of art's histories*. London: Routledge.
Pollock, G. (ed.). (2005). *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist readings*. London: Routledge.
Roces, M. (2010). Asian feminisms: Women's movements from the Asian perspective. In Roces, M. and Edwards, L. (eds.), *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and transnational activism* (pp. 11-30). New York: Routledge.
Rokudenashiko. (2016). *What is obscenity?: The story of a good for nothing artist and her pussy*. Toronto, Canada: Koyama Press.
Royal, D. P. (2007). Introduction: Colouring America: Multi-ethnic engagements with graphic narrative. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)*, *32*(3), 7-22.

Sabin, R. (2013). *Adult Comics: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
Sanders, L. S. (2007). Feminists love a utopia. In Gillis, S., Howie, G. and Munford, R. (eds.), *Third Wave Feminism* (pp. 3-15). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Satrapi, M. (2008). *Persepolis I and II*. London: Random House.
Simone, G. (1999). Women in Refrigerators. Available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20120111060731/http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/ (Accessed: 18 February 2020).
Skidmore, M. J. (1983). More than mere fantasy. *Journal of Popular Culture, 17*(1), 83-92.
Taylor, J. (2008). The problem of women's sociality in contemporary North American feminist memoir. *Gender & Society 22*(6) 705-727.
Thorn, M. (2004). Girls and women getting out of hand: The pleasure and politics of Japan's amateur comics community. In Kelly, W. (ed.), *Fanning the Flames: Fans and consumer culture in contemporary Japan* (pp.169-188). New York: State University of New York Press.
Tierney, H. (1996). Hannah Wilke: The intra-Venus photographs. *Performing Arts Journal*, *18*(1), 44-49.
Wilke, H. (1974). *SOS Starification 1974 – 1982. Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles, CA. URL:* Available at: http://www.hannahwilke.com (Accessed: 18 February 2020).
Whitlock, G. (2006). Autographics: The seeing 'I' of the comics. *Modern Fiction Studies*, *52*(4), 965-979.
Zack, N. (2005). *Inclusive Feminism: A third wave theory of women's commonality*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Citation: Sylvester, S. (2020). Drawing Dangerous Women: The Monstrous-Feminine, Taboo and Japanese Feminist Perspectives on the Female Form. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 05. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7909

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 06
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Women Living in Solitude: A Case Study of *The Base of an Old Girl and Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me*

Kin-Wai Chu [1*]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

Autobiographical graphic novels have become a salient cultural production and a popular art form for feminists to express themselves nowadays. The graphic life stories privileged by feminist comic scholarship are often related to sexuality, trauma and unspeakable taboos while other themes are less explored. This article is a case study focusing on the visual and narrative analysis of two alternative feminist comic diaries: *The Base of an Old* Girl (2009), created by the Hong Kong artist Stella So; and *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* (2003) (literally translated as living alone for the fifth year), created by the Japanese artist Naoko Takagi. These works are composed of episodic everyday stories and the overarching narratives embody a sense of joy of living in solitude. Drawing on the manga aesthetic of '*kawaii*' (cuteness), So and Takagi depict infantilised visual imagery and discursive practices in their comic diaries. This suggests a transcultural configuration of femininity that departs from the conventional emphasis on the female body and sexuality in feminist studies.

Keywords: Feminist comics, comic diaries, singleness, kawaii, solitary living

INTRODUCTION

Feminism not only aims at achieving gender equality but also repositioning women as subjects by highlighting women's agency. Stressing the subjectivity of femininity helps recognise its multiplicity so as to diversify current social constructionist points of view (e.g. Berger, 1972; Betterton, 1987; Jones, 2010; Klein, 1993). Likewise, to understand the construction of femininity in Asia, one cannot rely solely on the existing knowledge of western feminism. This article will look into a changing phenomenon of East Asian single women who embrace their singleness. It will do so through a case study of two autobiographical comic diaries: Stella So's *The Base of an Old Girl* (2009) and Naoko Takagi's *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* (2003). The first part of this article contextualises feminism and comics from a historical and transnational perspective. The second part discusses the visual features of the two diaries in relation to the western culture of cuteness and the Japanese culture of *kawaii*. The third part analyses the solitary life narratives in the diaries that reflect an emerging positive notion of singleness amongst East Asian societies. Lastly, the article will propose that the comic characters of So and Takagi can be understood to represent a strand of girl-child femininity that manifests the cross-pollinations of the feminist trends of cuteness and *kawaii* as well as the postmodernist kidult phenomenon (Ngai, 2012).

FEMINISM AND COMICS

Comics as a mass medium can be traced back to the British caricature or cartoon in humour periodicals published in the eighteenth century. These early comics were mainly produced and read by men. By the turn of the nineteenth century, women started to play a more active role in the production of political cartoons, leading to the emergence of early comics by and for women in different countries. In Anglophone contexts, the development of comics has gone hand in hand with the feminist movements, for example in the first feminist wave, which was epitomised by universal suffrage activism, many suffragists took cartoons as a means to promote their campaign. One example is the poster made by Emily J. Harding Andrews with the title 'Convicts and Lunatics' (1907-1922),

[1] *Doctoral student at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and PhD Fellow of The Researcher Foundation of Flanders (FWO),* BELGIUM
*Corresponding Author: Kinwai.chu@kuleuven.be

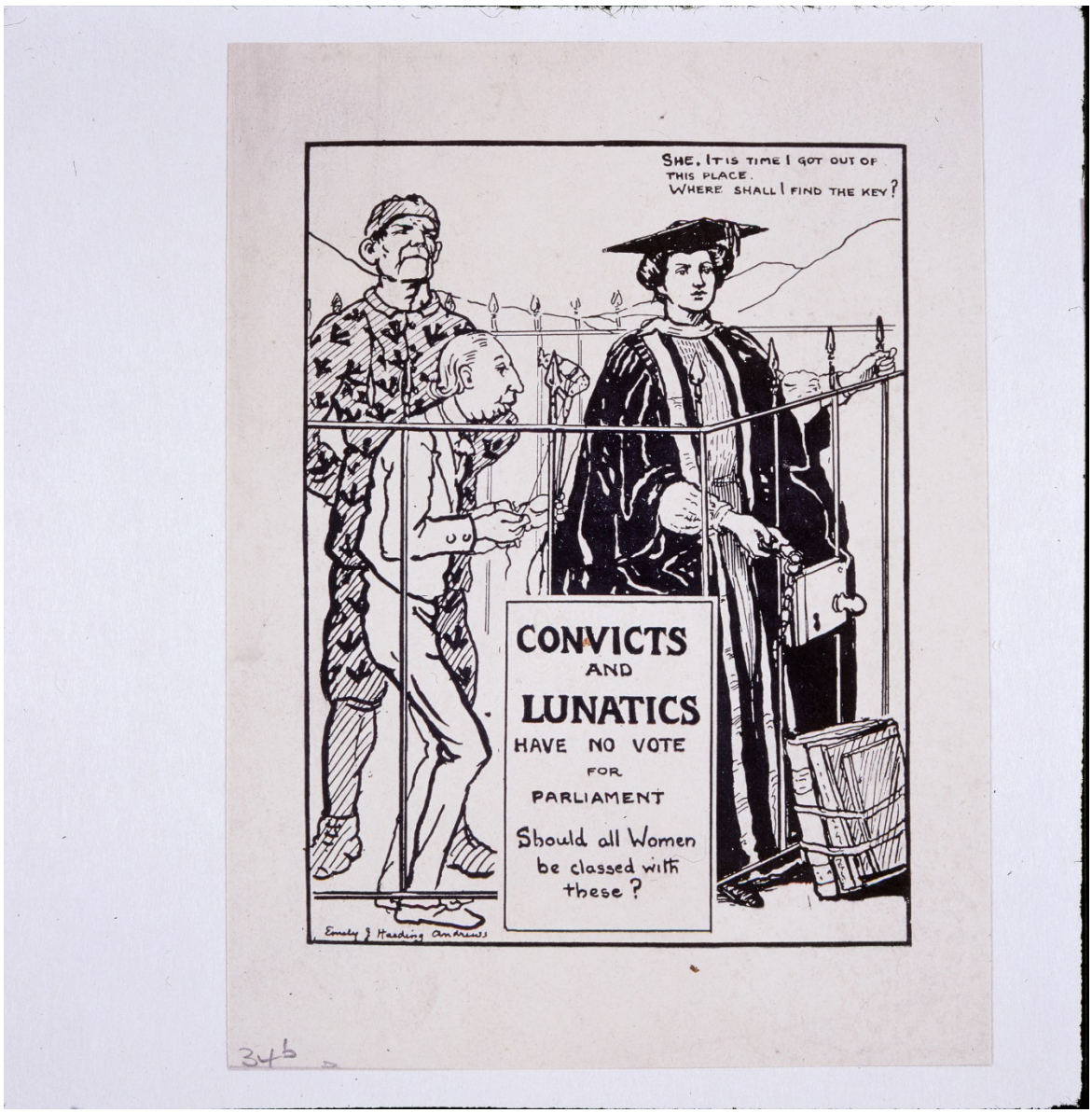


Figure 1. Andrews, E. (1907-1922). 'Convicts and Lunatics', LSE Library. This image is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA3.0.[1]

which showed an intellectual woman who is symbolised by her academic cap and gown being locked up with a convict and a man with mental health issues (**Figure 1**).

The second wave of feminism coincided with the Anglophone underground comix movements from the 1960s to 1970s, and they demonstrated a profound synergy (Chute, 2010; Robbins, 1999)[2]. Trina Robbins, a renowned women comics historian, comics artist, and cofounder of the first all-women comic book in 1970, claimed that the underground comix scene was male-dominated in the 1960s until feminist artists gradually gathered momentum during the 1970s (Robbins, 1999: 85). Underground comix were a cottage industry, mostly self-published at a low cost, so liberated feminists whose voices were silenced in mainstream media could surpass institutional mediation in the comix creation process. As a result, feminist comix not only empowered women artists by disrupting the imbalanced power relations between publishers and author-artists, they also offered representations of empowerment. In the early 1990s, the third wave of feminism shifted towards individualism and diversity, and this came in tandem with the rise of alternative comics movement (Streeten and Tate, 2017; Walker, 2006). Alternative

[1] Photographic postcard 'Convicts and Lunatics' by Emily J. Harding Andrews from Mary Lowndes Album (1907-1922), ID 234135.3, Women's Library Suffrage Banners Collection, The Women's Library, LSE Library. The digital version is available at The Visual Arts Data Service (VADS), (https://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=78643&sos=5). This image is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

[2] Underground 'comix' movement took place in the USA where a group of comics artists explored x-rated topics (for details, see further Sabin, 1996).

comic author-artists differentiate their works from mainstream comics mainly by sole authorship and specific aesthetic pursuits or trends (Hatfield, 2005).

Roughly at the same time, the graphic novel emerged as a subcategory of alternative comics but with an emphasis on narrativity and literariness. The graphic novel elevated the status of comics by following the publication format and distribution channels of literary books and it represents a 'significant aspect of comics and literary history' (Baetens, Frey and Tabachnick, 2008:1). Female artists are more visible in this graphic novel scene in which some canonised works, by Alison Bechdel, Phoebe Gloeckner, and Marjane Satrapi to name but a few, have not only attracted widespread scholarly attention but also arguably made autobiographical feminist comics become 'today's most riveting feminist cultural productions' (Chute, 2010: 2). Although most comics theories and the comics corpus chosen for academic studies have been established in the European and North American contexts, the recent decade has seen burgeoning research that enriches the spectrum of comics from transnational, multicultural, and wider global perspectives (Aldama, 2010; Brienza, 2015; Denson, et al., 2013; Heimermann and Tullis, 2017; Lent, 2015).

FEMINISM AND COMICS IN EAST ASIAN CONTEXTS

Lisa Bloom claims that western feminist movements have not been directly adopted in Asian societies partly because of the relatively 'strong patriarchal familial contexts in Asia, making Asian women still more bound by traditional notion of womanhood (2010: 16)'. Manga constitute an indispensable component of Japanese popular culture, so manga for women can be taken as a departure point for the cultural study of Japanese feminism. The highly stratified manga market reaches all walks of life because manga are not just classified according to genre but also according to the gender and age group of the target audience (Ito, 2005; Schodt, 1986). *Shōjo* manga, for instance, is manga for teenage girls, while *Josei* (or *radikomi* and *rediisu*) manga targets adult women. In the early 1970s, a group of female manga artists (called the Year 24 Group or *Nijtūyo-nen Gumi*) revolutionised *shōjo* manga and their success also elevated the status of female manga artists (Shiokawa, 1999: 100).

Hong Kong comics have a strong affinity with manga. In the 1960s, Hong Kong became 'the earliest outlet of the global flow of manga from Japan' though most of the translated manga were pirated back then (Wong, 2006: 29). This gradually led to the 'Japanese [manga] boom' in Hong Kong since the 1980s (Lai and Wong, 2003: 116). Regarding the gender ratio and cultural production of comics, there have been significantly fewer female comic artists in Hong Kong. The most well-known female artists include Wai-chung Lee (who started her career in the 1960s and is coined as 'the mother' of Hong Kong girl's comics), Alice Mak, Rainbow Leung and Little Thunder.

Japan and Hong Kong are not simply tied to each other in terms of commerce, but also in terms of their cultural proximity (Bridges, 2005; Roger, 1989). Both of their traditional social values are shaped by Confucianism to various degrees. Both have also experienced more drastic westernisation, largely caused by trade, religious activities and political processes[3]. Japanese ports were forced to open up to international trade in the 1850s, followed by the explicit national goal to modernise or westernise the country during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and the Taishō period (1912-1926). Similarly, British colonisation (1842-1997) transformed Hong Kong into a cosmopolitan city, idiomatically blending East and West.

The hybridised sociocultural constructions of Japan and Hong Kong highlight the fluidity and heterogeneity of Asian cultures, which cannot be labelled as or reduced to a 'homogeneous totalizing whole' (Darling-Wolf, 2015:8). Likewise, the term 'Asian feminist comics' is a homogeneous category that undermines the diversity of such comics. Therefore, this article presents two indicative case studies by analyzing one Japanese and one Hong Kong comic diary in order to explore how such works can evince heterogeneous feminist sensibilities that can broaden and reflect upon the complexity of existing feminist discourse. This choice of corpus takes into account the fact that diaries are a key genre in feminist studies, since autobiographical writing and everyday life experiences can foreground socially and personally constructed gender identities (Gibson, 2015; Hirschman, 2003; McRobbie, 2004). Everyday life narratives have also been an increasingly popular theme in the contemporary and global comics' scene over the past few decades (Schneider, 2010).

HITORIGURASHI MO 5 NEN ME AND *THE BASE OF AN OLD GIRL*

The two comic diaries to be analysed in this article are the Japanese artist Naoko Takagi's *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* (2003), which literally means 'Living Alone for the Fifth Year' ; and the Hong Kong artist Stella So's *老少*

[3] Foreign contacts with Japan began in the fourteenth century but a closed-country policy was implemented during the Edo period (1603-1868), from the 1630s to the 1850s. *Onna Daigaku* (translated as 'the great learning for women') was written during the mid-Edo period to teach Japanese women Confucian values, including women's total submission to their husbands.

女基地 (*The Base of an Old Girl*) (2009)[4]. Both Takagi and So depict themselves as cute and prepubescent girls. Their diaries also document solitary living in a positive way.

Takagi narrates the fifth year of living alone after moving to Tokyo in *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* (*Hitorigurashi* hereafter). Her diary is divided into sixteen chapters and each chapter discusses one issue about everyday solitary living, such as cooking simple dishes, watching horror movies, and rearranging furniture. When Takagi created this comic, she had already made her name with her debut autobiographical comic book, *150 cm Life* (2003).

In *The Base of an Old Girl*, So depicts her new lease of life after moving out of her parents' home into her newly purchased apartment. *The Base of an Old Girl* (*The Base* hereafter) is a compilation of her eponymous weekly comic column in a Chinese-language newspaper called *Mingpao*. The Chinese title is literally translated as 'the base of an old teenage girl' which is a parody of the Japanese *shōjo* manga series *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* (1991-1997) that is literally translated as 'Pretty teenage-girl warrior Sailor Moon' in Chinese. Thus, 'old teenage girls' is used satirically to describe mature women who still embrace the identity of teenage girls.

This article will provide a visual analysis of the female imagery and a thematic analysis of the discursive practices of singlehood and solitary living[5]. The selected works manifest direct influences from certain trends initiated in the West, namely, the feminist trends of singleness and girlhood, and the alternative comic trend of autobiography. On the surface, Takgai and So highlight girlhood instead of womanhood, following a recent tendency that obscures the boundary between girls and women (Handyside and Taylor-Jones, 2016). However, a closer examination from a transcultural perspective reveals that they have developed a specific form of femininity shaped by the East Asian and localised cultures.

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN JAPAN AND HONG KONG

Analysing the theme of solitary living presented with cute and *kawaii* aesthetics in So and Takagi's comic diaries requires a detour to situate the prevailing feminist theories in Japan and Hong Kong. Arguably, feminism began in the West, so when the western feminist movements reached Japan and Hong Kong, they intersected with the local culture in different fashions.

Western feminist ideas were introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth century. Throughout the 1920s, Japanese feminists challenged the highly patriarchal system and fought not only for voting rights but also for the right to divorce and to access higher education (Yoshihara, 2004). These demands were answered in the Post-war reforms in the late 1940s. Japanese feminists also followed the second wave of western feminism in the 1960s and 70s with some success. In terms of statistical evidence, Japan ranked 19th out of the 189 member states in both the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII), issued by the United Nations in 2017[6]. Nevertheless, even though the Gender Equality Employment Act came into effect in Japan in 1986, the traditional gender role of women as homemakers still holds strong. This is evident from the Global Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2018) which ranked Japan 110th out of 148 countries. One indicator included in the report is the average number of hours spent on unpaid household chores by both men and women. The study indicated that Japanese women spend five times more time than men on housework.[7] Therefore, it seems that Japan's top-down equality policies and initiatives have not yet truly aligned with the persistent socio-cultural realities of society.

In Hong Kong, the first feminist wave only emerged after the Second World War and continued until the 1970s, during which time women activists demanded egalitarian legal rights, such as abolishing polygamy and receiving

[4] The images of *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* used in this study is a Chinese translation published by Titan Publishing Co. Ltd in 2005 while the original Japanese version was published by Media Factory, Inc., a company of Kadokawa Future Publishing in 2003.

[5] In earlier research about single women, the word 'spinster' was used but it is embedded with negative and passive connotation so 'singleness' is used in this article following more recent studies that will be discussed in the later section (Macvarish, 2006: 5).

[6] The GDI measures life expectancy, knowledge and standard of living while GII measures health, empowerment and the labour market. Among the 189 member states included in the GDI, Hong Kong ranks 7th; Singapore ranks 9th; Japan 19th; the Republic of Korea 22th, China 86th (For the full report, http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/137906). The countries mentioned above obtained the same results in the GII, except for Hong Kong, which is not included in the GII for an unknown reason. As a part of China, Hong Kong is an associate member in the UN and this study takes the statistics of Hong Kong and China separately (For the full report, http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/68606).

[7] The Global Gender Gap Report takes into account the following indicators: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In this study, Japan was ranked in position 117, 64, 41 and 125, respectively, leading to the overall ranking of 110. However, the ranking of Hong Kong is probably included in that of China, which obtained 103th place. Given the fact that the ranking of Hong Kong and China showed great disparity in the United Nations report as mentioned in Note 2, it seems to be more appropriate not to compare the situation in Hong Kong and Japan based on the results of this report. (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf).

'equal pay for equal work', while universal suffrage was not on the agenda due to Hong Kong's colonial status (Chiang and Liu, 2011: 557-8). When there were territory-wide elections for the two District Boards during the 1980s, both male and female adult citizens were eligible to register as voters. In terms of the Gender Development Index, Hong Kong was ranked highest in East Asia, occupying the 7th place out of 189 member states worldwide. Highly inspired by western Marxist and socialist feminism, the second feminist wave in Hong Kong gave rise to different feminist research and activist groups in the 1980s (Chiang and Liu, 2011: 560-561). Unlike in Japan, the division of household labour is not an obvious indicator of gender inequality due to approximately 400,000 migrant domestic workers who are employed in Hong Kong households. The class and social problems associated with the employment of migrant domestic helpers are also informed by gender inequality, unfortunately though, this issue is beyond the scope of this current case study.

Since the 1990s, western feminist trends were diversified alongside decentralised structural and institutional spheres. Their cross-cultural impact on Hong Kong varies, for example, Shun-hing Chan (2009) notes that the recent feminist focus on everyday life in the West has sparked little interest in local academia in Hong Kong. Taking a critical postcolonial point of view, Sealing Cheng agrees with the postcolonial feminists' rejection of the idealisation of a 'global sisterhood' and calls instead for more attention to be paid to local sensitivities (2009: 21).

THE VISUAL ANALYSIS OF GIRL-CHILD IMAGERY

Sheri Klein (1993), who studies how femininity and sexuality are constructed in comics, claims that the imagery of women in mainstream comics, such as the superheroine comics, can be traced back to fine art traditions. In this context, the female body is usually highly sexualised and perfected to present the ideal body desired by men. In contrast to mainstream comics, most feminist comics are autobiographical and alternative comics, so they tend to display more individualistic and multifarious female imageries. Feminist comic artists are not only conscious of their self-portrayal and the central feminist issues such as the body and sexuality, but they are also aware of their defiant position to 'challenge stereotypical definitions of femininity' (Klein, 1993:63). Since comics stretch across a vast continuum that is inevitably bound by language, culture and various circumstantial factors, my analysis is limited by my own linguistic repertoire and exposure. As a result, the analysis is partial and only reflects a tiny facet of the myriad representations of Asian femininities. Even when solely focusing on feminist comic diaries, their diversity can still be daunting. So and Takagi's autobiographical diaries address different dimensions of feminism pertaining to single women as girls and singlehood while some of the key autobiographical trends in Anglophone feminist comics were saliently embedded with the 'identity politics' and trauma (Johnson (2016) quoted in Kirtley, 2018: 277).

So and Takagi's characters (**Figures 2** and **3**) embody a girl-child imagery that is seen rarely in European and American feminist comics. Such portrayal reveals two cultural trends at work. The first is the postfeminist trend of 'girling the womanhood' propounded by Anita Harris, who identifies a paradigm shift in the definition of girls from a simple definition based on age to more complex definitions based on some additional parameters influenced by the 'twenties' phenomenon and the 'girlie movement' (2004: xx). This trend is inspired by the parallel and non-gender specific postmodernist trend of kidulthood (Bernardini, 2014). The elastic construction of femininity means that 'the 'feeling' and 'doing' of a girl can attach to bodies of those other than young females' (Handyside and Taylor-Jones, 2016: 8). Angela McRobbie postulates that post-feminism signals the changing interest of feminist studies from the 'centralised power blocks' during the second wave to 'more dispersed sites, events and instances of power' since the 1990s (2004: 255-6). More importantly, she proposes that 'the tropes of freedom and choice' are 'inextricably connected with the category of young women' (2004: 255). In fact, the presence of girls in media is not a recent phenomenon at all, as six out of the ten top-grossing US movies of all time, such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Sound of Music* (1965), feature a girl who is coming of age (Gateward and Pomerance, 2002: 14). However, until the recent decade, feminist studies of girls and girlhood were more overshadowed by topics such as sexuality and power relations.

This shifted notion of girlhood can find its precursor in a series of bestsellers from the 1960s, spearheaded by Helen Gurly Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962). The author later globalised the business of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, promoting a highly consumerist kind of western womanhood. *The Single Girl*, like *Playboy* at the time, propagated the notion of 'singleness' in which men and women were 'in a state of perpetual immaturity' and, therefore, they deconstructed the traditional notion of manhood and womanhood that were closely linked with family responsibility (Radner and Luckett, 1999: 10). However, such western materialist and consumerist girl cultures are in tension with the traditional family cultures that still play a relatively important role in East Asia.

Figure 2. Takagi, N. (2005: 56). *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me*. Courtesy of Naoko Takagi, Titan Publishing Co. Ltd. (Morning Star Group) (Taiwan) and Media Factory, Inc., affiliated to Kadokawa Future Publishing (Tokyo).

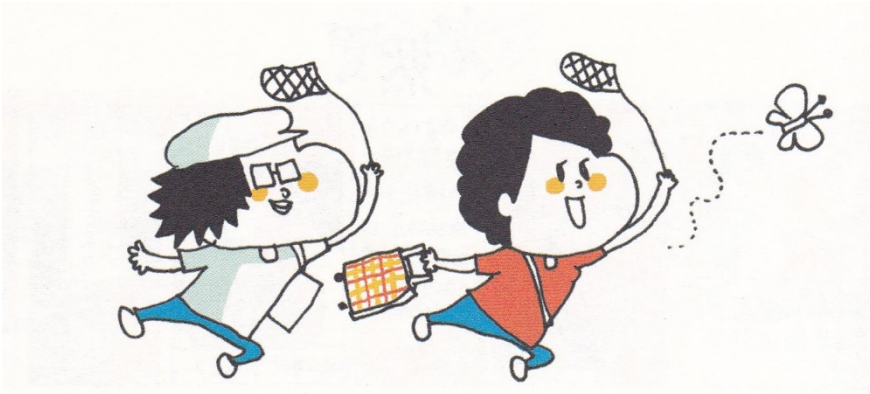


Figure 3. So, S. (2009: 92). *The Base of an Old Girl.* (Stella So (left) and her mother (right)). Courtesy of Stella So and Joint Publishing (Hong Kong).

CUTENESS AND *KAWAII*

The second and more prominent influence on the way in which Takagi and So picture themselves as small girls in their comic diaries concerns the '*kawaii*' culture. The word *kawaii* is a derivation of *kawai,* which first appeared in Japanese classic literature in the eleventh century, referring to 'the sentiment of pity and empathy' and the 'persons and things that inspired such sentiment' (Kōjien (1969: 477), quoted in Shiokawa, 1999: 95). By the nineteenth century, the word had gradually evolved into the adjective *kawaii.* According to the Japanese dictionary*, Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, it means something or somebody who 1) 'looks miserable and raises sympathy'; 2) is 'attractive and adorable' (referring to young women and children); 3) 'small and beautiful'; and 4) 'innocent, and obedient' (like children). '*Kawaii*' has also been added to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* where it is linked to the adjective 'cute' and the noun 'cuteness'. Therefore, '*kawaii*' and 'cute/cuteness' are only broadly similar but they actually carry different nuances (Nittono, 2016; Pellitteri, 2018).

Kawaii culture became more salient and even commodified after the Second World War in Japan, being partially influenced by the western culture of cuteness (Ngai, 2012:78; Shiokawa, 1999: 95). In the late nineteenth century, cute characters were seen in western comics. An example is in Palmer Cox's serialised comics *The Brownies* (1883-1918), whose characters have disproportionately large eyes and chubby faces. Citing Konrad Lorenz's (1971) ethnological explanation that babies' facial features can evoke humans' instinctive affections, Thierry Smolderen proposes that this big-eye 'genetic trait' was so widely adopted by artists that it gradually became a prominent feature of funny characters in the following century (Smolderen, 2014: 108). Tracing cuteness in the early twentieth century poetry studied by Hannah Arendt (1958), Sianne Ngai remarks on the linguistic 'cutification', which helps strengthen the association of cuteness with 'the infantile, feminine, and unthreatening' (Ngai, 2012: 3).

The transnational impact of the big-eye trait in manga is obvious while the big eyes of many manga characters have gradually evolved into a variety of stylistically and aesthetically distinctive features. For example, enormous and sparkling eyes were a typical feature for girl characters in *shōjo* manga, but in the recent decades such a feature has also appeared in 'non-girl' and boy characters in the *shōnen'ai* or the queer boy subgenre, propagating the fluidity and heterogeneity of gender (Tekeuchi, 2010: 87). Both cuteness and *kawaii* culture are associated with femininity and infantility, but *kawaii* culture has an additional connection with the specific 'girl-child subculture' in Japan (Shiokawa, 1999: 93).

On the one hand, So and Takagi's characters are inspired by *shōjo* manga in a generic sense, and intertwined with *kawaii* and cute aesthetics as well as the prevailing western cultural traditions of girlhood and kidulthood. On the other hand, their non-sexualised appearance and anecdotal narratives of solitude cannot be classified under mainstream *shōjo* manga, which generally revolve around the 'trinity of sex, love, marriage' (Fujimoto quoted in Takeuchi, 2010: 90). The images of Takagi and So's characters visualise the infantile connotation of *kawaii* and cuteness, similar to Ngai's observation of cute objects as 'simple or formally noncomplex' (Ngai, 2012: 59). In particular, Takagi's character with nondescript facial features, a bob hairstyle and a childlike body shape (**Figure 2**) resembles Momoko Sakura (Maruko) who is the nine-year-old main character in the highly popular manga and anime series *Chibi Maruko-chan*. Her drawing style is also characterised by simplistic strokes, which simulate a childlike drawing style. In comparison, So's visual imagery is less girlish and childlike because she mixes *kawaii* and *zaniness* in characterisation. For example, she draws herself with a chubby face with two patches of orange rather than pink cheeks. Pink cheeks are typically used to signify either a blush of shame or the rosy cheeks of children - a marked feature of some *kawaii* children' characters, such as Maruko (Cohn and Ehly, 2016: 27). So probably uses orange rather than pink cheek colour to tune down the infantile and girly image of her character.

The cartooning style of So's character displays an infantile and overtly exaggerated body proportion with a large head and a disproportionately plump and blob-like body (**Figures 3-4**). This cartooning technique is similar to the *chibi* style, a manga technique used to temporarily turn a character into a highly deformed miniature version of itself to express an extreme emotion, because *chibi* literally means 'little/small person/child' (Cohn and Ehly, 2016: 22, 25). However, So uses this style as her standard look regardless of the emotional state of her character to produce a comical effect. Her facial expressions are also carefully rendered to establish her hilarious personality. For example, her mouth in profile is sometimes drawn in the shape of the Arabic number '3', which represents whistling, a mischievous and frivolous marker in manga (Cohn and Ehly, 2016: 22). When she is overjoyed, she laughs with a widely open crocodile-like mouth (**Figure 7**, panel 10 and 13). So sometimes depicts herself as asexual or even androgynous, by drawing stubble on her face (**Figure 8**). This flexible gender portrayal is in line with the way she pictures herself with a flat chest while her mother is consistently drawn with breasts, although these are not obvious in So's cartooning style (**Figure 3**). Thus, So's prepubescent figure suggests her intended rejection of a feminine body, which is shared by Takagi who also draws her silhouette similar to that of a small child in bathing scenes (**Figure 2**).

Emanata are comic icons conventionally used to represent motion, sound, various emotions and so on (Witek, 2012: 29; Walker, 2003). So often utilises them as humorous and *kawaii* markers. In **Figure 4**, So expresses how hot she felt during a summer night by drawing the curvy evaporating air and sweat drops (panel 10). Her cat Ding Ding came and wanted to talk to her, signified by an empty speech balloon, but by then So's face had become even more sweaty and she expressed her annoyance using two hot puffs of smoke popping out from her head (panel 11). Next, the narration says she kicked Ding Ding away by accident (as indicated by the motion lines from her foot and the spiky lines referring to a crash) so Ding Ding cried with two long tear streaks and yelled, 'How come you treat me like this?...You have changed! (panel 12 and my translation)' In panel 13, So narrates, 'In the middle of this stuffily hot night, the most terrible mosquito appeared. I could only apply 'White Flower Embrocation' (a strong-scented medicated embrocation to treat the mosquito bites and to serve as mosquito-repellent) all over my body (my translation)'. Her anger is channelled via her throbbing cruciform veins and there is an extradiegetic flying line and arrow labelling the flying route and location of the mosquito.

Different colours are applied to reflect changing moods across the panels. Across the four panels, the background colour changes from green, to orange, to red, which indicates a climax. After that, the background colour becomes green again as this colour signifies resolution. The colour of her face also changes from the default white to a lighter shade of orange and finally deep orange to display the escalation of anger or annoyance.

Figure 4. So, S. (2009: 131). *The Base of an Old Girl*, panel 10-13. Courtesy of Stella So and Joint Publishing (Hong Kong).

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF SINGLENESS

Anglophone comix artists started to approach the topic of everyday life back in the 1960s (Cates, 2011; Schneider, 2010) but it only became the object of postmodern and feminist analyses in the 1980s (de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1984). Connecting this feminist trend with the development of *shōjo* manga, stories about the everyday lives of girls became more widespread in the late 1980s (Takeuchi 2010). While short comic strips about everyday life or current affairs started to become common in Hong Kong newspaper columns a few decades ago, it is not until the 2010s that the depiction of everyday life in comics started to raise growing public awareness (OUAT, 2019: 3).

The two comic diaries analysed include joyful anecdotes of living alone. Such narratives have foregrounded one issue, namely, girl-child-looking women embracing singleness through the discursive practices of solitary living. Combining the notion of singleness and solitary living, there is a body of social research studying singlehood and spinsterhood in modern societies. In earlier psychological and social research, an age-old marginalised and pathological social perception of singleness was presumed (Adams, 1976; Chasteen, 1994; Jeffreys, 1985). Nowadays, marginalised groups in general are gaining more social recognition. There has also been a more positive cultural shift in the representation of single women who deviate from the traditional homogeneous gender and social discourses (Sandfield and Percy, 2003). Several studies conducted in a British context have shown strong evidence that the concept of singleness varies across age, class and social environment (Macvarish, 2006; Simpson, 2005; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Similar research results have been obtained in Hong Kong and Japan, both of which have a growing population of single women who are considered to be a 'somewhat anomalous category' in Japan (Rosenberger 2007: 94) and a 'normal deviance' in Hong Kong (Ng and Ng, 2009: 303)[8].

Eriko Maeda and Michael Hecht conducted a longitudinal study on the always-single Japanese women and found that they were marginalised (but not sanctioned) in Japan, a country that accentuates 'social conformity', but the women did seem to express a heightened self-acceptance over time (2012: 58). The positivity projected in Takagi's work also manifests this trend. Likewise, some Japanese TV dramas have been devoted to reflecting more diverse life options for women, with an aim to foster a more positive mentality within this group of single women and initiate a more constructive and open discussion in society at large. Two popular examples are *Around 40* (2008) and *Wonderful Single Life* (2012) (the Japanese title *Kekkon Sinai* is literally translated as 'Do not get married'). Both

[8] In Japan, 22.7% of females aged 15 or above have never been married, according to a study conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in 2015 (http://www.ipss.go.jp/p-info/e/psj2017/PSJ2017.asp). In Hong Kong, the never-married women population (aged 16 or above) is higher, accounting for 28% of the women population in 2016, according to the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong (https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hkstat/sub/sp160.jsp?productCode=FA100055).

TV dramas star the renowned actress Yuki Amami whose real life is similar to her on-screen roles. In an annual survey conducted by the Japanese media company Orion Inc (Orion News, 2012), Amami has been voted as 'the woman that Japanese women want to be the most' multiple times by Japanese women aged from 10 to 40. This clearly indicates that people's attitudes to singleness are evolving in a more positive direction.

A similar research project studying the identity of single working women in Hong Kong found that participants actually faced 'little stigmatization' regarding their status as single women (Ng and Ng, 2009: 303). However, this study provides little evidence on whether this is a temporal change of view or whether this view has been stable in Hong Kong culture for a longer period of time. Considering an old customary practice in the Pearl River Delta of China (mainly the Shunde region) where many women worked in the silk and textile industry and thus became financially independent, some of them became 'self-combed women' or celibate women who took a vow of lifelong celibacy and independence as 'a form of marriage resistance' (Branigan, 2014). Since the silk industry collapsed in the 1930s, many of them moved to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia to work as housemaids. In 1950, this centuries-old custom was banned in China after the implementation of the new marriage law. For decades, self-combed women were fairly visible and they have been culturally accepted in Hong Kong. So's satirical jokes about herself as an 'unmarried old girl' implies a certain degree of self-acceptance of her singleness.

Although the depiction of singlehood in Takagi and So's works is certainly an artistic or personal life choice, it also reflects a wider cultural shift in Hong Kong and Japan. What So and Takagi have in common are forms of social, cultural and economic capital which empower them to be well-educated and financially independent as professional graphic artists. They embody the concepts of 'female individualism' and 'new meritocracy' in modern and open societies where middle class women generally enjoy equal access to education, thus enabling them to make alternative life choices (McRobbie, 2004: 258). The western second-wave feminist point of view takes sexual liberty as one means of emancipation, but So and Takagi lead a solitary and celibate life, so it is difficult to judge if Takagi and So are sexually liberated or otherwise enslaved by the ingrained patriarchal social control of sexuality in their societies because their diaries do not include sexual partners. Instead, their diaries demonstrate self-actualisation, rather than sexual freedom, as a different causal link to emancipation.

When it comes to the notion of emancipation, Jan Bardsley, who studies women and marriage in modern Japan, observes that the term is seen in dichotomy with patriarchy in absolute terms without acknowledging the intertwining themes of control and resistance within the dominant patriarchal social structures (2004). As a result, there is a tendency to underestimate the feminist progress in Japan. In Hong Kong, Cheng (2009) suggests that there is a different interpretative framework towards the concepts of the female body and sexuality among the groups of Hong Kong women she studied, in which cultural taboos descended and derived from traditional Confucian propriety still carry weight for an individual woman's identity. Therefore, the less sexually provocative contents of So and Takagi's diaries compared with some well-studied western feminist comics, such as Julie Doucet's *My New York Diary* (1999) and Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An account in words and pictures* (2002), have illustrated different values between individuals and society. This is not an essentialist claim for all western feminist comics versus East Asian comics. On the contrary, the diversity of feminist comics is never exhaustive. It is likely to cite some drastically different comics created by artists within the same culture.

This article delves into how So and Takagi construct their everyday life narratives using the aesthetics of cuteness and *kawaii*. *Kawaii* elements are clearly visible in *Hitorigurashi* due to the ubiquity of *kawaii* as a key constituent of modern Japanese culture (Kinsella, 1996; Masubuchi, 1994; Nittono, 2016; Yomota, 2006). Since the traditional role of women as homemakers is still highly valued in Japan, Takagi may have internalised such ideals and then prioritised managing her home over her work in her diary. This may explain why she divides her diaries into topical 'slice-of-life' stories without mentioning working at home as an artist. She only made one marginally work-related remark when complaining about her bulky computer and other home office appliances occupying too much space in her studio flat. Foregrounding her childlike acts but obscuring her profession in the story is widely acceptable because Japanese tend to 'view singles as more socially immature than their married counterparts regardless of their age', as suggested by Maeda and Hecht (2012: 50) who draw on the studies conducted by De Paulo and Morris (2005). In addition, this focus can also be partly explained by Yvonne Tasker and Dianne Negra's claim that career women may be perceived as less intimidating if they are portrayed as inexperienced girls (2005: 109); so these may be tactical strategies being deployed.

Since *kawaii* is also associated with innocent, obedient and unthreatening personalities, *kawaii* visual style can 'cutify' the practice of doing housework and further consolidate readers' association of a *kawaii* girl with doing housework. As a result, doing housework is mediated as a *kawaii* act which helps construct and support Takagi's femininity. Besides, she demonstrates an innocent trait by showing her teddy bear frequently in the story. For instance, in **Figure 5**, Takagi narrates her fear after watching a horror movie. Though she kept the light and TV on when she slept, she was still terrified by a slight movement of the balcony curtain. The personified teddy bear next to her 'felt' equally shocked, as indicated by the spiked upfixes emanata over both of their heads, and in this way the character is associated with childish vulnerability.

Figure 5. Takagi, N. (2005: 70). *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me*. Courtesy of Naoko Takagi, Titan Publishing Co. Ltd. (Morning Star Group) (Taiwan) and Media Factory, Inc., affiliated to Kadokawa Future Publishing (Tokyo).

Figure 6 shows another scenario of *kawaii* characterisation by depicting Takagi's vulnerability. When her doorbell rings, Takagi checks who is ringing the doorbell by secretly crawling towards the peep hole of the door like a toddler in order to avoid casting her moving shadow on the window curtain beside the door, where the stranger is standing outside and might have seen her. However, before she reaches the door, the stranger has found out she is inside because he is peeking through the letterbox on her door. He then asks her to open the door, seemingly with ill intent, as he speaks in an eerie tone, lengthening the articulation of the word 'miss', which is indicated by two tildes. This frightens her so much that she hides herself under a blanket until the stranger leaves. Her reconstruction of this experience stresses her timidity in a way that may easily evoke readers' empathy and even protectiveness, which is a key emotion triggered by *kawaii*.

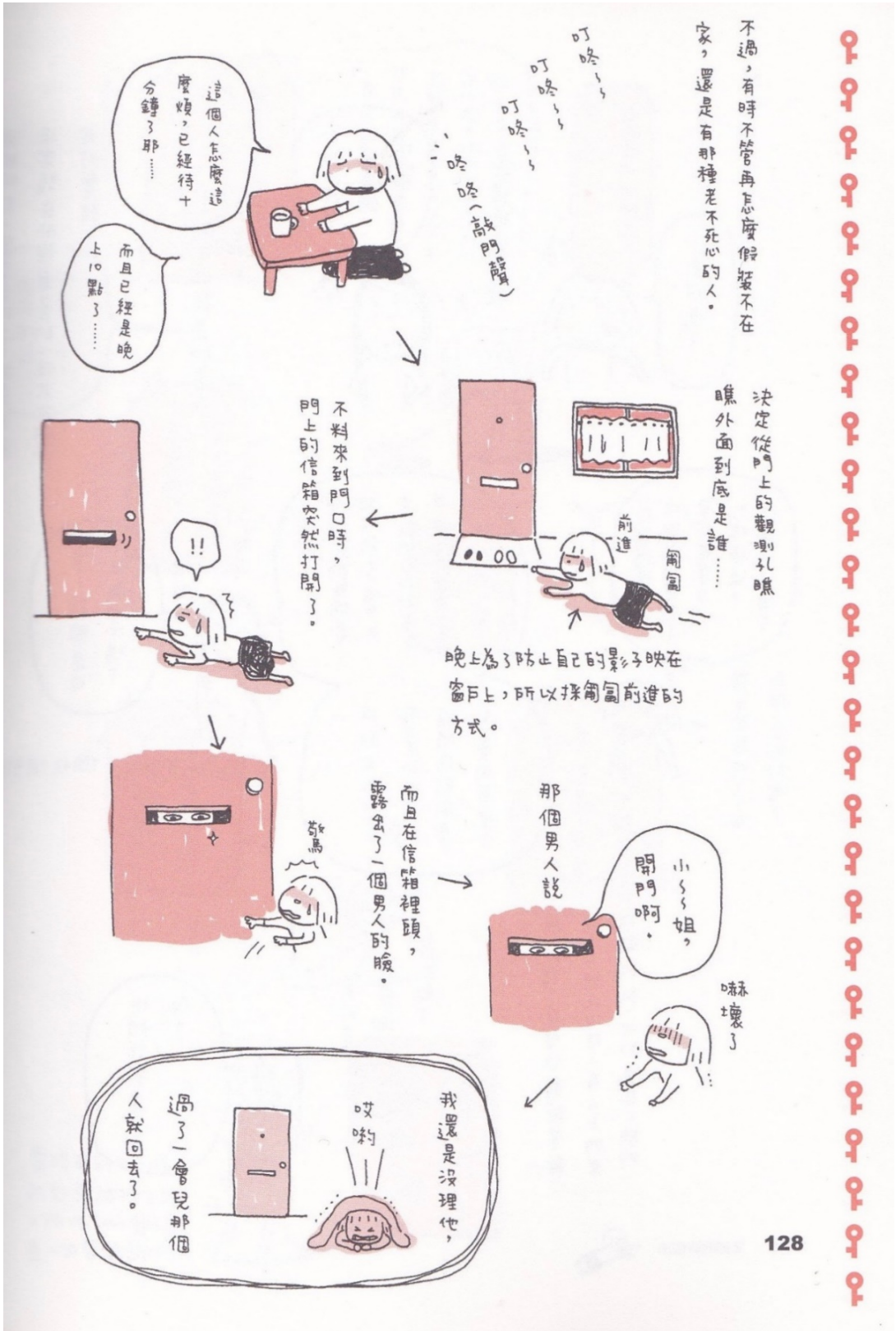


Figure 6. Takagi, N. (2005: 128). *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me*. Courtesy of Naoko Takagi, Titan Publishing Co. Ltd. (Morning Star Group) (Taiwan) and Media Factory, Inc., affiliated to Kadokawa Future Publishing (Tokyo).

So has a different take on the representation of *kawaii*. Apart from infantilising her looks and behaviour, she incorporates self-deprecating humour and constantly mentions her profession. As a result, by contrast she depicts herself as a naughty kidult instead of a submissive little girl. In the preface, she states that *The Base* is her endeavour to prove that 'my dry life being single can be very juicy (So, 2009: 5, my translation)'. In this case, the English word 'dry' is used in the original Chinese text, where it is borrowed as a slang word with an additional cultural assumption that people who are not in a relationship must lead a dull life.

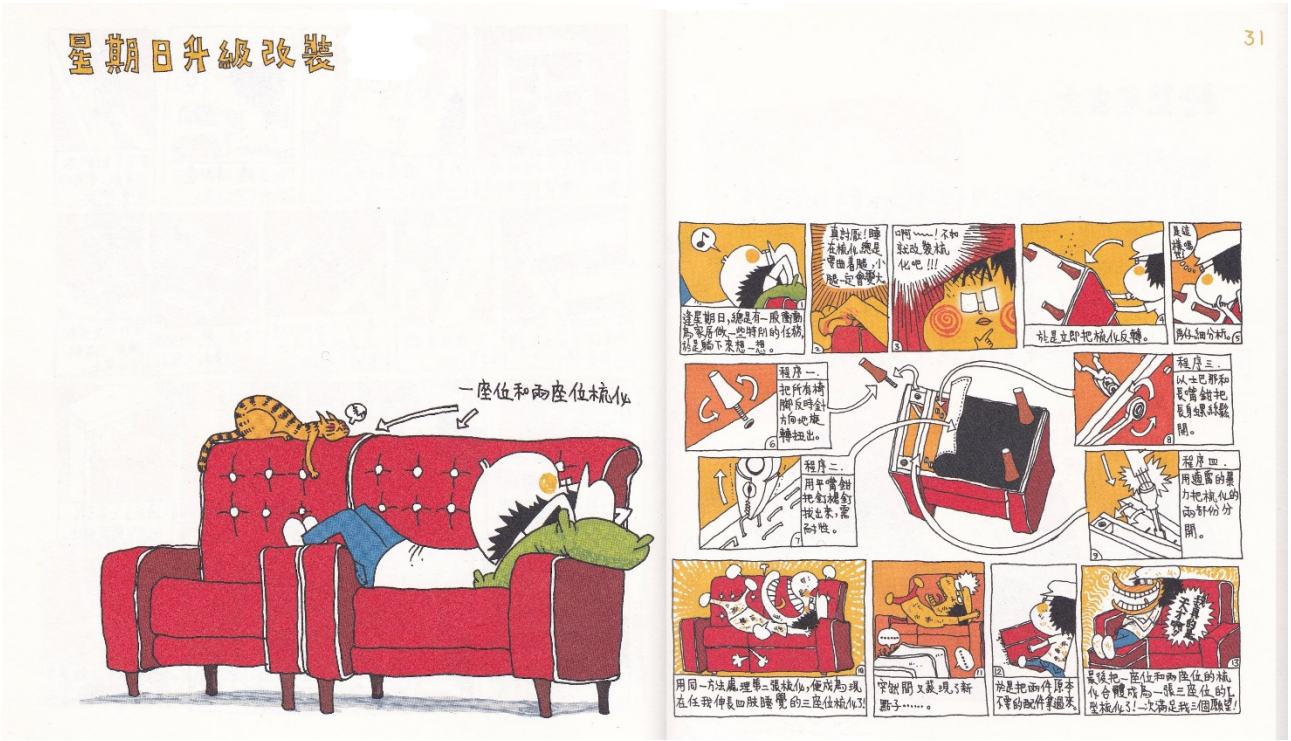


Figure 7. So, S. (2009: 30-31). *The Base of an Old Girl*. Courtesy of Stella So and Joint Publishing (Hong Kong).

So challenges the conventional notion of femininity in two ways: by projecting a cute/*kawaii* but sometimes androgynous or asexual imagery; and by intertwining childlike and professional behaviours. For example, in **Figure 7** she demonstrates her carpentry skills, a traditional masculine domain. This verso, entitled 'Sunday Furniture Upgrade' (my translation), shows So and her cat lying on two sofas side by side. The recto illustrates how she transformed the two sofas into one big sofa and felt overjoyed by yelling 'I am really a genius! (my translation)' after accomplishing this task.

Allied with this, she sometimes parodies men's stubble. In **Figure 8**, she has stubble on her face after working for long hours but in the same story she also wears a skincare face mask, which is a more typical feminine practice (though this rigid gendered act is also changing with the new Asian masculinities). The text says, 'Nowadays old teenage girls are not only worried about no one wanting to marry them, but also about not getting their work done well. Therefore, all 'old girl warriors' seek different ways to keep their youthful looks' (my translation)'. Her satirical comment on the pressure faced by single and working women being caught between traditional (family) and contemporary (work) expectation is bitter, nevertheless she consistently delivers this message with light-hearted humour.

So and Takagi represent a strand of femininity that is in between the *Single Girl* and the kidult. They embrace economic independence but this strength is tempered by childlike imagery. In the *Single Girl*, sexuality is embodied through the 'technology of the body' because the female character tries to reach the beauty standard promoted by mass media through tools and technology, such as make-up and dietary pills. As a result, the *Single Girl* is influenced by consumerism and 'the codes of femininity as defined by heterosexuality' (Radner and Luckett, 1999: 15).

Without blindly following *Single Girl*'s beauty regime, So and Tagaki share many similarities with the kidult, whose perpetual immaturity is a form of resistance to the rigid social indicators of adulthood that are linked with family and work obligations. However, Takagi and So are also different from the kidult in their preference for stability achieved through professional success, and the financial sustainability that supports their positive self-identity and solitary life. So states that she purchased her 'base' as her permanent home in case she would stay single for the rest of her life. However, So and Takagi are not regarded as militant feminists who refuse to enter romantic relationships. On the contrary, they seem to aspire to find a partner because they sometimes joke about being 'leftover girls' and share their fantasies about attractive men. Naoko Takagi seems to follow a traditional heterosexual trajectory as she has published a new comic book *Otagai 40-Dai Kon* (2018) (literally translated as 'getting married in my 40s') about dating, getting married and giving birth to her daughter. Similar to all her other works, this book contains no titillating scene or sensational descriptions about her romantic relationship.

Figure 8. So, S. (2009: 83). *The Base of an Old Girl*. Courtesy of Stella So and Joint Publishing (Hong Kong).

The *kawaii* depictions of Takagi and So lighten the pejorative connotations of singlehood by demonstrating that the pursuit of happiness lies within themselves. This resonates with some of the canonical early feminist writings and speeches such as 'The Solitude of Self', delivered by Elizabeth Cady Stanton at the National American Woman Suffrage Association convention in 1892. It is one of the first feminist speeches that emphasises women's intellectual and spiritual independence and self-sovereignty. Similar ideas were shared by the pioneer Japanese feminist Raicho Hiratsuka who co-founded the first feminist magazine *Seitō* in 1911. In the debut issue, she referred to the deity Amaterasu who symbolises the sun in Shinto religion and ancient Japanese mythology. Hiratsuka commented that woman was seen as a real person and as the sun, but in a more recent history, that metaphor changed and she became the moon, a retrograde step in which woman then lost their glory, as the moon can only reflect light from the sun rather than being a light source in its own right (Hiratsuka, 2006: 160).

CONCLUSION

A feminist reading of Naoko Takagi's *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* and Stella So's *The Base of an Old Girl* reveals that their childlike female imagery and discursive practices are tied up with a wider feminist trend of girlhood and the aesthetics of cuteness and *kawaii*. These two trends have also been influenced by the postmodern phenomenon of kidult, which involves the infantilisation of adulthood, an in-between state of development.

These works have foregrounded some configurations of femininity that deviate from the conventional emphasis on the female body and sexuality in feminist studies. From a transcultural point of view, the comic

characters of Takagi and So transgress the already blurred boundaries between girl and woman, and extend femininity to a pre-puberty stage. Their infantile girlhood can be read as influenced by the non-gender-specific kidult phenomenon that promotes perpetual immaturity. However, they have also complicated the paradigm of kidults by accepting some stable social thresholds of adulthood because they enjoy stability and independence in solitary living. All in all, they project an alternative kind of femininity that is not essentially connected to sexuality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincerest thanks to Stella So, Naoko Takagi, Joint Publishing (Hong Kong), Titan Publishing Co. Ltd. (Morning Star Group) (Taiwan), and Media Factory Inc. (a company of Kadokawa Future Publishing) (Tokyo) for generously granting me the permission to use the comic images from *The Base of an Old Girl* and *Hitorigurashi mo 5 nen me*. My heartfelt thanks go to my supervisor Jan Baetens, the editors of this journal Sally M Munt and Nicole Streeten, and the two anonymous reviewers who read and gave me advice on my drafts. Special thanks to the Research Foundation of Flanders (FWO) for funding my research. Many thanks as well to Tomomi Yoshinaga for translating the Japanese correspondence between Kadokawa Future Publishing representatives and me.

REFERENCES

Adams, M. (1976) *Single Blessedness: Observations on the single status in married society*. New York: Basic Books.

Aldama, F. (2010). (ed.). *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*. Austin, Texas: Texas University Press.

Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Baetens, J., Frey, H. and Tabachnick, S. E. (eds.) (2018). *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bardsley, J. (2004). Women, marriage, and the State in modern Japan: Introduction. *Womens Studies*, *33*(4), 353-359.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin.

Bernardini, J. (2014). The infantilization of the postmodern adult and the figure of kidult. *Postmodern Openings*, *5*(2), 39-55.

Betterton, R. (1987). *Looking On: Images of femininity in the visual arts and media*. London: Pandora Press.

Bloom, L. E. (2010). Negotiating feminisms in Asian women's art. In Jones, A. (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (2nd ed.) (pp. 14-18). London: Routledge.

Branigan, T. (2014). No regrets, say the Chinese women who chose independence over marriage, *The Guardian*, 3 July. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/03/survivors-ancient-chinese-custom-self-combed-women (Accessed 8 August 2019).

Bridges, B. (2003). Hong Kong and Japan: Commerce, culture and contention. *The China Quarterly*, *176*, 1052-1067.

Brienza, C. (2015). (ed.). *Global Manga: 'Japanese' comics without Japan?* London: Routledge.

Brown, H. G. (1962). *Sex and the Single Girl*. New York: Bernard Geis Associates.

Cates, I. (2011). The diary comic. In Chaney, M. A. (ed.), *Graphic Subjects: Critical essays on autobiography and graphic novels* (pp. 209-226). Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press.

Chan, S. (2009). Politics of female subjectivities and the everyday: The case of the Hong Kong feminist journal *Niuliu*. *Feminist Review, 92*, 36-53.

Chasteen, A. L. (1994). The world around me: The environment and single women. *Sex Roles,* 31(5/6), 309-328.

Cheng, S. (2009). Questioning global vaginahood: reflections from adapting the Vagina Monologues in Hong Kong. *Feminist Review*, *92*, 9-35.

Chiang, L.H. and Liu, Y. (2011). Feminist geography in Taiwan and Hong Kong. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 18(4), 557-569. https://doi.org/0.1080/0966369X.2011.583341

Chute, H. (2010). *Graphic Women: Life narratives and contemporary comics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cohn, N. and Ehly. S. (2016). The vocabulary of manga: Visual morphology in dialects of Japanese visual language. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *92*, 17-29.

Darling-Wolf, F. (2015). *Imagining the Global: Transnational media and popular culture beyond East and West*. Anne Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Rendall, S., (trans.). Berkley, California: UCLA Press.

DePaulo, B. M., and Morris, W. L. (2005). Singles in society and in science. *Psychological Inquiry*, *16*, 57-83. https://doi.org/10.1207=s15327965pli162&3_01

Denson, S., Meyer, C. and Stein, D. (2013). (eds.). *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the crossroads*. London: Bloomsbury Academics.

Gateward, F. and Pomerance, M. (eds.). (2002). *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinema of girlhood*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Gibson, M. (2015). Who does she think she is? Female comic-book characters, second-wave feminism, and feminist film theory. In M. Gibson, D. Huxley, and J. Ormrod (eds.), *Superheroes and Identities* (pp. 1-16 and pp. 135-146). London: Routledge.

Handyside, F, and Taylor-Jones, K. (2016). (eds.). *International cinema and the girl: Local Issues, Transnational Contexts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harris, A. (2004). *All About the Girl: Culture, power and identity*. London: Routledge.

Hatfield, C. (2005). *Alternative Comics: An emerging literature*. Jackson, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press.

Heimermann, M. and Tullis, B. (ed.). (2017). *Picturing Childhood: Youth in transnational comics*. Austin, Texas: Texas University Press.

Hiratsuka, R. (2006). *In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun: An Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist- Hiratsuka Raichō*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Teruku Craig. Columbia University Press.

Hirschmann, N. (2003). *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a feminist theory of freedom*. New Jersey: Princeton UP.

Ito, K. (2005). A history of manga in the context of Japanese culture and society. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 38(3), 456-475.

Jeffreys, S. (1985) *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and sexuality 1880-1930*. London: Pandora Press.

Johnson, M. (2016). Today's feminist comics: Why I don't relate. *The Comics Journal*. March 6. Available at http://www.tcj.com/todays-feminist-comics-why-i-dont-relate/ (Accessed 8 March 2019).

Jones, A. (2010). (ed.). *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Oricon News (2012). Josei ga erabu 'ī on'na' rankingu, amami yuki ga 4 renpa (女性が選ぶ'イイ女'ランキング、天海祐希が4連覇). *Oricon News*, 27 May 2012, Available at https://www.oricon.co.jp/news/2011032/full/#rk. (Accessed 7 March 2020).

Kinsella, S. (1996). Cuties in Japan. In Skov, L. and Moeran, B. (eds.), *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (pp. 235-53). Honolulu, Hawaii: Hawaii University Press.

Kirtley, S. (2018). 'A word to you feminist women': The parallel legacies of feminism and underground comics. In Baetens, J., Frey, H. and Tabachnick, S. E. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (pp. 269-285). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klein, S. (1993). Breaking the mold with humor: Images of women in the visual media. *Art Education*, 46(5), 60-5.

Kōjien. (ed.). (1969). *Shinmura Izuru* (2nd ed.). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

Lai, C. S. and Wong, D. H. (2003). Japanese comics coming to Hong Kong. In Befu, H. and Guichard-Anguis, S. (eds.) *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese presence in Asia, Europe, and America* (pp. 111-120). London: Routledge,

Lefebvre, M. (1984). *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Rabinovitch, S. (trans.). New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Lent, J. (2015). *Asian Comics*. Jackson, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press.

Lorenz, K. (1971). Part and parcel in animal and human societies. *Studies in Animal and Human Behaviour*, *2*, 115-195.

Macvarish, J. (2006). What is 'the problem' of singleness? *Sociological Research Online*, *11*(3), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1418

Maeda, E. and Hecht, M. L. (2012). Identity search: interpersonal relationships and relational identities of always-single Japanese women over time. *Western Journal of Communication*, *76*(1), 44-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2012.637539

Masubuchi, S. (1994). *Kawaii Shokogun/Kawaii Syndrome*. Tokyo: Nihon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai.

McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 255-264.

Ng, E. G. H and Ng, C. W. (2009). Single working women in Hong Kong: A case of 'normal deviance'. In K. Chan and A. Ku (eds.), *Doing Families in Hong Kong* (pp. 303-335). Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.

Ngai, S. (2012). *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, cute, interesting*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Nittono, H. (2016). The two-layer model of 'kawaii': A behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, *2*(1), 79-95. https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.2.1.79_1

Once Upon A Time: OUAT, Hong Kong Comics Touring Exhibition. (2019). Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2019. Available at: https://www.hkac.org.hk/calendar_detail/?u=Tt5Di_Cjbt0&lang=en (Accessed 8 January 2019).

Pelitteri, M. (2018). Kawaii aesthetics from Japan to Europe: Theory of the Japanese 'cute' and transcultural adoption of its styles in Italian and French Comics production and commodified culture goods. *Arts*, *7*(3), 24, https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7030024

Radner, H. and Luckett, M. (eds.). (1999). *Swinging Single: Representing sexuality in the 1960s*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minnesota University Press.

Reynolds, J. and Wetherell, M. (2003). The discursive climate of singleness: Consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity. *Feminism & Psychology*, *13*(14), 489-510.

Robbins, T. (1999). *From Girls to Grrlz: A history of women's comics from teens to zines*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Roger B. (1989). From reoccupation to EXPO: Hong Kong-Japanese relations, 1945-70. *Shakai Kahoku Jaanaru*, *28*, 50-52.

Rosenberger, N. (2007). Rethinking emerging adulthood in Japan: perspectives from long-term single women. *Child Development Perspectives*, *1*(2), 92-95.

Sabin, R. (1996). *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*. London: Phaidon.

Sandfield, A. and Percy, C. (2003). Accounting for single status: Heterosexism and ageism in heterosexual women's talk about marriage. *Feminism & Psychology*, *13*(4), 475-488.

Schneider, G. (2010). Comics and everyday life: From ennui to contemplation. *European Comic Art*, *3*(1), 37-63.

Schodt, F. L. and Tezuka, O. (1986). *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese comics*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Shiokawa, K. (1999). Cute but deadly: Women and violence in Japanese comics. In Lent, J. A. (ed.), *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning* (pp. 93-126). Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press.

Simpson, R. E. H. (2005). *Contemporary Spinsterhood in Britain: Gender, partnership status and social change* (PhD thesis). The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Smolderen, T. (2014). *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (trans.). Jackson, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press.

So, S. (2009). *老少女基地* (The Base of an Old Girl). Hong Kong: Jointing Publishing.

Stanton, E. C. (1915). *The Solitude of Self*. Library of Congress. Available at: https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbnawsa.n8358/?sp=2 (Accessed 4 April 2019).

Streeten, N. and Tate, C. (2017). (eds.). *The Inking Woman: 250 years of women cartoon and comic artists in Britain*. Brighton and Hove: Myriad Editions.

Takagi, N. (2003). *150 cm* ライフ. Tokyo: Media Factory Inc. Translated title: *150cm Life,* trans. Yu-jun Hung (trans.) Taipei: Titan Publish Co. Ltd.

Takagi, N. (2003). *Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me* (Original Japanese title: ひとりぐらしも５年め.

Tokyo: Media Factory Inc., 2003. Translated title: 一個人住第五年), Yu-jun Hung (trans.), Taipei: Titan Publishing Co. Ltd.

Tasker, Y. and Negra, D. (2005). InFocus: Postfeminism and contemporary media studies. *Cinema Journal*, *44*(2), 107-110.

Takeuchi, K. (2010). The genealogy of shōjo manga (girls' comics) studies. *U.S.- Japan Women's Journal*, 38, 81-112.

Walker, M. (2003). *The Lexicon of Comicana*. Port Chester, NY: The Museum of Cartoon Art.

Walker, R. (2006). Becoming the Third Wave. In Heywood, L. (ed.), *The Women's Movement Today: An encyclopaedia of third-wave feminism, vol. 2*, (pp. 3-5). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Witek, J. (2012). Comics modes: Caricature and illustration in the Crumb Family's Dirty Laundry. In M. J. Smith and R. Duncan (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and methods* (pp. 27-42). London: Routledge.

Wong, W. S. Y. (2006). Globalizing manga: From Japan to Hong Kong and beyond. *Mechademia*, *1*, 23-45.

Yomota, I. (2006). *'Kawaii' Ron/ Essay on 'Kawaii'*. Tokyo: Chikuma ShobO.

Yoshihara, M. (2004). The flight of the Japanese Butterfly: Orientalism, nationalism and performances of Japanese womanhood. *American Quarterly*, *56*(4), 975-1001.

Citation: Chu, K.-W. (2020). Women Living in Solitude: A Case Study of *The Base of an Old Girl and Hitorigurashi Mo 5 Nen Me*. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 06. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7910

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 07
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Ethnic Minority Women in Contemporary Chinese Comics: Design, Role and Identity

Xiyuan Tan [1*]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

Ethnic diversity has become an important part of Chinese culture. Since the finishing of the ethnic minority classification project, artworks representing minority people have appeared in many different forms. Among the studies of ethnic minority representation, hardly has any discussed minority women in comics. This study will investigate the depiction of female ethnic minority characters in Chinese comics. I have chosen two comics that are representative for two different categories. The first work is *Ling-Long*, an original story that uses southern ethnic minority culture as context, which falls under the 'ethnic minority themed original stories' category. The second one is *Gada Meilin*, an adaptation of a famous Mongolian folktale, which falls under the 'adaptation of existing stories' category. The main female characters will be analysed from two aspects: the visual design and the role they play in the story. The former aspect will investigate their appearance, dress, facial expressions and body languages, while the latter will investigate their occupation, position and action in the story. After the analysis, I will discuss my thoughts from the perspective of an art practitioner and suggest some of my own possible ways of improving the character designs.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, Chinese comics, character design, female characters

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority culture is an essential part of Chinese society. With the completion of the government led ethnic classification project in the late 1970s, 55 ethnic minority groups were officially confirmed and classified. This cultural diversity has attached much importance by the government and is often promoted during art events. Students are expected to learn about minority groups in history and social science classes in school, resulting in almost every educated Chinese having a general understanding of Chinese ethnic minority culture. With government attention and popular interest in ethnic minorities, many fiction and non-fiction publications representing their cultures have been produced.

Previous research has revealed that images aiming to represent an ethnic minority group usually consist of more women than men, such as in Chinese history textbooks and in films that adapt ethnic minority folktales or use ethnic minority people as main characters (Harrell, 1995; Chu, 2018). This gender imbalance makes it worthwhile to look at the issue from a feminist perspective. The two studies mentioned above have involved discussions of female positions in the relevant contexts, but there are still many more forms of media that could be explored. I choose to investigate the medium of comics - firstly, as a Chinese female graphic art practitioner and a comic reader myself, I am familiar with the way sequential graphic narratives work and have background knowledge of the contemporary Chinese comic art market. Additionally, the comic book medium has been overlooked in earlier research of ethnic minority images (Chu, 2018; Gladney, 1995; Yang, 2011; Zhang, 1997), and my study is intended to contribute to this gap. Lastly, comic art on the representation of ethnic minority people is rare and worth investigating. In a context where ethnic minorities have been constantly misrepresented in multiple media such as films and tourism tableaux, it is useful to know how minorities are represented in comics.

Among the Chinese comics that involve ethnic minorities, some use this subject as the main feature of their works, while others use it to create diversity and/or exoticism. This paper will discuss ethnic minority female characters in ethnic minority themed comics and investigate how their gender identities, ethnic identities and roles are graphically depicted. My chosen study period, from 2010 onwards, acknowledges an important period when online and digital media in China developed rapidly and was hugely influential in popular culture (Wallis, 2011),

[1] *PhD student at the School of Design and Creative Arts Loughborough University*, UK
***Corresponding Author:** x.tan@lboro.ac.uk

leading to the rapid growth of the comic industry through the appearance of major comic websites and online mobile applications.[1]

A DIFFERENT PERCEPTION OF 'ETHNIC MINORITY' IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

Ethnic grouping has been defined as 'a self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact' (De Vos, 1995:18), and 'a community whose heritage offers important characteristics in common between its members and which makes them distinct from other communities' (Modood et al., 1997:13). Both these definitions emphasise how the group members share common characteristics and use this to mark their distinctiveness from other groups. Studies on ethnic minorities in the western world often involve perceived racial differences, such as imagined to be between Blacks, Middle-East people and Asians (Central Office of Information, 1997; Modood et al., 1997; Romanucci-Ross and De Vos, 1995; Turton and Gonzalez, 1999). However, in China, people's views on ethnic minority rarely involve racial differences. Instead, Chinese people are inclined to recognise ethnic distinctions from cultural and linguistic differences (Poston and Yaukey, 1992). Not only the general public but also social scientists consider race as 'not a central factor' (Mackerras, 1987: 90) in terms of ethnic minority definition – they tend to view ethnic minorities as different 'nationalities', a 'historical category' defined by factors such as language, territory, economy and psychological make-up. I argue this is due to several reasons: firstly, most Chinese ethnic minorities have very similar visual racial features to the majority Han (such as yellow skin and black hair, although there are exceptions - for instance, Tibetans have a darker skin tone). Secondly, the Han majority group is so large that their racial features vary remarkably, so even if an individual has a distinctive ethnic appearance, Chinese people tend to think this is due to geographical influences rather than ethnic influences. Thirdly, intermarriages between the Han and the minorities have decreased unique ethnic features on both sides.

Generally, in China, the public does not see racial factors as important in defining ethnicity. There has been literature from biological anthropology, on factors such as facial structure or body size. For example, Liang defines Zhuang people as 'South-Asian Mongoloid', and that they have 'slightly darker skin compared to East-Asian Mongoloid', 'obvious cheekbones, thicker lips' and 'flat nose, thick and black hair' (2011:14, translated by the researcher). However, these nuanced racial differences are often ignored and seen as unimportant in visual culture. One explanation is that Chinese people, the potential audiences of these images, do not see racial features as an important factor that tells ethnic minorities apart, so that hence the creators of these images find it unnecessary to depict those racial features in comic art. As an illustrator myself, I argue that another reason is because these racial features are too subtle to depict.

Han dominance is one significant reason for the misrepresentations of ethnic minority groups. As the majority group in China (making up 94% of the whole Chinese population), it has been seen as the centrepiece of the Chinese nation that both Han and ethnic minorities find it difficult to distinguish between 'Han-ness' and 'Chinese-ness' (Joniak-Lüthi, 2015). Han individuals see being Han as 'being ordinary' (Joniak-Lüthi, 2015: 20). It is understandable that the Han as a majority might have biased views on minorities or exaggerate the differences between themselves and the minorities to create a symbolic contrast. As for literature on the impact of Han dominance, one example is Dillon's (2016) introduction to Chinese ethnic minorities for western readers, which states some western misunderstandings of Chinese culture, specifically in the confusion of Han Chinese and general Chinese, and the impact of Han Chinese as a majority. He defines the Han Chinese as 'the majority population who speak one of the languages […] that are grouped together as Chinese and whose written language and culture is expressed through the medium of Chinese characters' (2016: 2081).

Han Chinese is also viewed as the most 'advanced' or superior ethnic group, and is often used as the standard against which minorities are measured - another example of seeing the Han as normalised. This is also shown in Fan's article (Fan, 2016), in which he mentions that political belief and status are the crucial factors that determine whether a cultural group is advanced. In contemporary China's case, it is the Han-Chinese led Communist Party that marks the standards. Harrell (1995: 3) describes 'ethnic minority' as 'a variety of peoples of different origins, languages, ecological adaptations, and cultures'. Later in the article, the word 'peripheral' is used to describe ethnic minorities, and examples of how Han Chinese tried to 'civilise' them are given, as if they were primitive and uncivilised (1995: 3). This is also reflected in Chu's (2018) study, in which she finds that images of ethnic minority

[1] In this article, the Romanisation for the Chinese names is 'pinyin', an official Romanisation system for Standard Chinese used widely in mainland China. The names of the Chinese comic artists will be displayed in the conventional Chinese order, where surnames will be put in front of the given name. The names of the artworks mentioned will be displayed in their Romanised spelling followed by their original Chinese characters in brackets.

people in popular textbooks tend to appear in rural, outdoor settings, wear traditional clothes and have less interaction with modern technology. Furthermore, the more exotic the minority group is, the more likely it is shown in textbooks, and therefore minorities with less distinctive attributes (Zhuang and Hui, for example) are shown less often.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology I have used in this article is primarily visual research, which I have used to analyse the images in terms of content, form, style and depiction (Pauwels, 2011). In this case, visual research is used to find out how the comic medium in China represents ethnic minority women through character designs, with emphasis on content and depiction.

There are a very limited number of Chinese comics that consist of ethnic minority characters. Therefore, instead of analysing a large number of characters from numerous works, I have picked out the female protagonists from two comics I have selected*: Ling-Long* and *Gada Meilin*, to conduct detailed, in-depth visual content analysis. These two works fall into two different categories of Chinese ethnic minority comics: the former is an ethnic minority themed original story, while the latter is a comic adaptation of an existing ethnic minority story. The nature of the two categories are very different, leading to different aims, target audiences and eventually, female character designs. I will first introduce the background of the creation of the work, its authors and genre. Then the visual contents will be analysed from two perspectives: 1) visual design, 2) role, identity and personality. The first perspective mainly involves the analysis of physical appearance, dress, facial expressions and body language. The second perspective looks at non-visual, behavioural aspects such as character occupation, status, action and interaction with other characters. It is possible that some aspects from the two perspectives are linked, for example, dress and character occupation. These links will be mentioned in the analysis.

Before I start discussing the two comics I have selected, I will review some literature on the representation of ethnic minorities in comics and other media in China. Most of the studies suggest that ethnic people have a high chance of being depicted as female, and their depictions vary significantly depending on the context. For example, when they are used for propaganda purposes, they tend to be more heroic and more likely to be involved in male-dominated areas, but when they are used for culture communication purposes, they tend to play mild, submissive, serving roles, and their female sexuality is more explicit. These are two very different contexts, and the images are aimed at different audiences from different eras. Therefore, in the analysis of the comics I have chosen, I will also investigate whether the purpose of the story (e.g. communicating ethnic minority culture, or merely using ethnic culture to create exoticism) influences the depiction of the female characters.

ETHNIC MINORITY CHARACTERS IN COMICS

Multicultural representation in character design has been a widely discussed topic in the comic studies field in the west. Many have focused on the depiction of black people and the creation of black superheroes. For example, Brown (2001) has investigated black heroes created by Milestone comics, contextualised by their fandom. He notes that compared with white characters in American comics, their black counterparts often play the role of symbols rather than an individual person. This is further supported by Facciani et al. (2015), where they cite McDuffie's argument that characters from a non-dominant group (black, Asian, female etc.) 'can't be interesting because everything they do has to represent an entire block of people' (2015: 3-4). Racial stereotyping and underrepresentation have further been discussed by Singer (2002) and by Glascock and Pretson-Schreck (2004).

Compared to the discussion of minority characters in American superhero comics, little has been written about minority characters in Chinese comics, either in English or in Chinese, owing to the scarcity of ethnic minority people in Chinese comics compared with other forms of media such as film and propaganda posters. Several Chinese research papers have discussed ways of applying ethnic minority culture into comic books. For example, Tao (2017) discusses the efficiency of using the comic medium to promote Miao culture. Another example: Zhang's paper (2018) reviews the competence of using ACG (animation, comic and game) media to communicate ethnic minority culture in Guangxi, in which he argues that the comic is widely accepted by audiences of all ages and could use humour and caricature to convey ethnic culture in a more vivid way. Meanwhile, specific discussions on character art are seen less frequently. One example is the work completed by Yuan et al. (2012) that analyses character designs in picture books of Oroqen folktales, arguing that the designs tend to be symbolic but lack research into personality and facial features. Overall, current literature tends to discuss how artists could use ethnic minority cultures as inspirations for their works, but it lacks in-depth exploration and systematic analysis of previous comic works.

In contrast to the scarcity and superficiality of the research on minority representation in Chinese comics, there is more comprehensive information on minority images in other media such as propaganda posters, film and tourism, which will be discussed in the following section. Some methods of representation used in these media forms can also be found in the two comics I discuss later in this article.

IMAGES OF FEMALE ETHNIC MINORITY PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT MEDIA FORMS

In analysing the representation of Chinese ethnic minorities in comics, the chosen areas to investigate are propaganda posters, film and tourism. This is due to two reasons: 1) these three media forms have been studied the most compared to other media forms and there is sufficient literature to review; 2) the representation of minority people in these three areas have all gone through artistic or creative processing instead of being documentarily represented (e.g., as in TV news and journalism articles). This corresponds to the comic medium which also involves the artistic process of summarising an ethnic minority group's culture into symbolic character designs.

PROPAGANDA POSTERS

A valuable investigation of ethnic minority people in Chinese propaganda posters has been made by Li (2000). He defines minority people as 'signifiers' of 'socialist prosperity', 'lack of progress and education', 'national security' and 'national unity' (2000: n.p.). Although he does not focus on images of women specifically, he has noted several situations where women, both Han and minority, have played important roles in the posters. In one poster, *Share the Labor and Share the Fruit* (artwork by Cai Zhenhua, 1957), women of different ethnic groups are shown dancing under a tree. Here, Li states that women 'appear as the source of [colour], gaiety, and exuberance' (ibid. 2000: n.p.) and symbolise the prosperity of socialism and a bright future. In part 2, Li discusses images showing minority people lacking education, such as *Serf's Daughter Goes to University* (artwork by Pan Shixun, 1973), *The Spirit of Lei Feng is Passed on from Generation to Generation* (artwork by Seleng Yexi, 1976) and *Learn from Good Experience and Develop the New Mountain Areas* (artwork by Shan Xihe, 1974).

The status of women in these posters are different - in the first and the second posters, women are depicted as central characters in the image and showing a high level of education (being able to go to university and tell stories to teenagers). However, in the third poster, a Han Chinese man is at the centre and is accompanied by ethnic minority women dressed in traditional clothes. In these examples, ethnic minority women can be seen playing two opposite roles: 1) educators educating others who are often minority people and 2) students being educated by others, especially Han. Awareness of educating women has been addressed in the posters, but the primary aim is to show that Chinese minorities lack education compared with Han. In part 3, Li (2000: n.p.) discusses a poster of a Kazakh woman shooting with a gun while galloping on horseback. Li argues that 'Her female body is set in sharp contrast with the gun in her hands, the black boots, and the ammunition bags around her upper body… Here, a female minority body, still [colourful] yet no longer in gaiety, on the horseback instead of on the dancing floor, is turned into a warrior icon that becomes a signifier for national pride and security'. This poster conveys the message that even ethnic women can contribute to protecting the country. In part 4, posters that convey the message of 'national unity' are discussed. In these posters, ethnic people are shown interacting with Han people and endorsing political leaders. Ethnic people, alongside Han peasants, workers and soldiers, have been used as 'defining features to mark "the people"' (Li, 2000: n.p.). In these posters, most minority people are women dressed in traditional clothes. It seems that minority people are generally more likely to be female, especially when they are depicted together with the majority Han group, even though they are not deployed to convey gender-oriented messages.

FILM

Ethnic minorities scarcely appeared in Chinese films before 1949 as it appears that filmmakers believed that audiences would not expect them in this new, western medium (Clark, 1987). Nevertheless, the new creative producers of China decided to expand their audience and gradually, filmmakers began to include national minorities and produced several crucial works such as *Serfs* (a story about the struggle of Tibetan peasants, released in 1963), *Third Sister Liu* (a film adaptation of a Zhuang folktale, released in 1960) and *Sacrificed Youth* (a story about a Han schoolgirl's interaction with the Dai minority, released in 1985). Although these films are breakthroughs in that era, they have been criticised for being stereotypical, Han-centred (Zhang, 1997), and even for commodifying ethnic minorities by using their exoticism to attract film audiences (Gladney, 1995).

Wei (2018) has analysed ethnic minority films from a feminist perspective. She argues that female characters with strong personalities are often the centre of the story in such ethnic minority films (2018: 23-24). Also, the

films display ethnic women as integral subjects to the main narrative (2018: 23). She also states that female character images in ethnic minority films are diverse - they can be a heroine, or a common housewife; a protagonist or a supporting character. But many of them have successfully entered domains that used to be male dominated such as the battlefield (2018: 24). However, their images could also appear on the other end of the conventional spectrum of roles for women, for example, in *Sacrificed Youth*, Dai minority women are 'evoked as the… eroticized Other' (Zhang, 1997: 81) and their sexuality is shown explicitly in the scene where they swim naked in the river. Yuan (2014) classifies the roles of female protagonists in ethnic minority films into three: 1) heroines in a revolutionary period; 2) model workers who devote themselves to constructing new China socialism; and 3) contributors to national unity. These three factors are very similar to the roles of minority people in propaganda posters discussed by Li (2000) - films at that time were used as means of propaganda, after all.

TOURISM

Ethnic tourism in China nowadays generally refers to 'tourism motivated by a… search for exotic cultural experiences, including visiting ethnic villages, minority homes and ethnic theme parks' (Yang, 2011: 562). Knowing that ethnic minorities play important roles in the diversity of Chinese culture, the Government uses their resources for attracting both tourists and further investment. As a result, the Government's involvement in ethnic tourism developments helps them improve the infrastructure, planning and destination potential of a place (Qin, Wall and Liu, 2011). Ethnic tourism sites can be found in many places in China, especially in the border areas such as Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan.

Yang (2011) investigated the tourism industry in Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages and discovered that 99% of the tourist guides are young girls. He interviewed the manager who explained that they use women's colourful ethnic clothes to attract tourists. He also relates this to the commodification of ethnic minority culture and mentions that female characters are more closely connected to ethnic commodity production. This can be justified by the discussion by Yang et al. (2009) on the issue of using women dressed in colourful attire as performers of cultural stage shows, and requesting them to play the role of the bride in fictitious wedding ceremonies that involve male tourists pretending to marry minority women. Images of minorities in tourism present their cultures as feminised and exotic, and that women's 'beauty, purity and innocence' (Yang, Wall and Smith, 2008: 761) have become commodities that are central to standard tourism promotions.

Compared to the propaganda posters and film, images of minority women in tourism appear to carry fewer direct political messages - they are not warriors or heroines, instead they are mainly used as a means of conveying ethnic minority culture and as an entertainment. Female workers are more likely to be involved in activities that include interactions with tourists (e.g. tour guides, pretend 'brides'), whom are mostly Han, in which their exoticism is often accentuated.

THE COMIC *LING-LONG* (灵珑) AND THE TAMING OF THE HEROINE

Jin Yong's design of Lan Fenghuang, a character of Miao ethnicity (and a female character, as we would expect) in his work *Xiao'ao Jianghu* (笑傲江湖), has left a deep impression on Chinese readers, making them believe that southern ethnic minorities are often mysterious, eerie and fond of making poison (Tao, 2017). Male comic artist Wang Xiaoyang, the author of the comic *Ling-Long* (灵珑), has used this factor to create his own fantasy genre comic story. *Ling-Long* is a black and white comic that was published in 2010 and is an original story written by the author. Through my email interview with Wang, he told me that the inspiration for using ethnic minority culture in his comic came from a childhood experience, when he watched an ethnic minority-themed animation and was impressed by its mysteriousness. He also told me that he had read many books on ethnic minority cultures before he created the comic and has used this information for informing ethnic dress in his character designs.

Ling-Long is drawn in a conventional manga style - this is the case for many contemporary Chinese comics. Ethnic minority culture here is used as a context for the story. It is difficult to tell which specific minority he has referred to, but it can be inferred from the visual design of the characters and settings that it is a southern minority group (and this was later supported by my email interview with Wang). *Ling-Long* does hints slightly at the reader of the southern minorities. The communication of ethnic minority culture through the characters in *Ling-Long* can be considered as obvious as readers and fans have pointed out many references to southern minority clothes in the character designs. *Ling-Long* is not an adaptation of any southern minority folktale. However, the artist used southern ethnic minorities as a design reference for the characters and made their identity an enhancement of fantasy and mystery in the story, recalling the ideologies and stereotypes of minority people generated by their depictions in popular previous works such as *Xiao'ao Jianghu*.

The first character I will analyse is Long, a 14-year-old girl, who is one of the two main protagonists in the comic. She appears in the story before the male protagonist, a 13-year-old boy Lingbao, and is the centre of the story.

VISUAL DESIGN

As shown in **Figure 1**, Long has a round face, round eyes, long black plaited hair and a tattoo-like symbol on her cheek that indicates her hidden magical powers. Her eyelashes and double eyelids are signifiers of her gender - both are conventional feminine visual cues that comic artists would be likely to use for their female character designs. Considering the general manga style of the comic, it seems that the artist has designed a universal face for her without acknowledging any racial influences on facial features (e.g. southern minorities are often believed to have obvious cheekbones and thicker lips).

Figure 1. A page from *Ling-Long*. English translation of the text provided by me. Used with permission from the author

As argued earlier, ethnic minorities are rarely differentiated by race in China, whether within academia or non-academia. Therefore, Wang uses dress to mark out her ethnic identity, as previous artists have done. Using dress to show a character's identity is often effective, either trying to express ethnicity or gender, as dress is considered 'a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication' (Eicher, 1995: 1). It is not only an indicator but also a producer of gender (Barnes and Eicher, 1992). The character Long wears symbolic southern minority clothes and jewellery- dark coloured short-sleeve top and skirt, silver neck rings and earrings. These visual elements explicitly convey the messages of her ethnicity and female gender, as well as adding character exoticism. They also indicate her high social status, since jewellery is a sign of wealth, and other female characters in the comic do not wear such

jewellery. As for the face and body, she has rich and exaggerated facial expressions and body movements. For example, there are panels depicting her laughing wildly, shouting, kicking people and stretching her arms and fists up in the air, as shown in **Figure 2**. They reflect her extroverted, lively and energetic personality. This personality is further accentuated through the contrast with other characters. The panels in **Figure 2** also depict another character, who is Long's mentor friend. His character images create a sharp contrast with Long's. While Long is stretching out her limbs and full of facial expressions, this character displays a rather still body and a cold face. Although some other characters are also depicted with exaggerated facial expressions (a common feature in the manga-style), they show much less body language exaggeration compared to Long.

Figure 2. Another page from *Ling-Long*. English translation of the text provided by me. Used with permission from the author

Apart from Long's eyelashes, hair and skirt, there are a few other visual cues that show the construction of her femininity. Her loose clothing covers the feminine curves of her body. However, her aggressive facial expressions and body postures display traits that are generally considered masculine. But as the story goes on, Long goes through events and challenges that gradually decrease her naughtiness and childishness. Compared to the first half of the comic, there are fewer images of her with exaggerated facial expressions and body language. Later in the comic, her body language even starts to show her submission to male characters (e.g., leaning her head on their shoulders), which I will discuss in the following section.

ROLE, IDENTITY AND PERSONALITY

Long is the adopted daughter of the town lord and has the magical power to summon dragons when she reaches 15 years of age. She is of high social class or status, as displayed by her dress and jewellery, but is shown to be disliked by regular townspeople for her childishness and uselessness. She displays a naughty and rebellious personality and is sometimes immature and impolite. Some examples are shown at the beginning of the comic, such as her tongue-flicking at her guardian in **Figure 1** and her later act of selling a priceless antique artefact for a block of gold. She also enjoys being dominant and controlling. In the story, she succeeds in disobeying her father's orders and goes on an adventure with Lingbao.

Considering that the target audience of this comic is teenagers, it is understandable that Wang has constructed a protagonist who is about the same age and has similar personalities as the readers such as rebelliousness and impulsivity so that they can easily identify with her (Ono, 2007) and perhaps the intention is that they then reflect upon themselves. What makes Long special is that she is an ethnic minority female character. I have asked Wang why he chose to use an ethnic minority girl as the protagonist, he answered, 'Just think about a rebellious ethnic minority young girl…it gives us the feeling that she is full of stories!'. From this answer, it could be inferred that Wang has considered both ethnicity and gender as factors that dramatise the story. Since Wang also mentioned the 'mysteriousness' that he sensed from ethnic minority culture, it is likely that he has related 'mysteriousness' to 'full of stories.'

However, Long's personality changes after she starts her journey with the male protagonist Lingbao - just like the changes in her visual appearance discussed earlier. When she sets off her journey with Lingbao, she keeps her commanding personality and has a domineering attitude towards him. As the story goes on, she gradually becomes more passive and submissive, and even reliant on Lingbao. Although Long is the characters with the magical powers, Lingbao is character that makes crucial decisions, guides and directs the journey. There is even a panel showing Long leaning on Lingbao's shoulders and sleeping - a scene, I would argue, that notably displays the female protagonist's submission and reliance on the male protagonist. This is amplified by the fact that Lingbao is younger than Long. In terms of ethnicity, Lingbao is also shown as having a southern ethnic minority identity through his accessories - the lock he wears, for example, is a typical talisman for children in the Miao ethnic group. Both being southern minority characters, Long and Lingbao's interactions do not indicate any majority group dominance. During the climax of the story, Long discovers that she was being used by family and friends for the entire time as a sacrifice to the resurrection of dragons. She becomes an 'object' to her stepfather and mentor friend, both of whom are male. The characters who act as warriors and heroes for the decisive battle at the end are also male - the male protagonist Lingbao and a male dragon. She is totally under the control of the male characters at the peak of the story, despite her rebellious attitude and independence shown at the beginning.

To summarise, Wang creates a female protagonist who displays the commonly seen masculine, disobedient personality in propaganda and film images of ethnic minority women at the beginning, but later turns out to be carrying the stereotypical passive roles of female characters when the story reaches crucial points. Rather than a sign that reflects her pride and defiance as a high-status protagonist, her rebellious personality demonstrates her immaturity. As the one of the few characters that carry inhuman power and a central character that is surrounded by her supporters, she seems useless in the story and ends up requiring help from others, most of whom are the male 'helper'. Furthermore, the artist created a teenage character for this teenage-aimed comic, and this could be seen as intended to influence the minds of teenage readers, since the readers could use the character designs to reflect upon themselves. Research has shown that compared to conventional books, teenagers are more attracted to graphic novels and comics (Crawford, 2004; Snowball, 2005, 2007). Chances are that Wang had this in mind and was using his story to convey perceptions of appropriately gendered behaviour to teenagers. This not only includes their views on comic character gender stereotypes, but also their ideas on how gender works in real life, and is suggesting that even if a girl is a tomboy, she will be 'tamed' into appropriate femininity by the end of the story.

MUDAN: A BRAVE WOMAN WHOSE HEROIC PERSONALITY IS NOT SHOWN BY HER APPEARANCE

One important part of Chinese ethnic minority cultures are the tales and stories. These stories have been useful resources for graphic art adaptations. There have been many works produced since the completion of the ethnic classification project, most of which were picture books for children that were used to educate them about folklore and ethnic diversity in China. Some examples are the *Hansheng Chinese Fairy-tales* series published by Hansheng press (1982), *Ethnic Minority Folktales* series published by Shanghai People's Fine Art Press (1984) and *Classical Myths of China's 56 Ethnic Groups* series published by New Buds Publishing House (2013). Comic versions appeared at a

later stage and are very scarce. One of the works is the comic adaptation of the legendary story of the Mongolian national hero, Gada Meilin[2], which was published in 2013. The main artist is a male Mongolian cartoonist, Bao Bailong, who did the character designs for the main characters. He cooperated with Li Yueyun and other comic artists in the animation and comic studio of Inner Mongolia Xinhua Publishers to create and publish the comic.

Despite being a cartoonist, Bao did not use much visual cartoon language for the character designs. By cartoon language, I refer to features such as distortions in body shape, exaggerated body proportions, squash and stretch techniques, depiction of characters in dramatic contexts and comedic features (Bishko, 2007). As an adaptation of a famous ethnic minority tale, this comic uses Mongolian ethnic minority culture as the main feature and a selling point. Visual cues of Mongolian life and traditions can be noticed everywhere in the panels: vast grassland scenes, horses, Mongolian tents, traditional nomad clothes, and even small details like Mongolian food on plates. All of this show the artist's intention of accentuating and communicating the Mongolian-ness.

The character I will analyse in this comic is the wife of the male protagonist Gada Meilin, Mudan Qiqige (referred to as Mudan later). According to the original history of the tale, Mudan was born into a rich family and practised martial arts, horse archery and shooting from a young age. She also received a good education. She is viewed as a liberated woman, which was rare on the Khorchin grasslands. Some historians believe that Gada Meilin would not have been as successful without the support of Mudan, and that her actions explicitly display feminism, since she did not merely act to help her husband, but also regarded the revolution as her own cause (Henochowicz, 2011).

VISUAL DESIGN

Mudan is depicted as a young woman. She has an average sized, round face, tied-up long black hair and almond-shaped eyes. Similar to the design of Long, the visuals of her face do not obviously speak of her ethnic identity with what is believed to be typical racialised features - minority people in the northern steppe areas of China are believed to have smaller slant eyes, single eyelids and larger faces, but Mudan's face is an average Chinese female face. As for dress, she wears a bright green headband and a top with bright green sleeves and black cuffs decorated with floral patterns. The black vest she wears is a traditional Mongolian vest. In her design, the vest is decorated with the same floral patterns as those on her cuffs, and has blue and pink near the edges of the garment. In terms of facial expressions and body language, Mudan does not have abundant and exaggerated expressions like Long. She is generally calm, gentle, serious and mature. In the panels, she often appears accompanying her husband.

Mudan's feminine gender is displayed by her face and clothing. Although there are no obvious graphic signifiers such as long eyelashes, her gender can be seen from the comparison of her face to those of male characters. As one of the very few women in the story, her face stands out from the male characters with a relatively fairer skin colour and smoother lines, highlighting her femininity. Her clothing is a more obvious sign of her gender as well as ethnicity - the bright colours and floral patterns on her clothes work together to exhibit the stereotypical idea of colourfulness and gaiety of ethnic women, just like the images in propaganda posters. Additionally, the bright colour and elaborate patterns are also symbols of her high status and role as a protagonist. They make her stand out from other female characters, as they do not have such colourful and patterned dress. The classic structures of the traditional Mongolian attire are also intended to represent her Mongolian-ness.

ROLE, IDENTITY AND PERSONALITY

As the wife of a respected leader, Mudan is also respected by other nomads and must take up responsibilities for the revolution and get involved in conflicts between the nomads and the authorities. She is a mother with one daughter and her role as a parent is reflected with her caring and mature personality. On the other hand, she has a heroic characterisation and has a strong will. She even abandons her femininity and motherhood in serious situations, for example, killing her own daughter (though it is proved later that this is only made up - her daughter died due to illness (Dejide, 2008)) and rushing into the frontlines with a pistol in the hand. Like the Kazakh woman in the propaganda poster discussed earlier, Mudan's actions show a sharp contrast with her colourful, female dress.

Compared to Long, Mudan seems to be exactly the opposite as a character. Long's visual design displays rebelliousness and independence, but her role in the story is still reliant and passive; Mudan's visual design displays gentleness and womanhood, but her role in the story demonstrates her decisiveness, toughness and bravery. Despite being one of the few women in the rebellion, she is not a follower of the dominant gender. Instead, she shows charisma and leadership of her own, leads the nomad rebels and makes crucial decisions for them while her

[2] Rather than the name, this is the title of the hero. It is sometimes written as 'Gada Meiren'. I will use this pinyin version throughout the article.

husband is in danger. As an obvious challenge to the existing gender role conventions, she has rescued her husband several times during the rebellion. However, the objectification of women is demonstrated at the end of the story, in which Gada Meilin is killed by Han Shewang's men and Mudan is then forced to marry Han Shewang. Mudan's forced marriage not only shows a significant contrast to her role as a brave, revolutionary heroine, but also indicates that in her era, no matter how strong a woman is, she is not able to decide whom she will be married to.

The fact that the adapted tale, *Gada Meilin*, has a heroic and rebellious theme also contributes to the unconventional gender roles of Mudan. Since this work is an adaptation of an existing tale, Mudan's personalities, behaviours and actions are pre-determined by the folktale itself rather than by the comic artists. However, the comic artists have much freedom on the visual design and they chose to give her conventional feminine visual elements - fair skin, bright colours and floral patterns, in spite of the masculine roles she plays. I suggest that there are two possibilities: either the artists have not done enough research into Mudan's position in the historical tale, so they designed her as a visually clichéd female ethnic character or the artists did notice her atypical roles but wanted to create the sharp contrast between her appearance and personality. Should it be the former, it reflects the widespread dominance of the visual stereotypes of ethnic female characters on comic artists - or to be specific for this case, the dominance of Han-centred visual stereotypes on Mongolian artists.

CONCLUSIONS AND NOTES AS A PRACTITIONER

The comparison of the two selected works reveals that female ethnic minority characters in Chinese comics shows two different possible narratives of femininity. The design strategies and character encoding resemble those of other visual forms, such as film and propaganda posters. Visually speaking, both examples emphasise the characters' garments and clothing Although the levels of details vary, the dress of the character is considered a symbol of their ethnic identity. Using typical attire is a straightforward way of visually depicting a person from a different cultural background in the Chinese ethnic minority cultural diversity context, where there is little difference in skin colour or facial features. Besides, clothing is an important aspect of a character, and is a more iconic way to emphasise distinctive features compared to working on the nuances of facial features. Dress also conveys non-verbal gender and social class/status messages, as shown with jewellery and floral patterns. Facial designs and body language communicate gender messages in Chinese comics but not, generally speaking, ethnicity messages. Visual conventions of gender can be found in both Long and Mudan such as long eyelashes, fair skin and smooth lines for face contours. Ethnicity-oriented racialised facial differences are not shown explicitly in either the characters. Since clothing design could already convey enough information, the artists chose to apply universal approaches to the depiction of the face. Body language gives gender information by the characters' interactions with other characters, especially male characters. Long's leaning on the male protagonist's shoulder and Mudan's serving food for the nomads are two obvious examples of the artists' intentions of showing typical roles in conventional femininity.

In terms of characterisation, both examples show rebellion and submission, but the orders they appear in the stories are different. Long displays naughtiness and rebellion at the beginning but gradually reduces her rebelliousness and starts following the guidance of male characters as the story unfolds toward conventional feminine subservience; Mudan starts by accompanying her husband as a wife, but takes over the role of rebel leader from her husband during the climax, then again displays passiveness and submission with a forced marriage at the end when her husband dies. Henochowicz (2011) states that in folklores of revolt, women and other peripheral characters get the opportunity to become courageous heroes. As a graphic adaptation of a folklore story, the comic *Gada Meilin* supports this argument with the female protagonist. *Ling-Long*, however, does not derive from folklore, nor is it a story about revolution. This could be the reason why the author refused to construct a heroine-like identity for Long.

I would also like to comment on the characters from my view as an illustrator. In terms of the visual representation of their ethnicity, I suggest that the authors could have further developed their exploration of the method of visually representing the characters' ethnic minority identity. Both the characters' ethnicities are distinguished mainly by their dress, which is not only an overused visual method for creating ethnic minority characters, but also one that reinforces typically Chinese audience's stereotypes of ethnic minority people. One may argue that considering the genre and historical context of the stories, using ethnic dress for the character design is appropriate and already enough for the readers to identify their ethnic identities. But it would be worthwhile to investigate further, especially within a graphic narrative such as the comic medium, these visual tactics which involves both image (non-verbal) and text (verbal). Although we have a strong tendency to make meanings from non-verbal information (Duncan, Taylor and Stoddard, 2016), I suggest that verbal aspects could also construct characters in comics. As stated earlier, ethnic minority culture in China is usually distinguished by cultural and linguistic factors. This approach is not fully utilised in the two comics discussed above - the only

linguistic signifiers are the names of the characters, which are transliterations, or read like transliterations of names in an ethnic minority language.

Fashion is a conventional way to perform cultural identity. How could we visually represent other aspects of culture (such as customs, beliefs or philosophical views) and linguistic factors in the graphic narrative? I argue that this is where the development of verbal aspects should step in. A straightforward way would be by giving the characters names from their ethnic origin, which has been shown in the comics here. The more challenging approach would be interrogating their way of speech and ethnical dialects, which would require fieldwork and ethnographic research in ethnic minority areas. This could be challenging both to the artist and the reader, as the artist needs to explore different and new visual methods of depicting these intangible components of language use, while the reader needs to interpret the artist's visual methods to understand the message conveyed in its distinctive cultural context. As for the representation of femininity, common visual cues of gender were used by the artists of both works: long eyelashes for Long and floral decorations for Mudan. Comic characters are often highly simplified and symbolised, thus using clichéd visual signifiers is an effective way of displaying gender throughout the imagery, as the characters are not depicted to the extent of photo-realism that readers can recognise their genders by analysing their physical details. The following questions would be useful for the artists to ask themselves: how would women from that particular ethnic group speak differently from men? What are the words women tend to use that men would avoid? This also requires some ethnographic research, especially if the artist is trying to avoid falling back onto gender and ethnic stereotyping.

The graphical constructions of the characters have not been discussed in this paper and are worth more exploration. By graphical construction, I am referring to the artistic construction of the characters in the comic panels. Comic as sequential graphic narrative has its distinctive ways of storytelling with its vocabulary of panels, transitions, gutters and *emanata* and so on. Factors such as figure size, panel size, point of view and distance would influence the meanings that a certain character conveys to readers. The reader's capacity for understanding the visual grammar of comics also affects their understanding and consumption of the character's portrayal, and we need more research on the cultural symbolism of gender and ethnicity in Chinese comics and its impact, going forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the support of my supervisors, Andrew Selby and Paul Wells, for their help with my PhD project and their advice on my research on Chinese ethnic minority representation.

REFERENCES

Barnes, R. and Eicher, J. B. (1992). *Dress and Gender*. Oxford: Berg.

Bishko, L. (2007). The uses and abuses of cartoon style in animation. *Animation Studies*, *2*, 24-35.

Brown, J. A. (2001). *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. London: University Press of Mississippi.

Central Office of Information. (1997). *Ethnic Minorities*. 2nd edn. London: HMSO.

Chu, Y. (2018). Visualizing minority: Images of ethnic minority groups in Chinese elementary social studies textbooks. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, *42*(2), 135-147.

Clark, P. (1987). Ethnic minorities in Chinese films: Cinema and the exotic. *East-West Film Journal*, *1*(2), 15-32.

Crawford, P. (2004). Using graphic novels to attract reluctant readers. *Library Media Connection*, *27*, 26-28.

Dejide. (2008). Gada Meilin Zhi Qi - Mudan. *Dangan yu Shehui*, *1*, 30-32.

De Vos, G. A. (1995). Ethnic pluralism: Conflict and accommodation. In Romanucci-Ross, L. and De Vos, G. A. (eds.), *Ethnic Identity: Creation, conflict and accommodation* (pp.15-47). Walnut Creek: AltaMira, pp. 15-47.

Dillon, M. (2016). Majorities and minorities in China: An introduction. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *39*(12), 2079-2090.

Duncan, R., Taylor, M. R. and Stoddard, D. (2016). *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir, and Nonfiction*. Oxford: Routledge.

Eicher, J. B. (ed.) (1995). *Dress and Ethnicity*. Oxford: Berg.

Facciani, M., Warren, P. and Vendemia, J. (2015). A content-analysis of race, class, and gender in American comic books. *Race, Gender & Class*, *22*(3-4), 1-12.

Fan, K. (2016). Representation of ethnic minorities in socialist China. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *39*(12), 2091-2107.

Gladney, D. C. (1995). Tian Zhuangzhuang, The 'Fifth Generation'and 'minorities films' in China: A review essay. *Public Culture*, *8*(1), 161-175.

Glascock, J. and Preston-Schreck, C. (2004). Gender and racial stereotypes in daily newspaper comics: A time-honored tradition? *Sex Roles*, *51*(7/8), 423-431.

Harrell, S. (1995). Introduction: Civilizing projects and the reaction to them. In S. Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (pp. 3-36). Washington: University of Washington Press.
Henochowicz, A. (2011). 'For the land of all Mongols': Gada Meiren the bandit, hero, and proto-revolutionary. *Journal of Wenzhou University: Social Sciences*, *24*(2), 44-50.
Joniak-Lüthi, A. (2015). *The Han: China's diverse majority*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Li, Y. (2000). Representations of ethnic minorities in Chinese propaganda posters, 1957-1983. *MCLC Resource Center*. Available at: http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/minzu/ (Accessed: 11 November 2018).
Liang, T. (2011). *Zhongguo Zhuangzu*. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.
Mackerras, C. (1987). Contemporary Chinese social science study of the minority nationalities. In Yahuda, M. B. (ed.), *New Directions in the Social Sciences and Humanities in China* (pp. 89-113). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
Modood, T., Berthoud, R., Lakey, J., Nazroo, J., Smith, P., Virdee, S. and Beishon, S. (1997). *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and disadvantage*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
Ono, K. (2007). The long flight of manga and anime: The history of comics and animation in Japan. In Cholodenko, A. (ed.) *The Illusion of Life II: More essays on animation* (pp. 99-118). Sydney: Power.
Pauwels, L. (2011). An intergrated conceptual framework for visual social research. In E. Margolis and L. Paulwels (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (pp. 3-23). London: SAGE.
Poston, D. L. and Yaukey, D. (eds.). (1992). *The Population of Modern China*. New York: Plenum Press.
Qin, Q., Wall, G. and Liu, X. (2011). Government roles in stimulating tourism development: A case from Guangxi, China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, *16*(5), 471-487.
Romanucci-Ross, L. and De Vos, G. (eds.). (1995). *Ethnic Identity: Creation, conflict, and accommodation*. 3rd edn. Walnut Creek: AltaMira.
Singer, M. (2002). 'Black skins' and white masks: Comic books and the secret of race. *African American Review*, *36*(1),107-119.
Snowball, C. (2005). Teenage reluctant readers and graphic novels. *Young Adult Library Services*, *3*(4), 43-45.
Snowball, C. (2007). Researching graphic novels and their teenage readers. *Library and Information Science*, *17*(1), 1-20.
Tao, R. (2017). Yi Manhua Huiben Wei Zai Ti Cu Jin Miao Zu Wen Hua Chuan Bo De Yan Jiu. *Da Zhong Wen Yi*, *16*, 38.
Turton, D. and Gonzalez, J. (eds.). (1999). *Cultural Identities and Ethnic Minorities in Europe*. Bilbao: University of Deusto.
Wallis, C. (2011). New media practices in China: Youth patterns, processes, and politics, *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 406-436.
Wei, H. (2018). Nvxing Zhuyi Shiye zhong de Shaoshu Minzu Ticai Dianying. *Movie Literature*, *14*, 23-35.
Yang, L. (2011). Ethnic tourism and cultural representation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *38*(2), 561-585.
Yang, L. and Wall, G. (2009). Ethnic tourism: A framework and an application. *Tourism Management*, *30*(4), 559-570.
Yang, L., Wall, G. and Smith, S. L. J. (2008). Ethnic tourism development: Chinese Government perspectives. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *35*(3), 751-771.
Yuan, J. (2014). 'Shiqi Nian' Shaoshu Minzu Ticai Dianying zhongde Nvxing Xingxiang Tanxi. *Dazhong Wenyi*, *1*, 189-190.
Yuan, J., Mo, H. and Cao, X. (2012). E Lun Chun Ti Cai Lianhuanhua Min Zu Biao Shi Tu Xiang Jie Xi. *Zhongguo Mei Shu*, *2*, 118-119.
Zhang, X. (2018). Jiyu ACG Xing Shi De Guangxi Minzu Min Jian Wu Dao Yi Shu De Chuan Bo Fang Fa Yan Jiu. *Xi Ju Zhi Jia*, *15*, 120-121.
Zhang, Y. (1997). From 'minority film' to 'minority discourse': Questions of nationhood and ethnicity in Chinese cinema. *Cinema Journal*, *36*(3), 73-90.

Citation: Tan, X. (2020). Ethnic Minority Women in Contemporary Chinese Comics: Design, Role and Identity. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 07. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7911

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 08
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Activist Feminism in Turkey, Represented Through the Caricatures of Bayan Yanı Magazine

Seval Erkul [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

In Turkey, under the governance of a conservative political party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) since 2002, religion and conservatism has been relentlessly promoted. Both government officials and their supporters have been expressed sexist and discriminatory discourses against women keenly and frequently, causing various incidents and public outcries. *Bayan Yanı*, being the first and only women led caricature publication in Turkey, has been widely covering the gender related, socio-political issues, since its first appearance on the market, in the early days of March 2011. This article aims to explore the way in which gender related socio-political issues, whether on the part of individuals or a more collective activist engagement, are debated in this particular publication, revealing the depiction of feminist activism and tensions surrounding women's everyday experiences of gender in Turkey.

Keywords: Feminist activism, caricature, gendered politics, political cartoons, feminist comics

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine the representations of activist feminism in Turkey's feminist caricature magazine *Bayan Yanı*; the magazine focuses on a gender-related, socio-political agenda and women's everyday experiences of gender inequality in Turkey. I investigate how caricatures in *Bayan Yanı* explore and represent such issues, whether on the part of activist individuals or in a more collective activist engagement. As my analysis reveals, the magazine promotes themes of activism, awareness, contestation and solidarity on behalf of women and gender equality in the various realms of Turkish culture, and engages with contemporary national and global agendas. In doing so, the magazine also engages with women's everyday problems, triggered by issues concerning women's complex gender identities and inequality.

Under the governance of a right-wing political party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) since 2002, conservatism and religion have been relentlessly promoted in Turkey. Both government officials and their supporters have keenly and frequently expressed controversial and discriminatory statements on gender, causing various incidents and public outcries. Therefore, domestic violence, femicide, women's labour, policies of population control over the female body and reproductive system have all been major issues of contention, occupying feminists in Turkey (Tekay, 2013). As a feminist publication, *Bayan Yanı* magazine has been widely covering the gender-related, socio-political turmoil in Turkey, since the publication of its first issue in 2011.

In the following section, I will give a brief summary of the *Bayan Yanı* caricature magazine and the idea behind its first appearance on the market. Then, the methodological framework, including the selection criteria of sampled themes and caricatures follows. After that, I explore the activist feminist encounters within the magazine, revolving around the gendered socio-political turmoil in Turkey. Here, I present three sub-themes: individual endeavours, 'We Can Do It!' feminism, and collectively and publicly fighting patriarchy. In conclusion, I identify areas for further research, looking through an intersectional perspective and suggesting there appears to be some degree of limitation to the diversity represented in the magazine.

[1] *Doctoral student at the University of Sussex*, UK
***Corresponding Author:** S.Erkul@sussex.ac.uk

BAYAN YANI: THE FIRST AND ONLY WOMEN-LED CARICATURE MAGAZINE OF TURKEY

Bayan Yanı was first launched on 8th March 2011 by women caricaturists and writers of the Leman publication group[1], and it was originally intended to be a single, special issue, dedicated to International Women's Day. However, as a result of the positive feedback from critics and readers a decision was made to continue publishing the magazine. *Bayan Yanı*, the first and only women-led caricature magazine of Turkey, appears on the shelves on a monthly basis, targeting mostly, but not exclusively, women. The magazine is printed in colour on A3 size paper, and it generally consists of 32 or 36 pages per issue, but in special issues the number of pages increases (there are issues with 48 and 68 pages). The publication does not only consist of caricatures, there are also articles and columns as well as photographic stories, but usually two thirds of the magazine is dedicated to caricatures. The magazine's slogan is 'Women are also capable of producing humorous content, get ready gentlemen!' (CNN Türk, 2015). As is evident here, the standpoint of the magazine echoes those feminist comic theorists who disprove 'the myth of female humourlessness', 'the myth that women have no sense of humour' (Bilger, 2009: 120; also see Gray, 1994).

The magazine presents work of various caricaturists and writers, who have diverse talents and other occupations alongside creating material for the magazine. A small group of core caricaturists and writers produce content on a regular basis, and they live in different parts of Turkey, some even abroad. Feyhan Güver, one of the main contributors of the magazine, usually depicts relationships and friendship in rural life. She states that they do not have a 'boss' within the magazine but work more collectively and are free to create as they wish, exchanging emails with each other about their ideas (Güver cited in Girardot, 2017). Caricaturist Ramize Erer, winner of the Creative Courage Award at the Angoulême Comic Festival in France in 2017, and who is one of the founders of the magazine, living in Paris, creates caricatures that provide deep and powerful messages about feminism (NTV, 2017). Elif Nursad Atalay, an internationally recognised artist and painter, creates 'psychedelic drawings, mostly inspired by cats and the female body' (Toksabay, 2011). Betül Yılmaz narrates stories of modern Istanbul and its cosmopolitan, young citizens. İpek Özsüslü is known for her unique female characters with long eyelashes, and her recreations of classical Turkish movies from the 1960-1980s with a modern and humorous twist: she puts herself in the plot as the main heroine (The Nib, 2017). Raziye İçoğlu, a ceramic artist, is widely known for her humorous column *Paparazziye* in the magazine, which the columnist herself claims as being a support group therapy for women in Turkey (Toksabay, 2011). Although the contributors of *Bayan Yanı* have different philosophies of life: 'some are more liberal, others are Kemalist or supportive of the Kurdish movement', in general they see themselves as closer to the political opposition in Turkey (Aksoy, 2017 cited in Girardot, 2017). They all have one thing in common, resistance to the rule of AKP and its perceived misogynistic discourses (Girardot, 2017). Therefore, they are aware that imprisonment is not an outlying probability for any of the team members, although none of them has faced any litigation yet from the government (Aksoy, 2017 cited in Girardot, 2017). Reuters remarks that the magazine:

> confront[s] uncomfortable topics such as "honor" killings, women's rights, sex, adultery and Islam, and with occasional irreverent glances at lighter fare such as weight loss or cellulite. (Cited in Toksabay, 2011)

Bayan Yanı has a large and growing readership community with 54,600 followers on Instagram and 77,600 on Twitter (December 2019). According to Atalay, the contributors draw on and represent what they experience as women, and therefore the focus of the magazine is mainly issues around gender inequality (Toksabay, 2011). Güver (2017 cited in Girardot, 2017) states that as the topics the magazine tackle are diverse, its caricatures are given distinct bodily features and personalities: they are sometimes 'blond and curvaceous', or 'tall, thin, young or old, coming from both urban and rural backgrounds; they are veiled or unveiled, fashionable or hopelessly untrendy'. This suggests that the magazine aims to reach women from diverse backgrounds, such as social class, occupations, and ethnicities, cultural and religious beliefs, so that they can identify with the characters in the magazine, whilst utilizing humour and wider feminist discourse.

[1] Leman is one of Turkey's top satirical magazines (Girardot, 2017), which has been on the market since 1991. Its attitude of being independent and not publishing advertisements led the magazine to regulate alternative ways of consumption for its audiences, which also helped the magazine to expand its revenues (Yalçınkaya, 2006). By the mid-1990s, Leman began publishing various books and magazines under the name of Leman Publications, which single-handedly transformed the magazine into a minor media establishment (Yalçınkaya, 2006). Some of the caricaturists were also encouraged to launch new magazines and books under the regulations of Leman Publications (Cantek, 1997). As a result of this attitude, in 2011 *Bayan Yanı* magazine appeared on the market.

METHODOLOGY

For this article, I analysed the images I obtained through archival research using thematic analysis, critical discourse, and visual and textual analyses.

My archival data collection took place in December 2017 at the National Library of Turkey in Ankara, where copies of all materials published in Turkey are kept. As no digital archives were available for the caricature publications, I completed my research manually by digitally scanning hard copies of the materials. Firstly, I began the content analysis with scanning through all the issues of *Bayan Yanı* magazine (71 issues in total), since its first appearance on the market in March 2011 until the last issue of 2017. I looked specifically at the representation of feminism through caricatures. Articles and other forms of writings and visuals were excluded from my search. Next the research material was coded, and initial themes were formed from my impressions during primary scanning. These themes were then refined throughout the research process. King (2004, cited in Nowell et al., 2017: 2) suggests that thematic analysis is precisely effective for: firstly, emphasising 'similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights' and secondly, 'summarizing key features of a large data set', as it helps generating a clear and systematic conclusive report, by urging the researcher to adopt 'a well-structured approach to handling data'. Hence, to deal with the large amount of visual materials in the *Bayan Yanı* magazine archive and make coherent meaning from them, the selective thematic analysis method was appropriate.

I developed my thematic analysis further by counting the number of caricatures in each theme. It is important to note that strip caricatures who narrate stories in multiple sequences are counted as one, since separating them would initiate misinterpretation. On this basis, I concluded that activist feminism, pertaining to contemporary gendered socio-political turmoil in Turkey, was the main theme of the magazine. Therefore, in this article I have chosen to focus on the caricatures that embody activist feminism within the gendered socio-political turmoil in Turkey. Subsequently, caricatures that offered richer details were selected for in-depth analyses, avoiding representations with similar features as much as possible.

Rose (2016: 23) states that it is necessary to interpret visual materials through critical thinking, because visual materials are 'always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges', and therefore they are never one facet. Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that although visual communication may seem to be transparent and simple, because we are already familiar with it, it is, in fact, always coded. Visual structures are ideological and have 'a deeply important semantic dimension', as they do not merely regenerate the reality, but they generate versions of reality, 'with the interests of the social institutions within which the images are produced, circulated and read' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 47). Indeed, Rose (2016: 24-46) also suggests that there are four sites of an image which affect its meaning: 'production, the image itself, its circulation and its audiencing' and each of these sites are formed through three modalities: 'technological, compositional and social'. On the basis of these principles, my research also benefited from some further research methods, alongside my primary approaches. I have, therefore, drawn on social semiotics in my analysis at times, because it deepens my understanding of the symbolic cultural meanings in the images. In doing so, I addressed a multimodal approach by exploring the multiple dimensions of caricatures, including gestures, linguistics and spatial aspects.

A FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Activist feminism which is shaped around the contemporary gendered socio-political landscape in Turkey is the most prominent theme of *Bayan Yanı* magazine. Since it includes a variety of communications, I have divided the themes into three sub-categories: individual endeavours, 'We Can Do It!' feminism, collectively and publicly fighting patriarchy.

INDIVIDUAL ENDEAVOURS

In this sub-category caricatures of activist feminists individually opposing the gendered socio-political discourses are analysed. On the issue of pregnancy, on 23rd July 2013 an AKP supporter and conservative lawyer, Ömer Tuğrul İnançer, spoke on television indicating that it was disgraceful and not aesthetic for pregnant women to wander the streets with their big bellies (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2013). **Figure 1** is a caricature reacting to this statement representing a woman who is purposely doing the opposite.

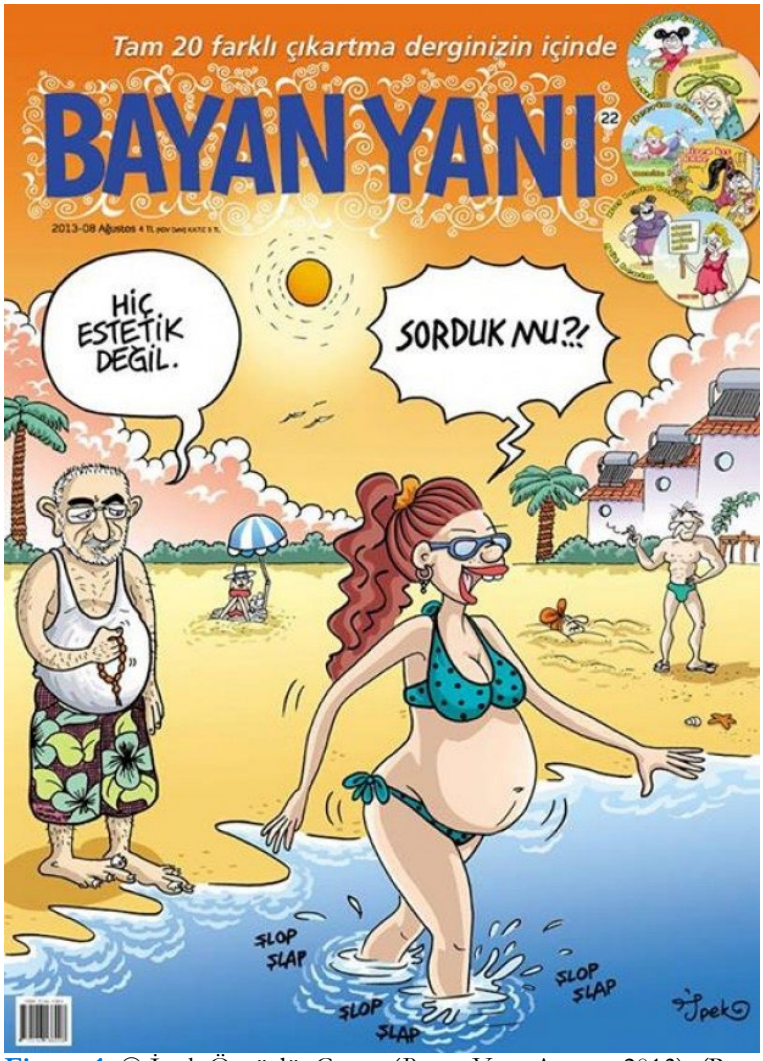


Figure 1. © İpek Özsüslü, Cover (*Bayan Yanı*, August 2013), (Reprinted with permission).
Captions:
Man: It is not aesthetic at all.
Woman: Did we ask?

The dominant colours of the caricature in **Figure 1** are yellow, orange and blue, representing a summer's day in a holiday location by the sea. Providing perspective, two main figures are foregrounded and three smaller figures retreat into the background. A pregnant woman in a green, polka-dot bikini strides into the sea and an old man, in baggy floral shorts, a white sleeveless undershirt, holding prayer beads to indicate his conservative identification, looks on. He proclaims that seeing a pregnant woman, in a bikini is not aesthetic, to which the woman replies, 'Did we ask?'. Her plural expression 'we' can be interpreted as referring to the collective female identity and solidarity that the magazine promotes. In the background, three other figures are represented. A fit (muscles in evidence) younger man wearing green swimming trunks, flip-flops and smoking a cigarette stands, directing his gaze towards the pregnant woman. A second woman in a red swimsuit and hat sits under a parasol, whilst another woman's head cover can just be glimpsed, but the rest of her body is buried in sand. The latter is one of the famous rebellious characters of the magazine, who is known as Fethiye Nene (Granny Fethiye).

The most noticeable trait here is the contrasting look of the main character: a beautiful, well-groomed and stylish young woman versus an untidy, unstylish and neglected-looking, old man with cracked toenails and a hairy body. It is implied that such a man, looking as he does, is hardly placed to criticise a pregnant woman; if he can display his belly, why can't she? The woman replies wittily, looking back at him over her shoulder, paying him no attention as she continues to walk unperturbedly to the water ('slop slap, slop slap'). In a broader sense, it argues that men have no right to decide what is right or wrong for women; it is for a woman to decide what to do with her body in the public arena. A renowned feminist discourse is emphasised here: my body, my decision. However, it is also noteworthy that the pregnant woman has a flawless and slim body. As Tyler (2011: 22) states, the glorified figure of youthful mother and 'pregnant beauty' have become more visible and absurd in the public domain, with the ascending role of neoliberal celebrity culture. The elegance of pregnancy has become associated with the ability

to achieve the 'perfect little bump', by minimising weight gain during pregnancy and has developed into a new kind of imprisonment for women (Tyler, 2011: 25). In this sense, the image can also be decoded as reproducing an idealised pregnancy beauty image, reflecting more of women's gendered oppression, imposed by popular culture.

Figure 2. © İpek Özsüslü, Inside page (*Bayan Yam*, July 2013), (Reprinted with permission).
Caption:
If we were afraid of water, we would not be hanging out clothes.

Figures 2 and **3** relate to the Gezi Park Protests[2], depicting two female protesters. The caricatures are similar to each other in terms of the meanings they produce, although they are published a year apart. Both caricatures depict the same character: a slim, light brunette woman, who is the main heroine of İpek Özsüslü's stories and is also the self-portrayal of the caricaturist. In **Figure 2**, the woman is depicted outdoors - clouds billow in the background and the dominant use of the yellow and orange colour connote a hot and sunny day from a social semiotics perspective. The woman character stands confidently, arms wide open, as if she is welcoming the water directed at her. This is an intertextual reference to the iconic 'woman in black' of the Gezi Park Protests, who responded similarly to the pressurised water targeted at her. In this sense, the figure in the caricature connotes a brave, determined and modern woman, empowering other women to rise-up against gender inequality.

[2] On 27 May 2013, a local demonstration with a few environmentalists began in Gezi Park, which is located in the heart of Istanbul, to protest its destruction. Soon after, in response to the overly aggressive intervention by police armed with water cannons and tear gas, the protest spread, and millions of people flooded not only into Gezi Park but also to other local parks and squares across the country. Afterwards, the protests became anti-governmental and people from around the world supported the protests by organizing demonstrations in their homelands and sending messages via social media (see Amnesty International, 2013; Arat, 2013; Özen, 2015).

Figure 3. © İpek Özsüslü, Inside page (*Bayan Yanı*, June 2014), (Reprinted with permission).
Caption:
If we were afraid of water, we would not be wiping windows.

In **Figure 3**, the woman wipes the windows by balancing on a window frame, as water from outside the frame is targeted at her. She stands fearlessly without any safety precautions (a common practise in Turkey to clean domestic windows). The captions in both images state that women are fearless in their domestic responsibilities. However, these images can be interpreted to suggest that household duties have been accepted as the responsibility of women, and on this basis, women are encouraged to be strong. Herewith, these caricatures limit women, referring to their existence in the domestic sphere with traditional roles and household responsibilities. Therefore, it can be suggested that such portrayals reproduce and normalise already existing gender norms and roles, rather than encouraging women and society as a whole to break the norm and overcome unequal labour division.

Further controversial injunctions on what women should not do were made in the General Assembly by former Deputy Prime Minister, Bülent Arınç in 2015. He warned a former female MP saying: 'Shush lady, be silent as a woman' (BIA News Desk, 29 July 2015). Taking up this issue, **Figure 4** offers a harder and more violent representation: a grey-haired, black-suited and seemingly toothless man with wrinkled face (resembling Bülent Arınç), tries to silence an anonymous young, blonde woman, wearing a dark blue spotted shirt.

The background colour of the caricature is green, the traditional colour of Islam, having predominant usage in different realms of Islamic life (Akyüz, 2014)[3], and here it can be read as emphasising the conservative Islamic identity of the man and the government he represents. A pin with a white crescent and star, which are the symbols of the national flag of Turkey are seen on the man's left collar, signalling the man's legislative identity. His black clothes and large black pupils, together with utter blackness in his mouth can be interpreted as embodiments of not only his, but also the government's seemingly endless oppressive attitude towards the role of women in society and gender related socio-political issues. Portraying the man as older than he is in real life can also be read as underlining the government's outdated approach on gender issues.

[3] The colour green is largely recognised as the colour of Islam and according to Islamic understanding it represents nature, liveliness, freshness, wealth, fertility, happiness, hope and peace. Clothing such as green robes and turbans usually worn by persons of religion and mosques and mausoleums are often coloured green (Akyüz, 2014).

Figure 4. © Ramize Erer, Cover (*Bayan Yani*, August 2015), (Reprinted with permission).
Captions:
If you keep quiet, everyone dies!..
The man: Be silent as a woman… Ahhhh!..

Furthermore, the man seals the young woman's mouth with his bare hand and is saying, 'Be silent as a woman', as Arınç said in the Assembly. In return, however, the woman in the caricature says nothing, but bites man's hand to get rid of the obstacle that tries to silence her, causing him to let out a yell. She has unusually big mouth and teeth, covering almost two thirds of her face in which the man's hand can easily fit. Her mouth is salivating as she bites man's hand. All these features give her a monstrous look as she instinctively tries to defend herself against danger. As pointed out by Creed (1993,1999), the monstrous female body is a prevalent figure in many cultures, especially in myths and legends, seeming to cross borders between human and inhuman, good and evil, proper and abnormal gender roles. The monstrous representation of the female body is found in myths regarding women as castrators, what Creed entitles as 'a major archetype of female monstrosity'(1993: 105), that pushes men to confront their biggest fear of all, that is the threat of castration, by 'the vagina dentata or toothed vagina' (1999: 251; also see Walker, 1983; Harrington, 2018).

The *vagina dentata* is frequently symbolised with the metaphoric usage of the mouth because of the mythical and linguistic connotations concerning the mouth and women's genitals (Walker, 1983; Creed, 1993; Rees, 2013; Harrington, 2018). The mouth and the vagina, being 'powerful bodily orifice[s]', have long been associated with each other (Rees, 2013: 51), as such in many Egyptian and Greek myths (Walker, 1983). The mouth arouses 'the allure of vagina dentata' (Harrington, 2018: 61), as the damaging female characteristic usually emerges 'in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth' (Rees 2013: 222). Building on this, the monstrous depiction of the woman's mouth in **Figure 4** can be read as symbolising the castrating toothed vagina. Moreover, Creed (1993) suggests that, women as castrators depict dynamic, powerful and damaging monster figures, challenging the traditional gender position of women as passive victims. This phenomenon of active female castrator is also present in this caricature, as the main heroine is actively defending herself against the man and the patriarchal order as a whole. This can also be read as female empowerment as it emphasises women's agency as having the power to confront men with their greatest subconscious fears. The captions above the figures encourage and empower women to speak up against gendered prejudices, by suggesting that keeping one's experience of abuse quiet may cause other people to be harmed as well.

'WE CAN DO IT!' FEMINISM

The second sub-category to be investigated in detail is the 'We Can Do It!' feminism, a message that is repeated in the magazine on various occasions to empower women. The origin of the image is the iconic World War II poster from the USA, known as 'Rosie the Riveter'[4], which has been adopted internationally by feminists. Rosie the Riveter, as a feminist icon has been in the spotlight for feminists in Turkey, as well as mobilised by the *Bayan Yanı* magazine.

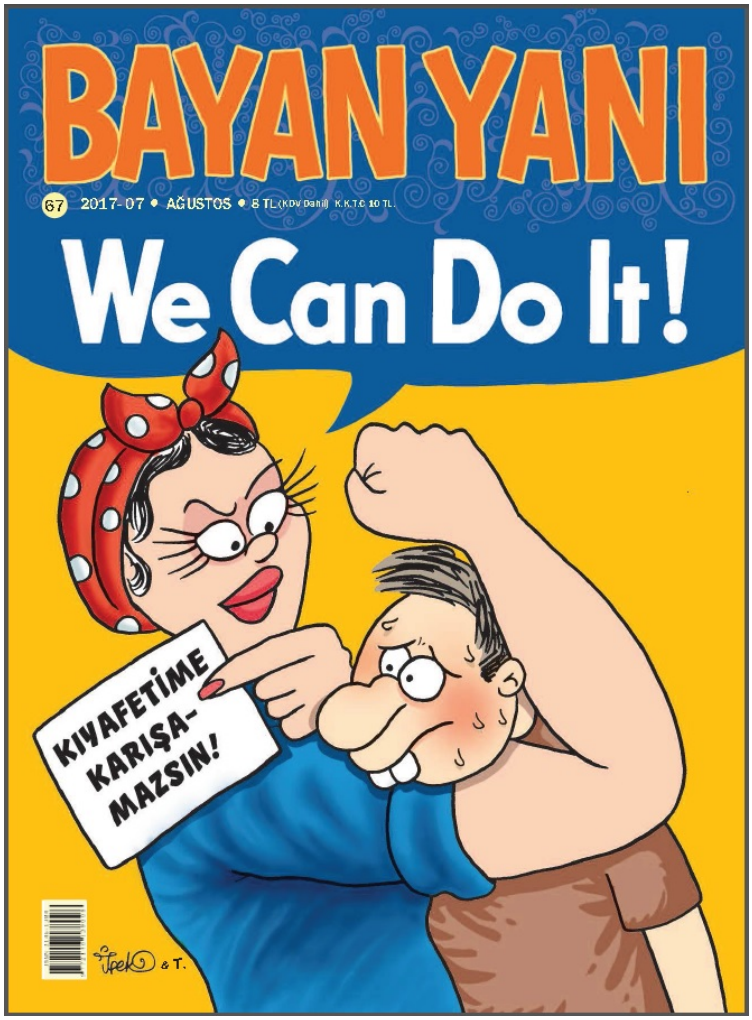


Figure 5. © İpek Özsüslü, Cover (*Bayan Yanı*, August 2017), (Reprinted with permission).
Caption:
My clothes are not your concern!

Figure 5 is an interpretation of the poster on the cover page of the August 2017 issue. As a whole, the caricature closely resembles the original poster (apart from an additional male character) with its prominent colours of yellowy orange and blue, representing a strong woman with the caption 'We Can Do It!'. From a social semiotics reading, the background colours evoke optimism, spaciousness and dynamism (Robinson et al., 2015). The heroine wears

[4] The 'We Can Do It!' poster was created by Howard Miller in 1943, containing the image of a strong woman, known as 'Rosie the Riveter'. As Kimble and Olson (2006) point out it was a propaganda poster created for Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, to encourage women to join their workforce and to motivate them to increase the productivity of their factories during World War II when men were on the front lines fighting for their country. Tobias (1997: 53) describes Rosie the Riveter as having 'movie-star looks, hair pulled up in a colorful bandanna, sleeves rolled high, ready to take rivet gun in hand', and in her newly designed workwear, 'she was cajoled into taking one of those dirty wartime jobs—out of patriotism and boredom (or both)'. However, in its initial publication the poster was far from being used as an empowerment tool for women and it had been forgotten for many years after the war (Kimble and Olson, 2006; Milkman, 1987). It was only after the 1960s with the onset of the second wave feminism movement that the Rosie the Riveter images reappeared with a new purpose to empower women rather than being a propaganda tool and the 'We Can Do It!' message was adopted by feminist groups, making Rosie an authentic feminist icon (Milkman, 1987; English, 2015).

a blue top with rolled up sleeves and a red bandanna with white polka dots, which partially covers her wavy hair just like the actual Rosie the Riveter. She is well-groomed and womanly in the way that she wears make-up: red lipstick, nail polish with long and defined eyelashes. She has a very determined and strong expression on her face, as opposed to the man's worried, confused and sweaty face which is trapped by her arm. Her power is supported by her muscled right arm, which looks disproportionately big and strong compared to the rest of her body, whilst the man, shorter and with a thin arm, seems weak. The woman clutches his head and directs his gaze to the written note she is holding on her left hand in capital letters, declaring her clothes are not a man's concern. The 'We Can Do It!' message in a blue speech bubble echoes the original poster. The slogan suggests that women have the required power to change gendered oppression in society. The caricature also implies how powerless a man can be in the face of a powerful and determined woman.

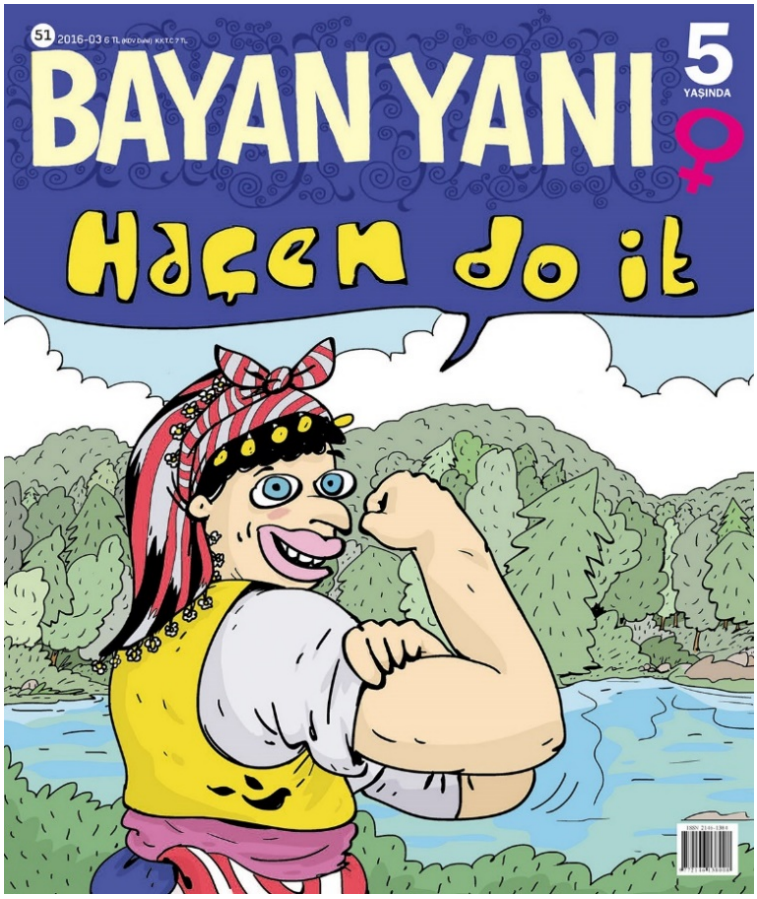


Figure 6. Unknown Caricaturist, Cover (© *Bayan Yani*, March 2016), (Reprinted with permission).

Figure 6 is another interpretation of the Rosie the Riveter poster, again having some similar features with the original image, but it also has some specific micro-culturally Turkish political elements. The caricature relates to the Artvin resistance[5]. Therefore, the feminist icon is depicted as a traditional north eastern woman from the Black Sea region and the 'We Can Do It!' message has a touch of a local accent: '*Haçen* Do It'. ('*Haçen*' is a word that is a product of the local Laz accent in the Black Sea region, meaning interchangeably 'hey', 'then', 'if'.) The region is famous for its picturesque green fields, forests and steep hills and mountains as represented in the background of the caricature (and thus differing from the bicolored background of the original poster). The characteristic features of people living in this region are usually referred to as having pale skin, blue eyes and arched noses that are apparent on the woman in the caricature, with some exaggerations that give her a comical look. Instead of a work uniform she wears a traditional local outfit completed with a striped and embellished headcover. Her positioning is similar to the original Rosie, as she is depicted from her right side, looking over her right shoulder and raising

[5] Artvin is a city in the north eastern part of Turkey. For more than a quarter of a century locals in Artvin have been fighting against the use of a 250hectare field for mining gold, copper, zinc and silver in the area of Cerattepe, which has a rich variety of fauna and flora hosting 2,000 plant forms, 124 endemic forms and hundreds of animals. Drilling works were first launched in the area in 1987 and people have been fighting actively and legally ever since. On 16 February 2016, security forces and vehicles belonging to the mining company wanted to enter the area and attacked the people who resisted them (BIA News Desk, 2016; 2019).

her strong and muscular right arm to show her strength. Women of the Black Sea region are usually referred to as being strong both physically and mentally and therefore being capable of accomplishing tough tasks. In short, the caricature promotes solidarity with the people of the Black Sea region in their ongoing resistance by specifically addressing and empowering female members of the community who have been actively fighting for their environment, despite the many challenges they have faced over the years.

Figure 7. © Betül Yılmaz, Inside page (*Bayan Yanı*, March 2013), (Reprinted with permission).
Caption: The old man in the left-hand corner: How magnificent!

Differing from the first two images of the sub-category, the main heroines in **Figures 7** and **8** appear to be more active, as they demonstrate a muscular strength by engaging in physical tasks. The women are huge and bulky, and it can be inferred that they are the same character, as their face and body features are quite similar. Medhurst and Desousa (1981: 214) argue that the size of an object within the frame of a caricature 'embodies valuative statements and values invite judgments'. This phenomenon can be explained by the concept, the bigger the object, the bigger its value (see Medhurst and Desousa, 1981) and it is relevant to these caricatures, as the main female figures cover most of the frame.

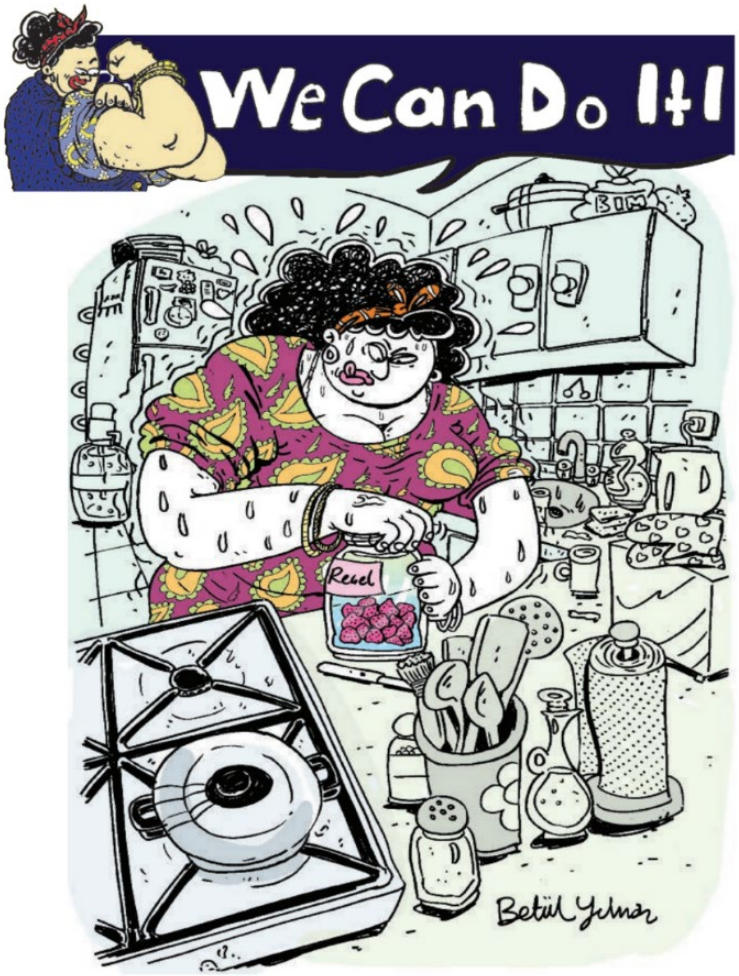


Figure 8. © Betül Yılmaz, Inside page (*Bayan Yanı*, July 2015), (Reprinted with permission).

Both women are engaged in traditionally masculine activities: in **Figure 7**, on the left the woman opens the ventilation window on the top of a bus, using both her hands and all her strength, which is signified by sweat and a grimacing ed facial expression. The woman on the right uses her force, again signified by sweating and a strained facial expression, whilst trying to open a jam jar. By placing the caricatures in the middle of their respective frames it suggests that they are at the core of their environments, while other people or objects surround and support them (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In **Figure 7** the woman wins appreciation from the other passengers (evident in the words of the old man), although some of them seem to be shocked at how strong she is. Indeed, she is represented as 'a superwoman', providing fresh air for the passengers and possibly saving them from a hazard. The second woman in **Figure 8**, however, is alone in a kitchen. Although she is also represented as physically strong and not needing a man to help her, the kitchen signifies another story that pertains to many other women: she is surrounded by evidence of household duties, arguably imprisoned in this private domestic sphere. Thus, the caricature reproduces representational norms, while at the same time, criticises them through a signification of empowerment.

COLLECTIVELY AND PUBLICLY FIGHTING PATRIARCHY

In this sub-category caricatures of activist feminist women who fight collectively against the gendered socio-political discourses are analysed. On 28th July 2011, a young female volleyball player was beaten by a male passenger on the bus on the grounds that she was wearing shorts. She was punched in the face, splitting her lip (*Milliyet*, 2011). **Figure 9** is the cover page of the September 2011 issue of *Bayan Yanı*, in support of the young girl and against the violent incident.

Figure 9. © İpek Özsüslü, Cover (*Bayan Yanı*, September 2011), (Reprinted with permission).
Captions:
One, two, three. Don't touch my shorts!

The caricature of thirteen women wearing either sports shorts as part of a team uniform or casual wear to show their solidarity and sympathy with the beaten women. The background of the caricature is white, which creates a blankness that surrounds the women. White is usually perceived positively and associated with 'purity, cleanliness, and peace' in social semiotics (Mahnke, 1996 quoted in Robinson et al., 2015: 663). In this sense, the colour preferences can be read as indicating the peaceful and legitimate spirit of the women's resistance. Each woman has relatively diverse body features, being short, tall, blonde, brunette, red-headed, short haired and long haired, all of which can be interpreted as representing a diversity of women, to a certain extent. However, all of them look young and seem to have proportional bodies, apart from Granny Fethiye who is standing on the right-hand side with her unusual knotted head cover. Overall, the caricature promotes the idea that there is safety in numbers and women are free to choose what they wear, regardless of their age and body features. However, it might be argued that the portrayal of diversity is also limited: there are no overweight women or disproportioned bodies, perhaps suggesting traces of the idealised female body image. There are also no women of colour or ethnic minorities represented in the caricature.

As for Granny Fethiye, the distinct features which separate her from the others are her floppy breasts, wrinkled toothless face and unfashionable clothes. She wears open toe slippers and long, casual, floral printed shorts that look like underpants or nightwear, usually worn by older women. This gives an impression that she was sitting at home and suddenly rushed out to join the girls. As Lemish and Muhlbauer suggest, elderly people are commonly 'under-represented' and set up 'to be marginal to plot lines, to play secondary characters, and to be represented in a highly stereotypical manner' (2012: 166). Representing the 'odd' one in a group of young women, Granny Fethiye is the marginalised character here. Placed in the far right-hand corner, rather than being placed somewhere in the middle of the group, is another indication of her subordinate role. However, from a different perspective, she is not in her private space, nor in a vulnerable or helpless situation, which is quite the contrary to more usual media representations of elderly people (Lemish and Muhlbauer, 2012). In this sense, she is challenging the conventional construction of elderly people: she is outside, independent and an active supporter of women's rights.

Figure 10. © Ramize Erer, Inside page (*Bayan Yanı*, June 2012), (Reprinted with permission).
Captions:
The woman: Before the abortion is forbidden, we want to get rid of these kids, doctor.
Little Erdoğan: Every abortion is an Uludere…
Little Gökçek: Women should kill themselves, instead of aborting their babies.

Figure 10 of the sub-theme concerns the issue of abortion. On 25 May 2012, during the United Nation's International Conference on Population and Development held in Turkey, the current Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, stated that he was against abortion and caesarean births because he believed they are carried out for the sole purpose of preventing Turkey's population growth. He added that there was no difference between abortion and committing murder (*Hürriyet* Daily News, 2012). He went on to link abortion and the *Uludere* Massacre[6], and claimed that 'every abortion is an Uludere' (*Hürriyet Daily News*, 2012). Other AKP members supported this idea. The former minister of health, Recep Akdağ, suggested that the government would take care of the babies of 'rape victims' rather than allow them to be aborted (Letsch, 2012). Former Metropolitan Municipality Mayor of Ankara, Melih Gökçek, stated in a TV interview that women should behave well, then there would be no need for abortion, and children would not suffer due to their mothers' misbehaviour (Letsch, 2012). He further advised that mothers should kill themselves, instead of aborting (in his view killing) their babies (Letsch, 2012).

Figure 10 demonstrates one of the many responses from *Bayan Yanı* to government politicians Erdoğan and Gökçek's comments. The caricature depicts a group of women visiting a gynaecologist's office. A woman in the foreground speaking on behalf of all declares: 'Before the abortion is forbidden, we want to get rid of these kids, doctor'. And the 'kids' are a child version of Erdoğan and Gökçek, who are repeating their statements (as cited above). Frowning women in this group look angry and annoyed at the two men. Only one woman (young, blonde, second from the left) wears a sad and worried facial expression. With her chequered skirt, backpack and knee-high socks, she is perhaps a student, just finishing her class and joining the others. The doctor, leaning nonchalantly against his desk, seems nevertheless to be startled by such a request: eyes wide open, eyebrows raised. As in **Figure 9**, each woman's bodily features are again diversely represented, as well as their styles of dress. The depiction of women in **Figure 10** is more diverse than in **Figure 9**, as is evident in the portrayal of women with headscarves and curvaceous bodies. Three women wear headscarves with one at the back tying it like a turban, a style usually adopted by conservative women, and the others tying it more casually, allowing a piece of hair to be visible beneath the headscarf and knotting it under the chin. The caricature attempts to be inclusive and speak to a wide range of women, but only to a certain extent.

[6] On 28 December 2011, Turkish Air Forces killed 34 civilians misidentifying them for Kurdish rebels in Uludere, in the south-eastern part of Turkey, close to the border of Iraq. The *BIA News Desk* reported that 'Drones and thermal cameras identified a group of people heading for the border. F-16 planes took off and struck the group with missiles. With dawn, it was revealed that the group were not PKK members but young villagers who were trying to smuggle cheap gasoline over the border' (*BIA News Desk*, 2011).

The humour is at the expense of Erdoğan and Gökçek who are demeaned by being represented as smaller than others, as children. Erdoğan even wears a t-shirt with what appears to be a teddy bear. As Medhurst and Desousa (1981: 214) suggest, the size of an object within the frame assigns its value and the caricaturists manipulate 'size as a part of the grammar of cartooning', to invite a particular depiction of politicians as having a 'diminutive stature'. Portraying Erdoğan and Gökçek in diminutive form is meant to suggest their lack of rationality. They are virtually little boys, in an adult world (see Medhurst and Desousa, 1981).

Bringing women together in solidarity, the caricature also acts as a reminder that it is women who bring men into the world, and it is women who deserve to decide what to do with their own bodies. In addition, it also suggests that it is important to have the right to abortion because it can prevent bringing into the world some who are better off not being born.

Figure 11. © Ramize Erer, Cover (*Bayan Yanı*, July 2013), (Reprinted with permission).
Caption:
RESIST GEZI

Figure 11 is another caricature related to the Gezi Park Protests, depicting famous characters from the magazine as protesters. The caricature is an interpretation of the famous painting 'Liberty Leading the People (*La Liberté Guidant le Peuple*)' by French painter Eugène Delacroix. Witnessing the Paris uprising of July 1830, known as the 'Three Glorious Days', which was triggered by 'the liberal republicans for violation of the Constitution', Delacroix painted this famous work (Dorbani-Bouabdellah, 2009). In this sense, it can be claimed that the magazine associates the Gezi Park Protests with the Paris revolution of 1830, rather similar conditions led to each of the civil uprisings against authorities. In addition, it is also noteworthy that the caricaturist Ramize Erer, who is the creator of this caricature, has been living in Paris for years and is perhaps familiar with the painting and its historical background.

One of the symbols of the Taksim Square, Atatürk Cultural Centre, became a showcase for the protest banners, which can be seen in the top far right-hand corner of **Figure 11**, covered with national flags and a portrait of

Atatürk, just like the placement of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Delacroix's painting. However, differing from the painting, the leading figure and the characters in the foreground are women and none of them carry any kind of weapon. In the background is second group of protestors (genders unclear) and police in conflict with one another. The latter are in black, wearing gas masks and helmets for protection but masking their identities. The protestors carry backpacks and cover their faces against tear gas with fabric (a common practice of the Gezi Park protesters). Similar to the painting, dust and smoke surround the figures and bullet-like objects fly over the protesters, just as tear gas and plastic bullets had in Gezi Park. In the Delacroix painting, the essence of victory is symbolized in 'a pyramidal composition; the base, strewn with corpses, resembles a pedestal supporting the image of the victors' (Dorbani-Bouabdellah, 2009). **Figure 11** also presents a pyramidal structure but there are scrap materials under the protesters' feet that were commonly used as barricades during the protests.

The leading female caricature in **Figure 11** wears a yellow, off-the-shoulder dress and waves a flag, just like the leading figure in Delacroix's painting, but in contrast to the painting the leading female character's breast is not visible and rather than the national flag, she is holding a bright pink flag, sporting the slogan 'RESIST GEZI' (*DİREN GEZİ*), which was a common hashtag on social media in support of the protests. The choice of the colour pink on the flag is pertinent. Reclaimed by post-feminists, pink signifies an expression of femininity. The colour yellow is referred to as the colour of sunshine, symbolising optimism, dynamism and happiness (Jirousek, 1995; Robinson et al., 2015). In **Figure 11**, yellow symbolises the leading female character with bearing hope amongst the chaos. In fact, she is one of the rebellious characters from the magazine, ironically known as 'Berna, the bad girl' (*Kötü Kız Berna*). She is a freedom fighter and a lively, attractive woman, who has no tolerance for unfairness and inequality, as is also evident in this caricature.

The figure on the left side of leading female character is 'Afet, the life coach' (*Yaşam Koçu Afet*) and she is the wisest character in the magazine. Living in a rural area she always provides useful advice in a clever and witty way to other women around her. Here, she has her hair double knotted (as always), wears a red t-shirt showing her cleavage and bright green, baggy printed trousers that are similar to those worn by rural women in some parts of Turkey. These codes in **Figure 11** place her as a representative of rural women. The first woman on the right-hand side of the leading female figure is another rebellious freedom fighter, known as Dilex. She lives in Istanbul and is a young, modern and slightly overweight woman demonstrating 'body positivity', which is shown in the caricature: she is not afraid of showing her body with all its imperfections and flaws. Next to her, there is the self-portrayal of İpek Özsüslü (the caricaturist). Sıdıka, the house girl, stands to the right of her; she is a 20-year-old daughter of a working-class family who lives in the suburbs of Istanbul. In her social circle she is more interested in world affairs and environmental issues, adopting a utopian idealism of changing the whole world, starting with her family and close circle (Atalay, 2012). This explains why she is depicted at the heart of the protest. The last woman portrayed is Raziye İçoğlu (the writer), who usually appears alongside her magazine column. By depicting female characters with different features, interests and backgrounds the magazine communicates the possibility of empowerment for a relatively variety of women, suggesting any woman can be on the frontline resisting and fighting for various forms of injustice. However, it can also be argued that the variety represented here is quite limited, as many women living in Turkey are left out, such as, women with headscarves, women of colour or women with disabilities, even though the women protesters were quite diverse in many ways, in the Gezi Park protests.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented a selective, indicative analysis of the way in which certain forms of feminism have been constructed through the caricatures published in the *Bayan Yanı* magazine from 2011 to the end of 2017. I began with briefly presenting the magazine, its ideology and appearance on the market as a feminist publication. Then, the methodological framework explained the image selection process and analytical framework of the article. By examining the visual and verbal aspects of sampled caricatures, the article offered an understanding of the major tendencies and shifting dynamics in the depiction of the key feminist trends within the magazine.

My analysis has shown that the role of the magazine was primarily a feminist activist response to an authoritarian anti-feminist regime in Turkey. This was either on the part of individuals or in solidarity, employing satirical, ironical, metaphorical and humorous representations of resistance. However, the magazine also reproduced various gendered roles and norms as an inevitable reality of humour (as has been argued by several scholars: Mackie, 1990; Holmes, 2006; Kotthoff, 2006). Nevertheless, it can be suggested that the magazine functions as an outlet for feminists and feminist ideas, with its caricatures that play a role in both reflecting and creating activism amongst women in Turkey. Furthermore, the magazine represents a diversity of women; however, it might be argued that there are some limitations to the diversity represented. From an intersectional perspective, there appears to be some degree of avoidance that is evident in very limited or sometimes non-existent representations

of covered women or indeed Muslim feminists, lesbians, disabled women or women of colour, for example. This is an area for future potential research and clearly something that needs further investigation. Modern Turkey is a diverse society having a lively dialogue about feminism; some of that debate is enabled and stimulated in the realm of popular culture and specifically through comics. Comics have long been part of popular political debate in Turkey and have provided a framework for alternative discourses such as feminism to flourish, we are only just beginning to recognise how the public sphere might be enriched by such visual activism.

REFERENCES

Akyüz, H. (2014) Hz. Peygamber'in Hadislerinde Renklerin Dili, [Language of colours in His Holiness' Hadiths], *Atatürk Üniversitesi Ilahiyat Fakultesi Dergisi, 41*, 373-397. Available at: http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/31212 (Accessed 10 March 2019).

Arat, Y. (2013). Gezi Parkı direnişi: Demokrasi açığı, demokrasi gücü, [Gezi Park resistance: Democracy gap, democracy power], *Bilim Akademisi Derneği*, Available at: https://bilimakademisi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Gezi-Parki-Direnisi_Demokrasi-Acigi-Demokrasi-Gucu.pdf (Accessed 3 November 2019).

Amnesty International. (2013). Gezi Park protests brutal denial of the right to peaceful assembly in Turkey, *Amnesty International*. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR44/022/2013/en/ (Accessed 3 November 2019).

Atalay, A. (2012). Sıdıka. *Atilla Atalay Yarı Resmi Enternet Sitesi*. Available at: http://atibey.blogspot.com/p/sdka.html (Accessed 10 November 2018).

Bayan Yanı (2016). Cover page, *Bayan Yanı*. Author: Unknown, Issue no: 51, (March), p.1.

BIA News Desk. (2011). Turkish air strike kills more than 30 civilians, *Bianet*, Available at: https://bianet.org/english/human-rights/135084-turkish-air-strike-kills-more-than-30-civilians (Accessed 24 July 2019).

BIA News Desk. (2014). Erdoğan: Bringing men and women to equal status is against nature, *Bianet*. Available at: https://m.bianet.org/english/women/160213-erdogan-bringing-men-and-women-to-equal-status-is-against-nature (Accessed: 18 January 2019).

BIA News Desk. (2015). Bülent Arınç: Be silent as a woman!, *Bianet*, Available at: http://bianet.org/english/women/166434-bulent-arinc-be-silent-as-a-woman (Accessed 8 January 2019).

BIA News Desk. (2016). Attack against people opposing copper mine in Artvin, *Bianet*, Available at: https://bianet.org/english/environment/172159-attack-against-people-opposing-copper-mine-in-artvin (Accessed 8 May 2019).

Bilger, A. (2009). Comedy. In E. Kowaleski-Wallace, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory* (pp.119-121), London and New York: Routledge.

Cantek, L. (1997). Leman, Anti-Medya ve İç Savaş Manzaraları, [Leman, Anti-Media and Civil War Scenery]. *Birikim Dergisi*, *102*, 61-76. Available at: http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim-yazi/5141/leman-anti-medya-ve-ic-savas-manzaralari#.WWZ_6emQzIU (Accessed 15 June 2017).

CNN Türk. (2015). Bayan Yanı'ndan özel sayı: "Kadınlar mizah da yapar beyler!", [Special Issue of Bayan Yanı: Women can make humour too, gentlemen!], *CNN Türk*, Available at: http://www.cnnturk.com/haber/turkiye/bayan-yanindan-ozel-sayi-kadinlar-mizah-da-yapar-beyler (Accessed 9 May 2017).

Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous-Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.

Creed, B. (1999) Horror and the monstrous feminine: An imaginary abjection In S. Thornham. (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A reader* (pp.251-267), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Dorbani-Bouabdellah, M. (2009). July 28: Liberty leading the people, *Louvre Museum Official Website*. Available at: https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/july-28-liberty-leading-people?selection=44900 (Accessed 20 May 2019).

English, T. (2015). Rosie the Riveter's journey from propaganda to feminist icon. Does the history of an image matter?, *The Humanities Index*. Available at: https://humx.org/rosie-the-riveter-985cd6e3a8a4 (Accessed 26 March 2019).

Erer, R. (2012). Inside page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 12, (June), p. 3.

Erer, R. (2013). Cover page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 21, (July), p. 1.

Erer, R. (2015). Cover page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 44, (August), p. 1.

Girardot, C. (2017) Fueling Turkish feminism with satire and humour. *Mashallah News*, Available at: https://www.mashallahnews.com/fueling-turkish-feminism-with-satire-and-humour (Accessed 10 November 2018).

Gray, F. (1994). *Women and Laughter*. London: Palgrave
Harrington, E. (2018). *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*. London: Routledge
Holmes, J. (2006). Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humor and gender in the workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics, 38*(1), 26-50.
Hürriyet Daily News. (2012). Abortion sparks raging debate in Turkey, *Hürriyet Daily News*. Available at: http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/abortion-sparks-raging-debate-in-turkey-21740 (Accessed 11 January 2019).
Hürriyet Daily News. (2013). Presence of pregnant women in public is 'disgraceful,' says Turkish lawyer, *Hürriyet Daily News*. Available at: http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/presence-of-pregnant-women-in-public-is-disgraceful-says-turkish-lawyer--51380 (Accessed 10 January 2019).
Jirousek, C. (1995). *Art, Design and Visual Thinking An Interactive Textbook*. Ithaca: Cornell University. Available at: http://char.txa.cornell.edu/ (Accessed 22 October 2018).
Kimble, J. J. and Olson, L. C. (2006). Visual rhetoric representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' poster. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs, 9*(4), 533-569. Available at: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/210135#info_wrap (Accessed 1 April 2019).
Kotthoff, H. (2006) Gender and humor: The state of the art. *Journal of Pragmatics, 38*(1), 4-25.
Kress G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.
Lemish, D. and Muhlbauer, V. (2012). 'Can't have it all': Representations of older women in popular culture. *Women & Therapy, 35*(3-4), 165-180.
Letsch, C. (2012). Turkish women join pro-choice rally as fears grow of abortion ban, *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/03/turkish-women-rally-abortion-ban (Accessed 12 January 2019).
Mackie, M. (1990). Who is laughing now? The role of humour in the social construction of gender. *Atlantis, 15*(2), 11-26. Available at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e49c/8b3b0bfe3e6c9f31268de2fbd07318ba0eab.pdf (Accessed 15 September 2019).
Medhurst, M. J. and Desousa, M. A. (1981). Political cartoons as rhetorical form: A taxonomy of graphic discourse. *Communication Monographs, 48*(3), 197-236.
Milkman, R. (1987). Gender, consciousness, and social change: Rethinking women's World War II experience. *Contemporary Sociology, 16*(1), 21-25. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2071182 (Accessed: 9 April 2019).
Milliyet. (2011) Voleybolcu kıza İETT otobüsünde kısa şort dayağı, [Beating of a volleyball player girl on an IETT bus because of wearing shorts], *Milliyet*. Available at: http://www.milliyet.com.tr/voleybolcu-kiza-iett-otobusunde-kisa-sort-dayagi-gundem-1424438/ (Accessed 1 December 2018).
Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., and Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1), 1-13.
NTV. (2017). Çizer Ramize Erer'e Fransa'dan "Yaratıcı Cesaret Ödülü", [The Creative Courage Award from France to Ramize Erer], *NTV*. Available at: https://www.ntv.com.tr/sanat/cizer-ramize-erere-fransadan-yaratici-cesaret-odulu,pIS7u7nIL0-PPWmhekiWPA?_ref=infinite (Accessed 7 October 2018).
Özen, H. (2015). An unfinished grassroots populism: The Gezi Park protests in Turkey and their aftermath. *South European Society and Politics, 20*(4), 533-552.
Özsüslü, İ. (2011). Cover page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 6, (September), p. 1.
Özsüslü, İ. (2013). Inside page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 21, (July), p. 3.
Özsüslü, İ. (2013). Cover page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 22, (August), p. 1.
Özsüslü, İ. (2014). Inside page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 31, (June), p. 3.
Özsüslü, İ. (2017). Cover page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 67, (August), p. 1.
Rees, E. L. E. (2013). *The Vagina: A literary and cultural history*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Robinson, M. D., Liu, T. and Bair, J. L. (2015). Affect-related influences on color perception. In A. J. Elliot, M. D. Fairchild and A. Franklin. (eds.), *Handbook of Color Psychology*. (pp. 660-679). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rose, G. (2016). *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. (4th Ed.) London: SAGE Publications.
Santana, M. C. (2016). From empowerment to domesticity: The case of Rosie the Riveter and the WWII campaign. *Frontiers in Sociology, 1*(16), 1-8.
Tekay, C. (2013). Part I: History of the woman question and feminism in Turkey. *Talk Turkey Conference: Rethinking life since Gezi, The New School's Historical Studies Department*. Available at: http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15037/rethinking-gezi-through-feminist-and-lgbt-perspect (Accessed 10 May 2016).
The Nib. (2017). İpek Özsüslü, *The Nib*, Available at: https://thenib.com/ipek-ozsuslu (Accessed 9 October 2018).
Tobias, S. (1997). *Faces of Feminism: An activist's reflections on the women's movement*. New York: Routledge.

Toksabay, E. (2011). With satire, woman's magazine tackles taboos in Turkey. *Reuters*. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-women-magazine-idUSTRE76J5UR20110720 (Accessed 9 October 2018).

Tyler, I. (2011). Pregnant beauty: Maternal femininities under neoliberalism. In R. Gilland C. Scharff(eds.), *New Femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp.21-37). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Walker, B. G. (1983). *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Yalçınkaya, C. T. (2006). *A Shift in the Tradition of Humour Magazines in Turkey: The case of L-Manyak and Lombak* (MSc Thesis). Middle East Technical University. Available at: http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12608118/index.pdf (Accessed 2 March 2017).

Yılmaz, B. (2013). Inside page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: Special Issue, (March), p. 25.

Yılmaz, B. (2015). Inside page, *Bayan Yanı*. Issue no: 43, (July), p. 31.

Citation: Erkul, S. (2020). Activist Feminism in Turkey, Represented Through the Caricatures of Bayan Yanı Magazine. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 08. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7912

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 09
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Veiling the Superhero: A Comparative Analysis of Dust and Qahera

Safiyya Hosein [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

This article conducts a comparative analysis of the Egyptian webcomic superhero, Qahera with Marvel's *X-Men* superhero, Dust by analysing the symbolic meaning of the veil in their storylines. By applying existing research from both comic scholars and postcolonial feminist researchers, this article illustrates how the veil can be used as a tool to perpetuate colonial prejudices as we see with Dust - or subvert them in the case of Qahera. Through both humour and political allegory, *Qahera the Superhero* has created a sensitive narrative for the veiled superheroine which speaks to the everyday life of a veiled Muslim woman in Egypt.

Keywords: Qahera the superhero, webcomics, veiling, Sooraya Qadir, Dust, Muslim superheroes, colonial feminism

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, webcomics have enjoyed a surge in popularity with Muslim women creators such as Huda Fahmy and Sanya Anwar making comics that destabilise orientalist constructions of Muslim women through humour and insight. For many years, the depiction of Muslim women in comics was dependent on industry gatekeepers such as Marvel and DC who often characterised them as either oppressed or – in the case of belly dancers – hypersexualised. In this article, I will compare two veiled Muslim superheroes – Marvel's *X-Men* superhero, Dust and the Egyptian webcomic superhero, Qahera. The purpose is to illustrate how the medium of webcomics is a powerful tool that makes Muslim women from the Global South active agents in shaping their own narratives. By illustrating how gatekeepers construct veiled Muslim women, this comparison will reveal how the webcomic *Qahera the Superhero* provides a counter-narrative to popular conceptions of veiled Muslim women as exoticised and oppressed. As a result, webcomics are significant in destabilising orientalist narratives about Muslim women by including their voices into media discourses and are thus a powerful social justice tool of representation.

THEORISING THE MUSLIM SUPERHERO

Muslim characters have been a part of comics for decades but have only taken on deeper significance in the post 9/11 era with Muslim superheroes such as *Ms. Marvel's* Kamala Khan and the *Green Lantern's* Simon Baz. While representation has come a long way for the depiction of Muslims in comic books, there is still room for improvement. Before the surge in popularity of Muslim superheroes, Jack Shaheen brought attention to the depiction of Muslims in American comic books in the 1990s. In his article 'Arab images in American comic books', Shaheen discusses a typology of Arab Muslim representation that mostly prioritises Muslim and Arab masculine constructions. However, his analysis of Arab gender roles included the depiction of Arab Muslim women whom he described as being 'doomed to one of two illustrations, either a scantily-clad or salivated-upon belly dancer, or a faceless housewife, whose thick-set form is bundled up in dark robes' (Shaheen, 1994: 129). The latter construction of the faceless housewife is undoubtedly descriptive of the stereotype of the veiled Muslim woman. Shaheen described the faceless housewife as inconsequential to the plot whose main purpose is served being 'part of the setting', never to be spoken to or to speak, and thus being 'devoid of personality' (Shaheen, 1994: 129). Therefore, veiled Muslim women in a pre-9/11 context in North American comic books continues to perpetuate the stereotypical construction of being oppressed and lacked any real significance in the narrative.

[1] *PhD candidate in the joint program in Communication and Culture at Ryerson University and York University in Toronto*, CANADA
***Corresponding Author:** safiyya.hosein@ryerson.ca

However, after 9/11, Muslim women seemed to take on new significance for the American comic book publishers Marvel and DC, who sought to capitalise on the wider media sensationalism of Muslims by including them in their superhero lexicon. The earliest of this inclusion was the *X-Men* Sooraya Qadir, codenamed Dust. As a *niqabi* superhero, who flayed her opponents alive with lethal sand particles, the faceless housewife was reinvented with a personality and an orientalist superpower, making her far more relevant to the genre of comics than before. Furthermore, whenever she transformed from being fully veiled and robed in her human form into a naked sand form when she used her superpower, her characterisation seemed to merge with Shaheen's belly dancer type. Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus analysed Dust's representation somewhat imperfectly in their short essay 'Finding a place for a Muslimah heroine in the Post-9/11 Marvel Universe: New X-Men's Dust', which paid much attention to the superheroine from a gendered perspective but failed to engage with any of the substantial issues regarding the representation of her race/ethnicity. After pointing out how Dust's religion has been used more as a tool for sensationalism, it didn't engage with the character's orientalist construction. For example, the authors justify her demeaning superhero name as a connection to the 'arid sands of the Arabian and Saharan deserts', when both her name and the superpower itself relied too much on a stereotypical perception of the Middle East as an uncivilised desert region (Davis and Westerfelhaus, 2013: 804). When it came to engaging with her deeply sexualised imagery, the article merely dismissed her naked sand form as reminiscent of pornography, when it was in fact more reminiscent of eighteenth and nineteenth century harem paintings. The article concluded that she was marginalised in comics simply because she was a woman as opposed to being a woman of colour, the authors being seemingly unaware of the fact that non-white female superheroes have historically been given much less of a symbolic presence in comics than their white counterparts.

However, it is worth pointing out that the veiled Muslim woman has been sensitively constructed most notably (perhaps unsurprisingly) in Middle Eastern superhero comics. *The 99* is a Kuwaiti comic that was inspired by the powerful characters of DC and Marvel comics. Its characters are young men and women gifted with superpowers that personify the '99 attributes of God'[1] (an Islamic scriptural concept) and are in a perpetual battle with the comic's chief villain named Rughal. By blending Islamic mythology with actual historical knowledge of the Mongols, *The 99* series has gained a cult-like following in North America. Shirin Edwin's article, 'Islam's Trojan horse: Battling perceptions of Muslim women in *The 99*', analysed the Muslim female superheroes from the series, describing the text as a 'polemic on Islam and Islamic feminism, in particular' (Edwin, 2012: 171). Edwin's article looked at multiple female characters – some veiled, others non-religious, and from a variety of backgrounds. Her essay primarily focused on their body language, dress code and personalities. One of her most interesting analyses was of the veiled superhero Batina, whose power is the ability to hide and move undetected through surveillance. The character's natural inclination is to stay hidden but because of her '*Noor* stone'[2] she is compelled to became visible. Edwin surmises that:

> Significantly, Batina's powers, and her own personal struggles, powerfully reflect the choice of Muslim women behind the veil who nevertheless make consistent, if unacknowledged, contributions to society. (Edwin, 2012: 182)

The implication that a Muslim female superhero would be empowered by her faith is predictable here since the series originated from the religious and culturally conservative Middle Eastern Gulf state, Kuwait. But what was notable about Edwin's observation, was her connection between the character and her veil. It can be argued that Batina's veil was allegorical to her shy personality, which often motivated her to stay hidden. Given that her superpower was based on faith (the *Noor* stone is an allusion to Islamic mythology), her storyline thus rounds her characterisation off appropriately with that the Noor stone is symbolically compelling her to be brave and thus be seen.

No article on the Muslim superhero would be complete without a discussion of the rebooted *Ms. Marvel*, the Pakistani-American teen Kamala Khan, who debuted to much fanfare in October 2014 and remains one of Marvel's most popular superheroes – a heartening fact when one considers that the character is far more sensitively told than the orientalised Dust (Diamond, 2014). Arguably, the figure of Kamala Khan is a giant step forward from the faceless housewife and the belly dancer construction of traditional Muslim representations in comics. However, despite her more sensitive construction, scholars have discussed some problematic aspects of the *Ms. Marvel* comic series. In 'Comics as public pedagogy: Reading Muslim masculinities through Muslim femininities in Ms. Marvel', Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa D. Niccolini pointed to one panel in Issue #1 that depicted the new Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers, passing on the 'Ms. Marvel' mantel to Kamala in the form of a 'celestial' being, which they concluded can be interpreted as a subtle reinforcement of the white saviour complex (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini,

[1] Usually referred to as 'The 99 Names of Allah' but Allah is the Arabic word for 'God' and is used by Muslims and Arabic-speaking Christians.

[2] The superheroes in *The 99* receive their superpowers from a fictional artifact called the '*Noor* stone'.

2015: 29). The visual panel in question depicts Captain America, Iron Man, and Carol Danvers, descending from above in a cloud of smoke with their hands in the air (Iron Man's is folded to his chest) in front of a mesmerised Kamala, which tends to confirm Khoja-Moolji's and Niccolini's analysis. This same visual panel was further analysed in Sarah Gibbons's article, 'I don't exactly have quiet, pretty powers': Flexibility and alterity in *Ms. Marvel*', for its celestial connotations, which aptly connects it to the kind of Christian iconography found in Raphael's painting *The Transfiguration* (1520). While both articles do speak of the mostly positive representation of Kamala, their point about the white saviour complex depicted in the panel, as well as Khoja-Moolji's and Niccolini's observations about 'normality' in the comic being 'invisibly marked by Christianity' provides salient contributions (Gibbons, 2017: 28). I would argue that an improvement on orientalist representations in superhero comics does not equate to an unproblematic Muslim representation. Since the debut of Dust, in which white saviourism was more overt, the subtle use of imagery that depicts white superheroes as saviours appears to have become a worrying trend in Muslim superhero representation.

THE VEILED AMERICAN SUPERHERO: AN ANALYSIS OF DUST

At the beginning of the USA War on Terror, Marvel Comics introduced Dust in December 2002 in the *New X-Men* series, Issue #133. Dressed in a traditional *abaya* (a Middle Eastern style of dress), Dust is predominantly portrayed as veiled. Despite this veiled representation, she is not an asexual character, devoid of any desirable gaze. On the contrary, her *abaya* is form-fitting to imply ample cleavage and curves beneath her garment, and her eyes are well-defined as the only facial feature that the audience is afforded (in Middle Eastern cultures where the female is veiled, or scarfed, eyes can carry a significant sexual power). A key element of her character's costume is wearing the *niqab* as a protection from prurient gaze. When a superhero colleague searches for her in a post-battle scene in a later issue, she is reluctant to go back into human-form because she 'has no clothes' and therefore cannot make it back to the *X-Men* school dormitory fully veiled. In yet another scene, she defends her choice to eat alone, stating it is because 'it requires me to take off my *hood*' (Davis and Westerfelhaus, 2013: 804). Her portrayal as a Muslim superheroine does not appear to be so much a benevolent move of diverse inclusion bestowed by Marvel, rather the figure is a trope that continues to reinforce blatant orientalist stereotypes that produces the age-old clash-of-civilisations binary.

Figure 1. Henry, C. (2005). Dust on the cover of *New X-Men: Hellions* Vol.1, August 2005. © C. Henry.

It is important to consider the context of production and the possible intention in creating Muslim superheroes. The reader may wonder why superhero comics are so eager to make a Muslim character a 'good' one (and more so a superhero fighting in the name of freedom) in an age of western tension with the Islamic world? One possibility could be best explained through Gayatri Spivak's work on the 'domesticated Other' and the 'imperialist self'. In 'Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism', Spivak examines the works of authors Charlotte Brontë, Jean Rhys, and Mary Shelley to deconstruct the imperialist undertones in their feminist works. She states:

> No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self. (Spivak, 1985: 253)

Dust can best be described as an epitome of Spivak's 'domesticated Other' consolidated for the 'imperialist self'. Spivak referenced this binary when exploring imperialism and feminism in her analysis of the works of the three White female authors she examined. Throughout her essay, she expresses wariness of the limitation of feminist individualism when analysing western literature that alludes to the Third world and its diasporas. In many ways, a veiled Muslim superheroine like Dust represents the same type of binary as the 'domesticated Other' on one end, and the 'imperialist self' on the other end. In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud details the power of drawing in comics in which he argues that the purpose of cartooning lies in its 'amplification through simplification' format. In his chapter, 'The vocabulary of comics' he refers to icons before discussing images and states that 'by stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't' (McCloud, 1994: 30). If we combine both McCloud's and Spivak's observations, then the 'domesticated Other' is amplified as Islam through its orientalist, veiled character and the 'imperialist self' is the western audience that the character is created for.

The impulse to domesticate the Oriental subject has far-reaching, arguably racist and gendered implications. In her article, 'Do Muslim women need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural representations and its others', the anthropologist and scholar Lila Abu-Lughod, mentions a 19th century conference proceedings book by Christian missionary women entitled *A Cry of Need from the Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those who Heard it*. Citing the need to save their veiled counterparts 'who will never cry for themselves, for they are down under the yoke of oppression', Abu-Lughod questions exactly why it is necessary to save these women, and for what reason? (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 789) The clear implication is that we are saving them from Muslim men – an archetype of orientalist masculinity that has too often endured racist stereotypes as savage, oversexed and uncivilised. It is thus no coincidence that our first introduction to an ostensibly powerful Muslim female superhero like Dust is presented as incapacitated in her first scene while she is rescued by the white hyper-masculine ex-soldier superhero Wolverine, who saves her from none other than these uncivilised Brown men who dare to unveil her and thus strip her of her modesty. Ironically, these Brown men are members of the Taliban, a group of religious fanatics who have notoriously mandated veiling in territories in Afghanistan that they control, a fact completely ignored. After Issue #133 opens with Wolverine valiantly fighting off several Taliban members somewhere in Afghanistan, the reader is privy to him walking into a tent only to find an unconscious Dust in the arms of a French thief Fantomex, who is about to sell her into the mutant[3] slave trade. After remarking on the deplorable treatment of women in the Taliban-era Afghanistan, Wolverine expresses incredulity that Fantomex would exploit their vulnerability (Morrison, Van Sciver and Rapmund, 2002). The politics of the scene is ripe with meaning when one considers that around the same time that the comic was written, the French had rebuffed the USA in their recruitment of western allies to join them in the invasion of Iraq. Therefore, the opening scene seems to be a mouthpiece for the writer Grant Morrison's political views, and the text infers that the artist disapproved of the French government's choice during that time. The incapacitated Dust is first seen in the arms of Fantomex before the last panel shows her in the arms of Wolverine. Such an example of rescue by a white male from first the Taliban and then the Frenchman not only positions Wolverine as a white male saviour but lays the 'white man's burden' squarely on an American. And whilst Wolverine was born in Canada, his prior US Army service and his current home combines a form of American nationalism with white masculinity.

It is important to discuss the cover of Issue #133 which was the issue that marked Dust's debut. Her veiled face appears on the front cover which is all black except for a slit of skin, revealing alarmed green eyes and dark eyebrows, reminiscent of the iconic 1980s *National Geographic* cover of a startled green-eyed Afghan girl (McCurry, 1985). In a disappointing turn, the issue that introduces her depicts her from the start as marginalised by placing her on the periphery of the main storyline where the primary focus is the rescue of Professor Xavier, which seems at odds with her feminine and coquettish eyes which make the cover. Most troublingly, she is devoid of any dialogue in this issue save for one Arabic word, *toorab* [dust], that she repeatedly utters in the ending, after being coaxed to come out of her sand-form by Jean Grey. The scene in question is troublesome when one considers the

[3] Mutants are superheroes in the *X-Men* series.

fact that Dust we learn, is a mutant with particularly strong powers. While the *X-Men* regroup in their Mumbai headquarters, the red-headed American superheroine Jean Grey uses the mutant-location device *cerebro*[4] to try to locate Dust who is described earlier on as simply a 'mutant refugee' (Morrison, van Sciver and Rapmund, 2002). While the *X-Men* gabber on in lively conversation, they notice the dust that is settling around a sleeping Wolverine. Jean Grey soon announces that the mutant is in the room but just not in human form and begins to talk to Sooraya, coaxing her into showing herself by reminding her that they were the ones who rescued her. This is shocking when one considers that earlier on Dust was powerful enough to flay thirteen Taliban members alive in her superpower form. The idea of a mutant that powerful being scared to appear in front of the others is a puzzling disempowerment. The scene also juxtaposes Dust with another female character – the brave, jeans-clad white American woman, Jean Grey, who is also positioned as a 'saviour' who seemingly conjures her up, thus reinforcing Spivak's observations of the domesticated Other.

Dust's transformation from sand to human form is the most telling in terms of her sexual objectification since there is a clear imprint of her undressed body in sand-form before we see her appear veiled as a human being, in a form-fitting *abaya* with a curvaceous silhouette and the same alarmed eyes. It is worth noting that the first image we see of her transformation in Issue #133 was less sexualised and slightly morbid with her ribcage featured in one panel. However, later transformations became more overtly sexualised with her naked body more clearly illustrated in sand form. Dust, the implied radical that cannot eat in front of others because she must first remove 'her hood' and the defender of the *niqab*, becomes domesticated by the male gaze. Her lack of dialogue implies that she is there for us to watch, objectified, and her non-existent English-speaking abilities only serves to accentuate her exoticism. In 'Estranging the familiar: 'East' and 'west' in Satrapi's *Persepolis*', Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley describe the veil in terms of a 'radical otherness':

> As Gayatri Spivak has famously argued, the project of imperialism has historically been to transform the radically other into the domesticated other in a way that consolidates the (western) self. (Naghibi and O'Malley, 2005: 226)

In their argument, the veil is the icon that amplifies the character's construction and simplifies her as a representative of a foreign civilisation. Already marginalised as a secondary character, Dust is reduced to being a talking *niqab*. This comic symbol of 'radicalised otherness' requires domestification, her purpose is to render an idealised version of the radicalised Other that is domesticated by the western/American subject. She is non-threatening and marginalised and the object of the male gaze.

The Islamic feminist Leila Ahmed has noted the hypocrisy of western colonisers who were obsessed with emancipating Muslim women while also opposing women's own emancipation campaigns in their home countries (Ahmed, 1993: 152). Having coined the term 'colonial feminism', Ahmed stated that during Lord Cromer's governorship in Egypt, he made de-veiling his mission while simultaneously opposing the Suffragist movement in his native country, Britain (Ahmed, 1993: 151). She points out that the Suffragist movement challenged Victorian norms and social mores – which Cromer defended. In her book *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, travel and the Ottoman empire,* Reina Lewis says of the harem:

> There is no denying it – as a topic, the harem sold books… Publishers knew it, booksellers knew it, readers knew it and authors knew it. (Lewis, 2005: 12)

Lewis' argument speaks to the power of the veil in popular culture which is an artefact often conjured up in conjunction with the western image of the harem and repeated in mainstream comics. Because Dust is depicted as naked in her superpower form and only returns to her veiled self when she is human, she evokes the harem painting and its mystical sexuality. But in depictions outside the harem, Muslim women were often veiled. Harem paintings, veils and white saviours typically reinforce colonial prejudices which can be emboldened in the form of symbolic archetypes deployed in contemporary comments.

THE VEILED EGYPTIAN SUPERHERO: AN ANALYSIS OF QAHERA

In July 2013, a previously unknown Egyptian illustrator named Deena Mohammed created a witty comic on Tumblr meant to be a joke to her friends and poke fun at a misogynistic cleric in Egypt. The comic made a light-hearted point about misogyny on Egyptian TV, and became a sensation on Tumblr. It soon ballooned into a bigger project entitled *Qahera the superhero* and became a fan favourite online (Mohammed, 2013). The veiled superhero has a mission to fight misogyny at home while fighting Islamophobia abroad. The webcomic's cult-like following

[4] *Cerebro* is a fictional device that locates mutants in the *X-Men* series. It was invented by two of the series' most important characters, Professor Xavier and Magneto.

and clever social justice messages soon attracted attention in western media outlets such as the *BBC*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, and *Vice*. *Qahera the superhero's* playful style has helped make the comic an attraction, in its ironic and boldly honest take on being a Muslim woman.

The construction of the character is notably different to Dust. Qahera is also dressed in an *abaya* but vacillates between wearing a *hijab* and covering her face with a veil at other times. But she is never seen nude, and her looser-fitting costume follows the Islamic requirements for modesty. By being a superhero that defends many different types of Egyptians, Qahera makes it clear that she is not bogged down by the constraints of patriarchal interpretations of religious scripture. In her comic *On Basic Equality and Such*, Qahera is seen saving Egyptian dogs, Copts, partying women, street thugs, and families much to the chagrin of a judgmental male bystander who chides her for 'not rescuing men' (Mohammed, 2019). Despite the character's admonishment, she continues to rescue people he disapproves of. In 'Beyond the veil: Graphic representation of Islamic women', Jackie Duncan does a comparative analysis of *Qahera* with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004) by analysing the use of the veil in both those texts. She acknowledges that the veil 'has long been stigmatised as a form of oppression' (Duncan, 2015: 1) and determines that representations of the veil in *Qahera* as well as the graphic novel *Persepolis* illustrate multi-dimensional complexity. She surmises that the veiled superhero in *Qahera* 'is imbued with superpowers to become a visible symbol of power under a veil' thus embracing her veil and using it as a source of power (Duncan, 2015: 2). She states that in *Persepolis* the main character 'uses her rebellious spirit to approach the issue' and consistently rebels against the suffocating limitations of an Islamist Iran (Duncan, 2015: 2). Thus 'the freedom to choose whether to practice veiling or not is what both texts are essentially referring to' (Duncan, 2015: 2). Duncan's essay concludes that:

> Both interpretations offer an understanding for a more complex interpretation of the Islamic women through their perceptions of the veil. A complexity that is compounded by veiling being stamped as an inherent symbol of otherness. (Duncan, 2015: 3)

Duncan is not the only scholar to note the uniqueness of comics in deconstructing the veil, and orientalism/Islamophobia. Gillian Whitlock also discusses veiling when she analyses *Persepolis* in her chapter 'Autographics' in her book *Soft weapons* (2007). When examining the use of the veil in Satrapi's schoolyard playground, Whitlock remarks on its triviality to young Muslim girls when Satrapi and her peers use it as a toy to play skipping, rather seeing it as a 'piece of cloth, and its fetishization by adults can seem strange' (Whitlock, 2007: 190). This kind of critical intervention is novel for it treats the veil as an insignificant artefact of no real importance which is a perspective that is rarely ever communicated in popular culture. Similarly, Qahera seems to reduce this over-worked cultural symbol, as to her it is only useful in the superhero wardrobe. The costume does not wear the character but rather the other way around, unlike the case with Dust.

Figure 2. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, June 30th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

Qahera is an allegory that synchronises the hybridity of text and images closely together. In 'Part 1: Brainstorm', the comic starts off with the veiled superheroine denoting 'misogynistic trash' with her supersonic ears before a comic panel cuts to a cleric telling a group of men that the best wife is an obedient wife (Mohammed, 2013). Soon after Qahera attacks the surprised cleric and hangs him on a clothesline with two laundry clips before telling him that he's right that 'housework is women's work absolutely' (Mohammed, 2013). As noted in 'Part 10: On basic equality and such', she pokes fun at an ignorant bystander who insults her incessantly. It ends with her saving someone who looks like him with him finally giving his nod of approval. The point of the comic is to make jest out of conservative Muslim masculinity. *Qahera* is often regarded as satirical for this reason.

Figure 3. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, June 30th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

Qahera the Superhero is very much a polemic on inclusive feminism. The character openly assists marginalised members of society like refugees while standing up for Egyptian women during the Arab Spring protests in Tahrir Square, and she has tackled everything from classism to racism in her statements. One of the earlier comics on the European feminist group, FEMEN[5] attracted criticism because of its purported violence which is surprising when one considers the fact that *Qahera the superhero* is a humorous superhero comic. The *Qahera* artist has discussed the criticisms in her interview with *Disorient* magazine (Kleer and Taxis, 2019) as well as another one where she went into even more detail (Aleya, 2018). When FEMEN protested in front of a Swedish mosque in June 2013, perhaps they and western audiences in general were not prepared for counter-narratives from Muslim artists to fight for women's rights. The comic illustrates an annoyed Qahera staring at her computer screen while FEMEN members protest bare-breasted in front of the Swedish mosque. During the protest, Qahera veils herself before she confronts them. After the FEMEN protestors make condescending remarks about needing to 'save' her, she uses her sash as a lasso to capture them, before she transports them to a far-off location to dangle them over a cliff stating, 'Hey so, feel free to rescue me anytime… the question is who's going to rescue you?' (Mohammed, 2013). According to the online news portal *The Huffington Post*, the real-life protest in Sweden only saw three FEMEN protestors who described themselves as 'sextremists' and were subsequently arrested for their protest (Bennett-Smith, 2013). In an interview with *Disorient* magazine online, Mohammed responded to some of the criticism of the FEMEN comic by stating that:

> The problem is to define feminism through gender issues only, without taking anything else into account. You can't be a feminist if you are oppressing other women. You can't be a feminist if you are classist or racist. A lot of people in Egypt tend to disrespect feminism because they are very familiar with a very bourgeois type of feminism that is aligned with the state. People offend your intellect when you are expected to believe a feminism that claims to fight for women's rights but disrespects other human rights. (Kleer and Taxis, 2019)

In referring to FEMEN's Islamophobic views on veiling as a form of oppression the counter-argument by Islamic and/or Muslim feminists is posed of Muslim women's agency when it comes to choosing to veil.

[5] A European feminist group who refer to themselves as 'sextremists'. They include atheism in their ideology and protest topless.

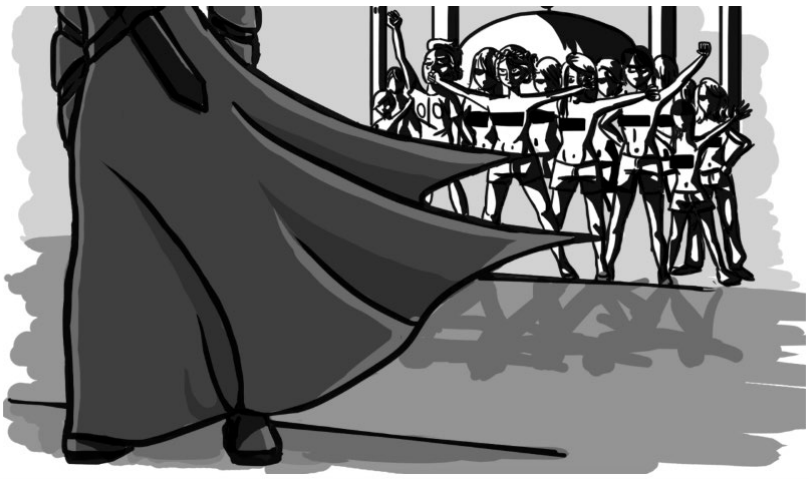


Figure 4. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, July 20th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

In the FEMEN comic the creator appears to draw a direct allusion to Wonder Woman, a feminist superhero who has also faced criticism for being too sexualised, as indicated in the UN's brief choice for Wonder Woman as an ambassador for the empowerment of women and girls for which they faced intense backlash for choosing an icon that was decidedly too sexualised. After protests and an online petition was launched, the decision to use her as an icon was rescinded (Ross, 2016). A hallmark weapon of Wonder Woman is her magic lasso, so when in the FEMEN comic Qahera uses her sash as a make-do lasso to capture the FEMEN protestors, this allusion appears deliberately intertextual. Another interpretation of Qahera's ad-hoc lasso can be to suggest a sense of solidarity with other iconic female superheroes and an attempt to indigenise the superheroine trope to an Egyptian Muslim audience. From this angle, the comic can be read as one that builds solidarity with feminist allies. (It is also quite possible that the comic was providing commentary on the policing of women's choices in dress as well.)

Figure 5. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, July 20th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

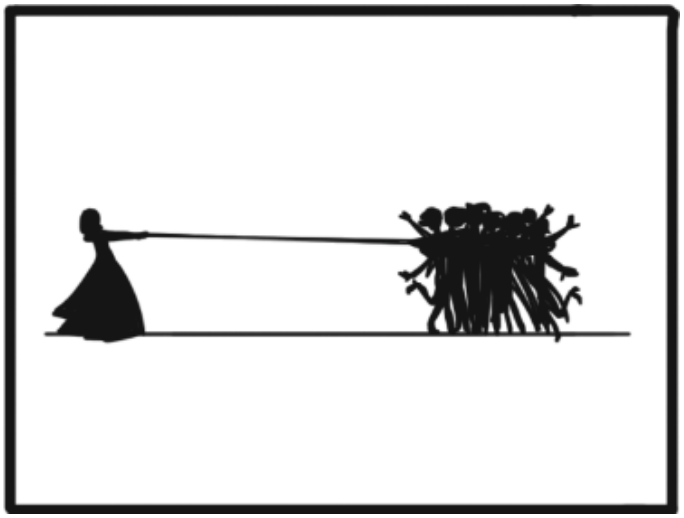


Figure 6. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, July 20th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed tackles the arguments of two Arab men during the colonial era – Qassim Amin (known as the 'Father of Arab Feminism') and Tal'at Harb, a hardline Islamist, arguing that Amin's perspectives are a reinscription of colonial discourses about Islam's inferiority and the 'backwardness' of the veil. His proposals, which included a ban on veiling and segregation, was later espoused by the middle classes and Arab feminists. When coupled with other male thinkers of his time who held his same contempt for the veil, Ahmed concluded that their 'true motivation' was in fact that:

> (…) they are men of the classes assimilating to European ways and smarting under the humiliation of being described as uncivilized because 'their' women are veiled, and they are determined to eradicate the practice. (Ahmed, 1993: 165)

Ahmed illustrates how Harb asserted patriarchy like Cromer and Amin, but this time through a reversal. On the debates between both Amin and Harb, she stated that:

> (…) the argument between Harb and Amin centered not on feminism versus antifeminism but on Western versus indigenous ways. For neither side was male dominance ever in question. (Ahmed, 1993: 163)

This trope is concretely applicable to *Qahera* in the 'Part 7: On women's choices' comic which starts off with Qahera and her unveiled friend walking into a restaurant where two men begin to discuss them. One of them terms the veil as 'a shame to see' and surmises that it is oppressive (Mohammed, 2015), arguing that a progressive society would not have so many veiled women and advocates policies that support de-veiling. The other man begins to defend the veil and connects it quickly to 'protection' and states a much-repeated folk analogy about the veil being like candy wrapper. Qahera notices that her friend looks uncomfortable and she disrupts both men, slamming her fists on the table. She begins to yell at them that women are human beings and that 'women's lives are not for you to prove a point' before she storms off (Mohammed, 2015). Interestingly, this comic does not show her using any of her superpowers thus reframing her as an ordinary human being to possibly drive the point home that ordinary feminists can take such action.

The subtleties and nuance of the comic can also be described through other choices on Mohammed's part for drawing a Muslim superhero in *hijab*. Making it clear that the comic is specifically about commentary on Egyptian life and politics, she states to *Disorient*:

> First, I just thought it would be interesting to have a superhero that doesn't look like the other ones. Second, I like things that represent reality and I wanted her to look like most Egyptian women, to represent them... Also, from a character design perspective it's just nice to draw someone that looks different to stereotypical designs of female superheroes. I would think about how she would fly and what that would look like. And in Egypt a veil [is] such a practical costume. You can just pull up the niqab and you are unrecognized. It's a character that feels both – different and familiar. (Kleer and Taxis, 2019)

We see the practicality of the costume in detail in her comic, 'Part 9: On Things We have to Worry About' where Qahera addresses the everyday lives of Egyptians and the things they need to worry about such as traffic and the economy. A few panels into the comic, we see the character alternating between being veiled and unveiled at times. For instance, in the panel with her addressing a crowd about 'controversial political opinions' she is veiled (Mohammed, 2019). In the panel after that, she is unveiled when speaking to an elderly woman about gender roles. When the costume calls for anonymity such as addressing a crowd on controversial politics, she is veiled. When she is not in the spotlight but addressing someone else's point of view, she chooses to not be veiled. A few panels later, she is seen veiled in a mob fighting back armed men. The veil is seen as practical, it provides anonymity which serves her strategy when fighting off enemies, so they have a harder time identifying her.

In contrast to the western representation of Dust, this type of comic and character is ground-breaking. When the veil is represented for practicality, and not for any orientalist uses the image is not exploitative. Mohammed's superhero is made for an Egyptian audience while American superhero comics are made for western audiences – but of course Muslims, people of colour, and marginalised groups form part of western audiences too. Mohammed's work does cater to an Egyptian audience, but she makes it clear that while she primarily draws for the audience, she also draws for western ones as well. She cited the FEMEN comic as an example and admits that she did not translate it in Arabic because of its lack of relevance to Egyptians (Kleer and Taxis, 2019). This recalls Leah Misemer (2017), who discusses webcomics as a space for community-building and solidarity. Misemer points out that webcomics often address multiple audiences, making them a space that serves multiple purposes (Misemer, 2017: 5). By addressing a non-Muslim western audience, *Qahera* is not only a counter-narrative to popular

misconceptions of the veil and Muslim women's representation but also potentially a learning space for them. For Muslim audiences in the west, it can function more as a space for solidarity. And for Egyptian audiences, it can function as a space for both familiarity and solidarity for specific political themes such as the refugee crisis in 2015.

Figure 7. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, June 30th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

While Dust is veiled, she is still sexualised with the form-fitting *abaya* and *niqab* with coquettish and startled eyes when viewed up close. Mohammed's character on the other hand is not sexualised and not subject to the male gaze. Panels of the superheroine's eyes betray expressions of anger and frustration when she hears for example the misogynistic cleric. When one considers the cover of *New X-Men* #133 where Dust's alluring green eyes and startled expression stares back at the reader, one can't help but think that they were drawn to accentuate her 'exoticism' as opposed to reveal anything substantial about the inner character. With that said, perhaps the one ground-breaking aspect of Dust lies in the fact that she was the first Muslim superhero in the post-9/11 era and it is possible that her representation as a Muslim superhero inspired the later Muslim superheroes in comics such as Kamala Khan, and the characters in *The 99*. From that aspect, her representation was necessary in its own way.

Figure 8. Mohammed, D. (2013). *Qahera the Superhero*, Egypt, Tumblr, July 20th, 2013. © D. Mohammed.

Keeping these perspectives in mind, Qahera is representative of Spivak's 'absolutely Other' as opposed to the 'domesticated Other'. And in this construction, we see a revolutionary tactic in *Qahera* as representing the resistance of the 'imperialist self' rather than a consolidation of it. The 'absolutely Other' can therefore be deduced as a holistic representation of the Other not refracted through the 'imperialist self' and therefore can be best described as a decolonised representation of a veiled Muslim superhero. Technically the 'radical Otherness' in *Qahera* is instead a radical resistance to colonial biases told through veiling and intersectional feminism.

CONCLUSION

The growing popularity of webcomics is a testament to the eagerness of members of marginalised groups to speak with their own voices and under their own terms. Whether most creators intend it or not, their work can be a resistance to popular misconceptions and biases found in mainstream publications and their representations of marginalised groups. Mohammed has made it clear that she is intentionally political in her outlooks on class and misogyny, which is apparent through reading her comic. Ironically, while Islamophobia is not an existential threat to her, she does admit that her first encounter with it was through the comments about *Qahera* in a BBC online article (Kleer and Taxis, 2019). But as a well-informed and passionate creator taking on such political issues, she

was aware of the growing threat of Islamophobia and has sought to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women through her drawing of *Qahera*. With comic characters such as Dust still a reality in superhero comics and a lot of marginalised issues being funneled into autobiographical comics, she has made an effective choice in creating a webcomic about a Muslim superhero. By creating a veiled Muslim superhero, she adds a rich and challenging dimension in this increasingly popular archetype.

REFERENCES

About Us - FEMEN. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://femen.org/about-us/ (Accessed 28 December 2019).

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist, 104*(3), 783-790.

Ahmed, L. (1993). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Aleya, S. (2018). Interview – Deena Mohammed. Available at: http://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/interview-deena-mohamed-qahera/ (Accessed 28 December 2019).

Bennett-Smith, M. (2013). Topless FEMEN activists protest In Swedish mosque, allegedly called 'whores from hell' (NSFW, video). Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2013/07/01/femen-protest-mosque-sweden-whores_n_3530171.html (Accessed 3 August 2019).

Davis, J. and Westerfelhaus, R. (2013). Finding a place for a Muslimah heroine in the post-9/11 Marvel Universe: New X-Men's Dust. *Feminist Media Studies,* 13(5), 800-809.

Duncan, J. (2015, April). Beyond the veil: Graphic representation of Islamic women. *The Compass, 1*(2), 1-9.

Top 100 Graphic Novels: October 2014. (2014, October). Available at: https://www.diamondcomics.com/Home/1/1/3/237?articleID=156090 (Accessed 3 August 2019).

Edwin, S. (2012, December). Islam's Trojan horse: Battling perceptions of Muslim women in *The 99*. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 3*(2), 171-1999.

Gibbons, S. (2017). 'I don't exactly have quiet, pretty powers': Flexibility and alterity in *Ms. Marvel*. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 8*(5), 450-463.

Kent, M. (2015). Unveiling marvels: *Ms. Marvel* and the reception of the new Muslim superheroine. *Feminist Media Studies, 15*(3), 522-538.

Khoja-Moolji, S. and Niccolini, A.D. (2015). Comics as public pedagogy: Reading Muslim masculinities through Muslim femininities in *Ms. Marvel*. *Girlhood Studies, 8*(3), 23-39.

Kleer, L. and Taxis, C. (2019). *'You can't be a feminist if you are oppressing other women' – an interview with Egyptian artist Deena Mohamed*. Available at: https://www.disorient.de/blog/you-cant-be-feminist-if-you-are-oppressing-other-women-interview-egyptian-artist-deena-mohamed?fbclid=IwAR38JbXMIKqZkSDCJzdhgwZyM2iGqURXrGCapU8mdNCPdAoVHNpTIrg17dU (Accessed 3 August 2019).

Lewis, R. (2005). *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, travel and the Ottoman harem*. London: I.B. Tauris.

McCurry, S. (1985, June). Afghan girl. *National Geographic*.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The invisible art*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Misemer, L. Webcomics building communities: Depression and visibility in *Hyperbole and a half*. Comics and Medicine Conference, Seattle, WA, June 2017.

Mohammed, D. (2013, June 30). Part 1: Brainstorm. Available at: https://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/64031330049 (Accessed April 25th, 2019).

Mohammed, D. (2015, July 28). Part 7: On women's choices. Available at: https://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/125314061196 (Accessed April 25th, 2019).

Mohammed, D. (2019, April 10). On basic equality and such. Available at: https://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/184095849551 (Accessed April 25th, 2019).

Mohammed, D. (2019, February 18). Part 9: Things we have to worry about. Available at: https://qaherathesuperhero.com/post/182896728481 (Accessed April 25th, 2019).

Morrison, G., Van Sciver, E. and Rapmund, N. (2002). New X-Men: Issue #133 [Comic] (Vol. 1). New York, NY: Marvel.

Naghibi, N. and O'Malley, A. (2005). Estranging the familiar: 'East' and 'West' in Satrapi's Persepolis. *English Studies in Canada, 31*(2-3), 223-247.

Ross, A. (2016). One less woman in politics: Wonder Woman loses job as UN ambassador. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/12/wonder-woman-un-ambassador-gender-equality (Accessed 3 August 2019).

Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Satrapi, M. (2004). *Persepolis*. New York City, NY: Pantheon.

Shaheen, J. G. (1994). Arab images in American comic books. *Journal of Popular Culture, 28*(1), 123-133.

Shaheen, J. (1991). The comic book Arab. *The Link*, *24*(5), 1-11.

Spivak, G. C. (1985). Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism. *Critical Inquiry, 12*(1), 243-261.
Weir, C., de Felippis, N. and Henry, C. (2005). *New X-Men: Hellions* (Vol. 1). New York City, NY: Marvel Worldwide Inc.
Whitlock, G. (2007). *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in transit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Citation: Hosein, S. (2020). Veiling the Superhero: A Comparative Analysis of Dust and Qahera. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 09. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7913

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 10
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Interview

'I Express All my Joys, All my Pain through my Art': An Interview with Fifi Mukuna

Catherine Mao [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Fifi Mukuna (born 1968, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo) is a comics artist and caricaturist. Beginning in the 1990s, her work regularly appeared in both mainstream and satirical local press outlets. In 2002, she was forced to leave the country because of her political caricatures. She is now a political refugee, and lives and works in northern France.

Mukuna is a multi-faceted artist: political caricaturist, comics artist, graphic designer in advertising, educator, and cultural ambassador for the *Alliance Française* and the Red Cross. Her comics work has appeared in several anthologies (*À l'Ombre du Baobab, Une Journée dans la Vie d'un Africain d'Afrique, Là-Bas... Na Poto*), and her first solo graphic novel (*Kisi le Collier*) was published in 2013. This transcript comes from a telephone interview with her, with examples of her comics work.

Your work has appeared in lots of different contexts; maybe we could talk a little about your journey in comics so far. How did you become a comics artist?

Comics were my passion from a very young age. I grew up in Kinshasa where *bande dessinée* is very popular; not surprising, given the Belgian colonial presence in the past. I also spent part of my childhood in Brussels, where my interest in comics developed further. Even when I was a child, I loved telling stories with images. My big sister paid a lot of attention to my drawing and started writing stories for me to illustrate. I used to copy the style of other artists and famous characters, like *Bob et Bobette* by the Belgian artist Willy Vandersteen.[1] I loved that series! I used to copy out whole pages from it.

Did you already want to make comics your career?

Yes! First of all, I trained in Liberal Arts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Then, at the end of the 1980s, I enrolled in fine arts at the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* (ABA) in Kinshasa. I was interested in a course there, run by the late Mongo Cissé. He was famous for his comics characters Pili-Pili and Mata-Mata. Before studying with him, I had already read a few of his comics; I loved his humour and especially his drawing style. His lines were really well defined and he used flat colours. He'd worked in Hergé's workshops, and developed a style which was very similar to Hergé's clear line, with the same qualities of simplicity and readability. Mongo Cissé inspired me a lot, and I enrolled at ABA because I wanted to take his course. It was the right decision. He encouraged me to make comics and to find my own style of drawing, inspired by clear line.

Were you influenced by any other artists at all? Did any female artists influence your work?

No**,** unfortunately not. I can't say that any woman has influenced my work particularly. When I started drawing, female comics artists just didn't exist in Africa. Only later did I discover the work of some French artists, like Florence Cestac and Isabelle Dethan. These women inspire me a lot, both in their drawing style and their use of

[1] Translator's note: This series (*Suske en Wiske* in the original Flemish) has been translated into English variously as *Spike and Suzy* and *Willy and Wanda,* and is also known as *Luke and Lucy* in video game and film adaptations.

[1] *Independent researcher*, FRANCE
***Corresponding Author:** mao.catherine@yahoo.fr

colour. But I've noticed that more and more women artists are getting noticed in Africa. I'm confident that soon emerging talent will be able to benefit from the influence of female artists. In terms of my other sources of inspiration, I must say that the artists that inspire my work the most are my friends and those around me, whether they live close by or very far away! Sometimes I have trouble with narrative or graphic aspects of my work, and it's often other comics creators who help me find the right solution. Barly Baruti, for example, has been there for me since the start of my career.[2] He helped me choose my techniques, in working on my use of colour, to find my own style. And he's still doing it today! In spite of all his success, he's stayed humble and still spends time helping his friends. He's a good example of the type of person who inspires me.

Mongo Cissé, Barly Baruti…it's clear that comics is a prominent part of Congolese arts and culture.

Absolutely! The DRC has a rich narrative and graphic heritage. I've mentioned Mongo Cissé, but before him there were plenty other important creators. OK, they published their work in black and white, in fanzines and other little-known magazines, but Congolese people have loved art and humour for a long time. Comics are especially popular in newspapers. When I worked for them, newspapers would often ask me to do the back cover; they called it the *huitième*: a whole page of caricatures covering all the news in the paper. People love it! The drawings are the first thing they look at when deciding to buy a newspaper.

Tell me about your experience working in journalism. You went to art school to do comics, but ended up doing caricature…

Oh, it came about really by accident. I was still studying at the ABA when I saw that a newspaper was looking for a caricaturist. I applied for the job. When I saw the boss's face, I realised that he was surprised a woman had applied! But I did well in the recruitment tests and they hired me. At that point I was in my final year of university, so for a year I studied as well as did my work in the newspaper. It was a really good experience for me. At the art school I encountered lots of new influences and reference points, and at the end of my studies I was trying to free myself of all those influences and find my own style. Working in newspapers, I got more efficient, I mastered my technique and developed my own style.

How would you describe your style?

I would call it semi-realist: a mixture of realism and humour. My style is based on the deformation of characters' features, not in an abstract or minimalist way, but staying grounded in realism. That's why I include a lot of humour, which in my mind is the common link between my caricatures and my comics.

Do you use any techniques in particular?

My favourite technique is 'direct colour', that is, applying colour directly onto the page. I do the sketches and the inking, then immediately add the colour. I prefer using liquid inks, which are like Indian inks, but runnier, more pigmented, and which give a bit of a different texture. I dilute them to get a watercolour effect. I stick to direct colour, even if it's a bit riskier. Sometimes other artists are surprised by my technique, and they try to warn me against it, saying that I could mess up the colour and end up losing my whole drawing. I must admit, sometimes I play it safe and photocopy the original art and then add the colour to the photocopy. But in general, I like taking the risk with direct colour. Colour is really important for me; it changes the tone of the art and has an important narrative function. For example, the story of my comic, *Kisi le Collier*, takes place entirely in a hairdresser's, a really feminine space. I wanted it to be really brightly coloured, warm and sparkling. It's very important for me that my use of colour has a function in my stories.

What kind of stories do you want to tell?

I take inspiration from the things I see around me. Often my friends and acquaintances will tell me about things they've been through, and even suggest that I make a comic out of their experiences. I'm happy that they're able to express themselves through my art. I don't want to tell the same old stories, things that other artists have already done before me. I want to avoid clichés and truisms, especially when it comes to Africa. People often present one, repetitive version of Africa: little exotic villages, poor children… I want to show Africa's other reality, the same reality that exists right here in Europe, the one I see every day. For example, in *Kisi le Collier* I talk about how some African immigrants in Europe are still very superstitious, and how that affects life in central Brussels.

[2] Translator's note: Barly Baruti (1959-) is a renowned Congolese comics artist.

Does this desire to tell untold stories come from your own experience? You were forced to leave your home country because of your caricatures, you've been directly affected by censorship and its consequences…

That's true. After I got my degree, I continued making caricatures for newspapers. I used a pseudonym, so no one knew I was a woman. The government didn't really like my work, but as long as my identity stayed secret, I didn't have any problems. Sadly, that didn't last. As soon as the government found out who I was and that I was a woman, my life was threatened. I had to leave the country quickly, leaving my young children behind. I went to France as a refugee, then I lost my husband who had stayed behind in Kinshasa. It's true that when you live through painful, difficult experiences, you want to talk about them, leave some evidence of them somewhere. Today, I'm lucky enough to be able to use comics as a means of talking about the real world, and to talk about things that are important to me. For example, I tell stories about forced marriage, female genital mutilation, the importance of vaccination, street kids… I think that comics is a great medium for educating people and raising awareness.

You say that art has helped you get through the hard times you've experienced. How so?

When I first arrived in France, I was very lonely. But I still had my art, or rather, art was all I had left. So I drew a lot, to express my emotions, to get things out. I was lucky and quickly made friends who supported me and encouraged me to continue drawing. Now I realise just how right they were. I express all my joys, all my pain through my art. For me it's a great means of expression. That's what I try to teach my students. When I arrived in northern France, I started doing comics workshops for a charity. What's important for me is giving kids the tools and the skills so they can express whatever they want. The end goal isn't creating professional artists, but enabling them to make up their own stories and their own characters. I love doing that sort of work, and the kids love it too. We do a lot of activities about illustrated stories, about dialogue...we've published several anthologies, supported by the regional council and community centres in Roubaix.[3]

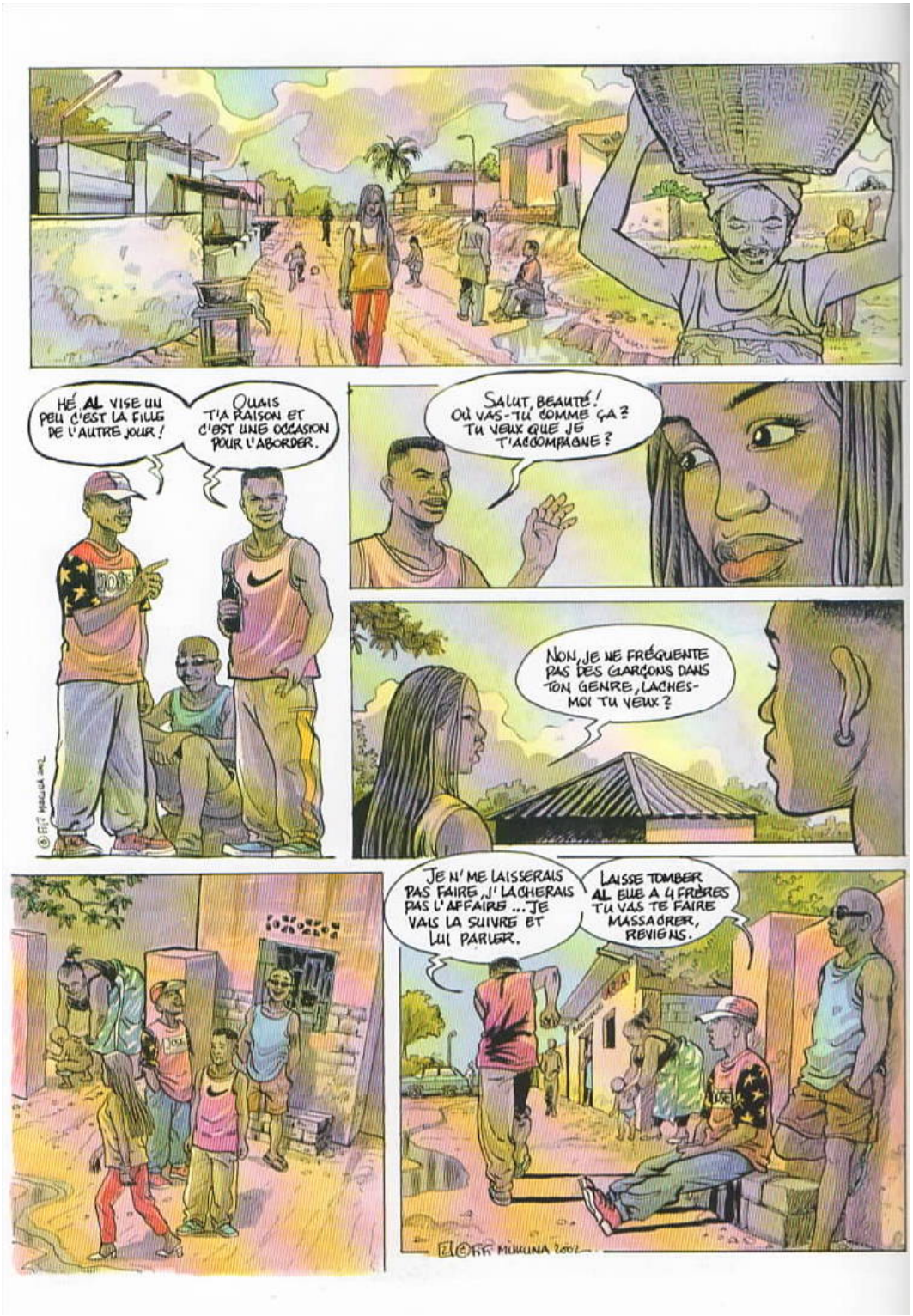
What are you working on at the moment? Are there any publications in the pipeline?

Now more than ever, I want to talk about what I've been through. I'm working on an autobiographical comic which I'm going to self-publish. I'm conscious of the fact that I couldn't do it if I'd stayed in Kinshasa, because of the government, the current repression and censorship. For this project, I'm trying new techniques, new atmospheres. My style isn't fixed, it continues to evolve; it's always a work in progress…I'm trying colder colours, to describe more sombre things. And the colours are so different in all the towns I've lived in (Lille, Kinshasa, Brussels), depending on the season of the year…when I first came to Europe, for example, it was right in the middle of autumn. For me, it's crucial to be able to adapt, depending on the story I want to tell.

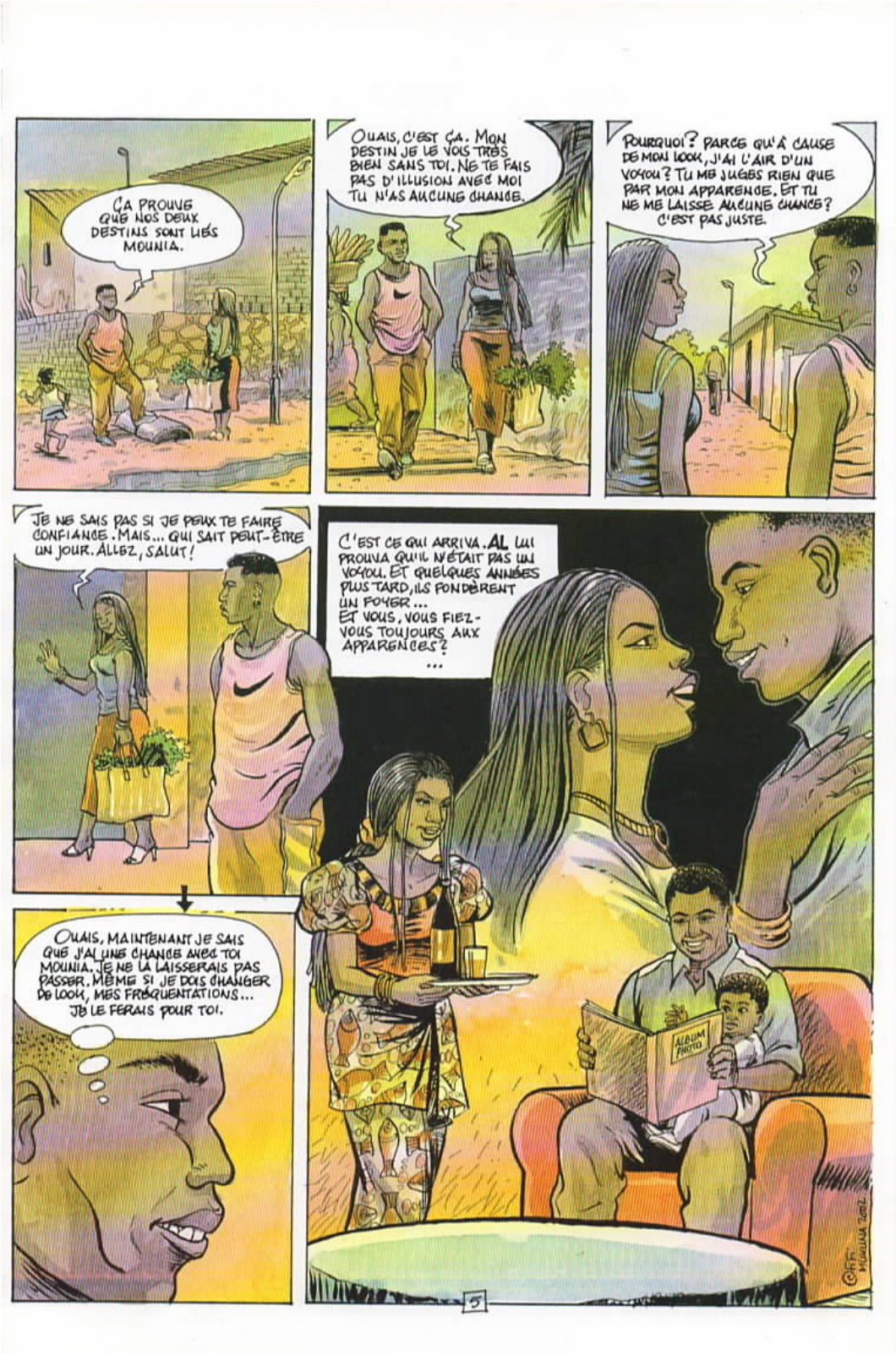
Telephone interview conducted on 27/10/2018.

TRANLATOR'S DETAILS
Lise Tannahill works at the University of Glasgow, UK.
Email: l.tannahill.1@research.gla.ac.uk

[3] Translator's note: A town in the north of France, near the Belgian border.




HÉ! REVIENS ALI! FAIS PAS L'IMBÉCILE!
TU VAS TE FAIRE MASSACRER JE NE RÉPONDS PLUS DE RIEN.
QU'EST-CE QUE TU VEUX TOI ?
JE VOUDRAIS VOIR TA SOEUR JE SUIS UN AMI, ELLE EST LÀ ?
TOI, UN AMI DE MOUNIA ? À QUI VEUX-TU FAIRE CROIRE CELA ? ALLEZ, DÉGAGE SINON JE VAIS ME FÂCHER.
PAS AVANT DE L'AVOIR VUE.
LÂCHE-MOI!
DÉGAGE ! ET NE REVIENS JAMAIS PLUS. SINON MES AUTRES FRÈRES S'OCCUPERONT DE TOI.
© FIFI MUKUNA 2002
3



Citation: Mao, C. (2020). 'I Express All my Joys, All my Pain through my Art': An Interview with Fifi Mukuna (L. Tannahill, Trans.). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 10. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7914


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectitojournals


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 11
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Interview

Interview with Neeske Alexander

Rose Richards [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Neeske Alexander is an academic writer, educator and artist living in Cape Town. She holds BEd (Foundation Phase), BHons (Learning support), BA Visual Arts (Illustration) and MA Visual Arts (Art Education) degrees. She has benefitted from a long-term mentorship under artist Ian Tainton and has received training in several media including oil painting and printmaking. In 2019, Neeske participated in an international comics residency and exhibited at the Angoulême Comics Festival, France. She has taken part in a variety of group exhibitions both nationally and internationally. Neeske has received several awards for her work including a prize in the international *Picture This!* Illustration competition in 2017 and first prize in the *Tollman Bouchard Finlayson Tondo* competition in 2019. In addition, she was a finalist in the *Sasol New Signatures Award* in 2019 and the *Artist Magazine* still life competition in 2020. Neeske is currently a part-time lecturer at Stellenbosch University.

Who has influenced your work?

Anton Kannemeyer, co-author of BITTERCOMIX and arguably one of the most well-known South African comix artists, was my lecturer and introduced me to narrative illustration and comics in 2018. He encouraged me to read as many comics and comix[1] as I can and pointed me to some of the classics as well as work on the fringe. I had not read comics since primary school – and then it was only Asterix and Obelix, so I particularly enjoyed reading graphic novels such as *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel and *Exit Wounds* by Rutu Modan. It was Anton, too, who told me to draw every day and to create and sell my first zine *Gomtosgollies and Other Stories* at the Fancon event in Cape Town in 2019. Finally, it was his connection with comix artists in France that opened up the way for me to attend a residency there in January 2019.

I'm also influenced by those artists I met during my short residency in Angoulême, France, at the beginning of 2019: Anna Haifisch (Germany), Mathilde Van Gheluwe (Belgium), Juliana Hyrri (Finland), Eva Lynen (Belgium). Anna Haifisch and Eva Lynen both have a strong autobiographical approach to their work. I have been influenced by the different approaches these artists take to representing womxn in a visual way. Examples of their work can be found on their Instagram accounts.

What other African artists do you draw inspiration from?

Octavia Roodt (her work shows the Afrikaner identity in new and interesting dreamscapes) and Kirsten Sims (she pushes the boundaries between narrative illustration and fine art) are two South African artists whose work greatly inspires me. I also draw inspiration from the boldness of Lady Skollie (aka Lara Windvogel) who is not necessarily a comix artist, but whose work shows strong feminist influences. Loyiso Mkize's work shows accurate anatomical illustrations of the human figure and I admire his comics for creating a South African superhero in a South African context. All of these artists have well-populated Instagram accounts where their works can be found.

[1] Many artists prefer to use 'comix' as a broad term to include narrative illustration works for adults, works that range from one-panel illustrations to graphic novels, works that are sexual and/or political in nature, and work that is alternative to the mainstream Marvel/superhero comics.

[1] *Writing Lab at Stellenbosch University Language Centre*, SOUTH AFRICA
***Corresponding Author:** rr2@sun.ac.za

Why do you use comic art?

I think narrative illustration (of which comic art forms a part) is very powerful, not only for telling a story and communicating a message in an easy-to-understand way (as opposed to high art or long texts) but also for reflection and self-discovery. My autobiographical comix *11 Months 1 Week* tells the story of my time in South Korea. In the process of making this comic, I managed to work through the many personal issues surfacing from reflection on my experiences in South Korea. Perhaps it is the striving to communicate the story and the repetitive process (thumbnails, rough sketches, editing, final drafts, editing, inking, colouring, digital cleaning) of narrative illustration that helps this reflection process.

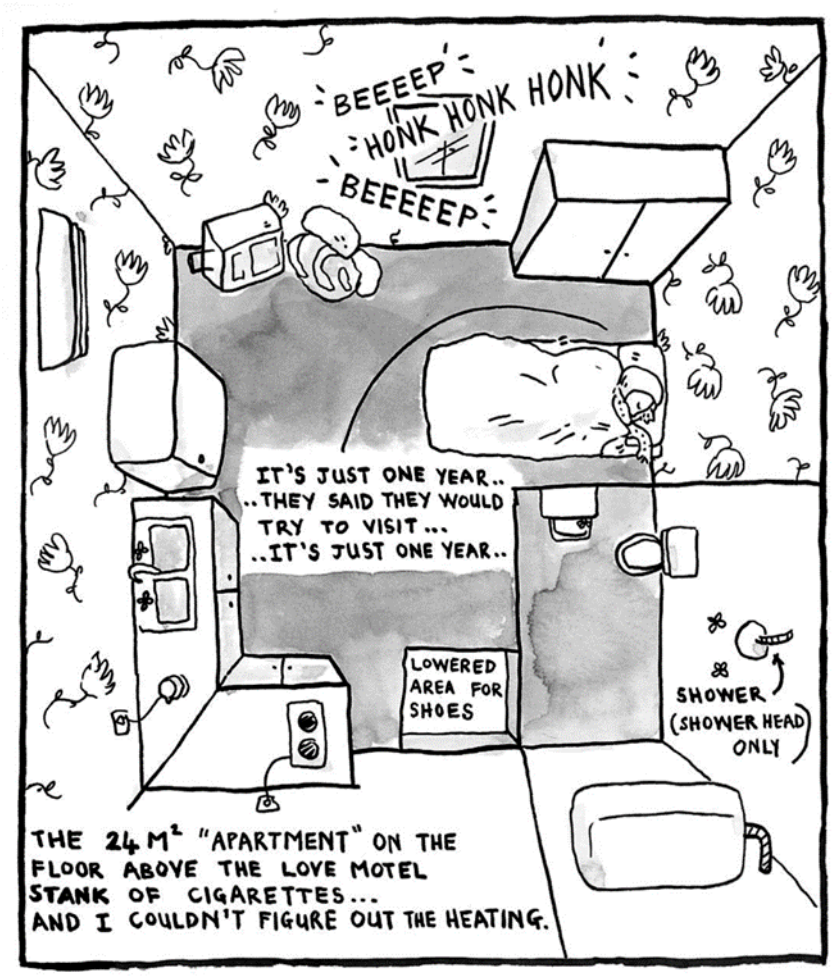


Figure 1. Panel from '11 Months, 1 Week' by Neeske Alexander. © Neeske Alexander

Do you think it is a good fit for feminist projects?

Yes. Comix are engaging and, in the visual culture we live in, it is an effective way to communicate – especially online. During my post-graduate illustration degree in 2018, I researched the ways in which narrative illustration and comix could be used to investigate women's stories of menstruation. I called the project *The Period Party*. This work can be seen as menstrual activism which works against the negative stereotype of menstruation as dirty and shameful. Menstrual activists have used different mediums to promote their cause including parades, poetry, art, installations and digital/paper zines (self-produced and distributed magazines). The use of independent publishing in the feminist movement has a long and rich history. Many comics, especially underground comics, are self-published in the form of zines. Chella Quint's zine titled *Adventures in Menstruating*, is a good example. Quint is a comedian, designer and artist who founded the #periodpositive campaign.[2] Other artists who promote menstrual activism include Rupi Kaur and Lucy Peach.

[2] Chella Quint's work can be found here: https://chellaquint.wordpress.com/about/.

What do you think about 'mainstream' comic book art?

I'm not a fan of the Marvel comic style. I prefer the fringe comics and graphic novels. The artists mentioned in the first few questions create work that are good examples of alternative comix. They draw in new and interesting ways, unlike the generic manga or Marvel style. Drawing in new ways is a good way to communicate new messages.

What difficult issues have you tackled and how?

As mentioned above, I've written about menstruation. I collected women's stories about menstruation and turned them into comix. Here is an extract from my unpublished article, 'The Period Party':

'Menstruation is something most women experience, yet it is often considered taboo. Ideas about menstruation are socially constructed and the way in which we speak (or don't speak) about it, is not often researched. Elements of taboo, stigma and power are related to perceptions of menstruation which causes menstruation and other corporeal leaks to be associated with shame, disgust, embarrassment and contamination (Grosz, 1994: 206). It is also believed by feminists that menstruation, as a specific 'leak', has been used as a tool to suppress, stigmatise and devalue women. Why is menstruation, which is a vital component of life-creation and part of most women's bodily experience, seen as shameful, stigmatising and taboo? Women should not (be made to) feel shame and disgust and inferiority regarding their menstruation. I therefore ask "How can illustration be used to investigate and communicate stories of menstruation?" For this project, *The Period Party*, the aim was to create an illustrated book/visual collection of stories about menstruation and in doing so to make space for women to share their experiences.'

Figure 2. 'The period party' by Neeske Alexander. © Neeske Alexander.

Is it easy to get your work published? What is the comics industry like in South Africa?

I must just mention that I am very new in the comix world. I drew my first comic (*11 Months, 1 Week)* in 2018 as part of my post-graduate degree. I drew my second set of comics (*The Period Party*) at the end of 2018 for my research project. I've only self published my comics for events such as Fancon and Open Book Festival in Cape Town. I've also had my comix (*The Period Party)* exhibited as part of Comic Con in the Joburg Art Gallery in 2019. So, I am not sure that I know what the comics industry is like, but I suspect that most publishers prefer to publish work that will sell - work drawn in the mainstream comics styles.

Who are your readers?

Most of my readers are probably people on Instagram and those who buy my comix at the events in Cape Town. It is mostly womxn who comment on my Instagram posts and who buy my comix. I hope that my comix about menstruation will fall into the hands of young womxn, because I wish I had had something like that when I first started menstruating.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I think narrative illustration has untapped power for processing trauma. I draw little comics when something bad/frustrating happens to me and it helps me to process this experience. Everyone can draw comix and I hope that there will soon be an increase in comix artists in South Africa.

Here is a quick comix sketch about my hatred of dish-washing:

Figure 3. Untitled by Neeske Alexander. © Neeske Alexander.

Citation: Richards, R. (2020). Interview with Neeske Alexander. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 11. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7915

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 12
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Nepali Women in Comics

Promina Shrestha [1*]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

The following article is based on interviews and visual analysis of a collection of comics illustrated by Nepali women artists Bandana Tulachan, Kanchan Burathoki, Kripa Joshi, Preena Shrestha, Shraddha Shrestha and Sangee Shrestha, as well as my own work. These artists have been selected in terms of their visibility and prominence in the comics scene in Nepal. These artists have produced comics with personal narratives of their everyday life, thoughts and emotions. I address the questions if, through comics, individual visual accounts of the everyday experience can be understood as an act of feminism, and whether Nepali comics are a tool for encouraging feminist beliefs in Nepal. The article will give a brief introduction to Nepal's feminist movement and assess whether or not the comics, that have been studied, can be characterised as part of Nepali feminism. For the purpose of this paper, I have categorised my visual inquiry under the areas of satire as counter culture, body image, self expression and sexuality, real life, real issues, metaphors and the comical side of life.

Keywords: Nepal, Nepali Feminism, Nepali comics, Nepali women artists, personal narratives

INTRODUCTION

I was recently reading Nicola Streeten and Cath Tate's *The Inking Woman: 250 years of women cartoon and comic artists in Britain* (2018). It prompted me to think about women's comics in Nepal. In my understanding of western comics, there is an illustrious history of women making comics on women's issues, where comics have been used as a platform for gender activism, both through autobiographical and fictional works. This made me ask - who were these women that were creating such comics? What were their cultural and social backgrounds? What were their stories? Do they carry a feminist tone? I noticed that there was a knowledge gap in Nepal in terms of the historicity of women in comics and whether or not they address or partake in women's movements.

When I was asked to write a paper on Nepali women comics from a perspective of feminism my reaction was that it would be easy - just throw in the women I know, discuss their work in brief and say how representative they are of feminist ideas. However, that was not the case, and I could not have been more wrong, because Nepali feminism in itself is a complex issue.

NEPAL'S FEMINISM IN BRIEF

Nepal's feminist movement essentially[1] started in the 1970s, and was based on the global idea of women in

[1] Nepal has undergone various political and social changes since the late 1940s, (Whelpton, 2005; Gellner, et al., 1997). Alongside these political movements and revolutions, Nepal's women's movement began and evolved alongside different political movements (see Whelpton, 2005; further reading Mahesh Chandra (Regmi Book Series) on detailed Nepali history) that Nepal has experienced from the 1950s to present. These have been categorised into five particular phases by Meena Acharya, starting from the late 1940s, 1951-1960, 1961-1990, 1991-2005 and 2006 (Acharya, 1994). In 1975, UN'S Women's year, the UN concentrated on research on Women in Development (Boserup, 1970) (i.e. status and politics of women in development) which sampled various geographies, castes and ethnicities of women and the women's participation/knowledge of women's' rights and development issues. This was published under 'The Status of Women in Nepal' (CEDA, Tribhuban University) from 1979 to 1981. However, some of the earlier movements have arguably lacked participation and inclusion of women outside Kathmandu, in terms of geography, social status, ethnicity and caste, and primarily focused on approaches to development by state and donor agencies (Tamang, 2009; Leve, 2007). Social diversity did not become part of the feminist

[1] *Independent researcher and graphic artist*, NEPAL
***Corresponding Author:** promina.s2@gmail.com

development, strongly supported by the state and foreign aid.[2] Like most women's movements, it aimed to achieve a singular target of providing agency and rights to women ('all' Nepali women) such as citizenship, education, health, labour and so forth. From its beginning though, it has been layered with sometimes conflicting political, social and cultural ideologies. These sought to construct a homogenised 'Nepali woman' for all Nepali women, suggesting that all Nepalese women suffered from the same gendered issues and needs. Sierra Tamang (2009) and Lauren Leve (2007) have argued that mainstream feminism in Nepal has been and is a 'privileged' movement that circulates in restricted spaces, with restricted political and donor driven agendas - which omit the diversity of ethnic, caste and class identities of women in Nepal.

The Nepali feminist movement has been subjected to much criticism regarding its role, whom it accommodates and caters to and whether is it truly for all Nepali women or exclusively for the urban and elite. Tamang (2009) and Leve (2007) have pointed out that there is a considerable gap between what is represented by feminists in the cities or in positions of power to what is actually required to address issues of the different geo-ethnic and rural necessities. This, they argue, deprives Nepali women of a functioning rights mechanism:

> Contemporary misrepresentation of 'the Nepali woman' as a single over-arching category in the socio-economic sphere of development (which has been achieved at the expense of consistently effacing manifest difference), with the desire for a generic Nepali women who shares a common set of needs and values with all her fellow female citizens, has produced not merely a homogenized Nepali woman, but, perhaps more importantly, one who is systematically denied agency (Tamang, 2009: 66).

WOMEN AND COMICS

So, where are women and comics located in terms of Nepali feminism? Comics, like art, serve as a form of social commentary in that they reflect the times in which they are created (Merino, 2001). They also act as new cultural artefacts that can be read and studied. Rather than to begin with a feminist idea, this essay examines what Nepali women comic artists have chosen to showcase in their personal narratives. Women comic artists only began drawing comics towards the late 1990s in Nepal, and there is limited to no archival material to collect and analyse from.[3] The images collected in this essay show examples of the diverse visual forms and storytelling methods of various women artists in Nepal, and much of the analysis is based on interviews with the artists.

The modern comic format used by Nepali artists appeared towards the 1960s with the privatisation and expansion of printing presses. It has flourished since and become a regular part of national dailies such as *Gorkhaptra*, *The Kathmandu Post*, *Kantipur* and *The Himalayan Times*. The appearances of comics in the 1960s were limited as there were not many platforms for expression, other than political expression. Most comics appeared in newspapers and national dailies, thus limiting them to being political in nature or in children's magazines.[4] Women were depicted as epitomes of perfection, 'Sati-Savitri'[5], religious figures or part of folklore and, in some instances, as villains or objectified subjects that are part of a larger political satire.[6]

Towards the late 1990s, and more so in the beginning of the 2000s, female artists started appearing, but sparsely. According to an interview of Shushma Rajbhandari and Sangee Shrestha by Fungma Fudong (cited in Lent, 2015), the option for women cartoonists was a problematic choice between domestic life that was bound by socio-cultural obligations and obstructions or freedom of expression with consequences of an opinionated traditional society

discourse until the 2000s. I use the term 'essentially' to highlight the fact that research and socio-political debate regarding the Nepali feminist movement began highlighting the gaps of social, cultural and geographical exclusion of women (Leve, 2007; Tamang, 2009; further reading Acharya, 1994; Upadhya, 1996).

[2] Nepal was trying to create a single national story and identity after the fall of the oligarchy in the 1950s. Thus, it sought to homogenise its heterogeneous cultures (Gellner et al., 1997; Whelpton, 2005): 'Catalyzed by the 1975 UN International Women's Year, foreign donors channeled funds into "developing" an essentialized "Nepali woman" in accordance with women in development (WID) doctrine dominant in the global development sphere' (Tamang, 2009: 65).

[3] Much of the material collected and analysed for this article was from personal archives, as libraries and institutional archives are not as well maintained, inaccessible or non-existent.

[4] Lent (2015): Sequential art has been part of Nepal's historic and traditional art forms such as *Bilampos*, narrative manuscript paintings or *patta* paintings. In these, the female is often depicted as of mythical nature, a mother goddess or deity, or part of the worshiping patron panel. (Further reading: Pal (1974); Bajracharya, 2016; Chitrakar, 2012; Chitrakar, 2017.)

[5] Sati-Savitri is a goddess in Hindu mythology, Savitri being daughter of a solar deity and wife of god Brahma and Sati 'good woman/chaste wife'. In combination, the terminology means a woman who is defined as the epitome of the faithful wife and paragon of virtue or a woman of virtue in general. In modern literature, art and linguistic uses it has a negative connotation (Bhatt, 2013: 130; Wildermuth, 2009; further understanding of the term in contemporary language can be found in academic literature on Indian Cinema). It is similar in meaning to the dichotomy of the Victorian ideal woman vs. the fallen woman (Anderson, 1993; Kühl, 2016).

[6] This observation is based on interviews with all artists for this paper, as well as on the survey of Nepali comics as a whole.

(Lent, 2015). Comics artists such as Preena Shrestha and Kanchan Burathoki, though from a generation younger, have stated similar experiences, where socially, culturally and in the working sphere, women cartoonists are not taken seriously enough and making comics as women seen as hobby rather than a profession.[7]

METHODOLOGY

For this article, I have interviewed several prominent female comics artists - Bandana Tulachan, Kanchan Burathoki, Kripa Joshi, Preena Shrestha, Shraddha Shrestha and Sangee Shrestha. I have looked and analysed their body of works that are found in their personal collections, in print and on social media such as WordPress, Instagram and Facebook. I also had group discussions with the artists, and prepared a questionnaire for the artists to respond to.

In addition, I have interviewed several Nepali editors of publishing houses and dailies, and studied their body of works for comparison and understanding of where the women and their comics are located in the context to the comics scene of Nepal as well as the Nepali feminist debate. Due to lack of literature on Nepalese comics artists and art as a whole (outside of traditional and historical art contexts), I have collected and read through international theoretical literature relating to comics, and analysed how these fit into the context of Nepal.

SATIRE AS COUNTER CULTURE

Sangee Shrestha worked as a political caricaturist between 2002 and 2003 for *Kamana Gaijatra* magazine. She used humour and satire to address Nepal's socio-cultural perception and treatment of women. She was ridiculing both society's gaze and her male counterparts who largely relegated women in their cartoons to the background, as either well-meaning, curious fools or nagging wives, thus confronting dominant images and perspectives of patriarchy.

In **Figure 1**,[8] Shrestha indicates that the woman in the comic is not just a mother and housekeeper but also a labourer for her offspring. Shrestha is reflecting a social norm in Nepal (though exaggerated). She felt that women like herself, not just as a woman but also as a cartoonist, faced a problematic choice between domestic life that was bound by socio-cultural obligations and obstructions of freedom of expression with consequences of an opinionated traditional society (Lent, 2015; S. Shrestha, Personal interview, 2019, July 24).

Figure 1. Untitled 1. Sangee Shrestha (2003). © Sangee Shrestha.

[7] Interview with Preena Shrestha (2019) and Kanchan Burathoki (2019).

[8] Approximate translation*: boy character: 'you again did my homework wrong. From tomorrow you will be going for tuition, I have already arranged it with my teacher'*

Figure 2. Untitled 2. Sangee Shrestha (2003). © Sangee Shrestha.

In **Figure 2**,[9] Shrestha has created a stereotype of the frivolous woman figure who is obsessed with fashion trends. The man of the household (this can be interpreted from the image in terms of size, and the fact that she is asking him for money) cannot understand why she needs more clothes. **Figure 3**,[10] Shrestha as an artist, has created a pun at self-representation, where she is asked what she is trying to say with her body of work. This could be interpreted as Shrestha using juxtaposition in the relative sizes of characters in both **Figures 1** and **2** to indicate the smaller characters to be clichéd social stereotype of women that are opinionated, inquisitive, troublesome and silly.

[9] Approximate translation: *male character: 'What are you trying to show with this painting?'; female artists: 'Please be patient. Let me finish the painting and you will see'.*

[10] Approximate translation: *male character: 'You need money for clothes again? Did you not just buy some yesterday?', woman character 'Yes, I am wearing them now. But that was yesterday's fashion.'*

Figure 3. Untitled 3. Sangee Shrestha (2003). © Sangee Shrestha.

Artists who followed after Sangee Shrestha provided more personal narratives that disclosed glimpses of their lives and emotions, rather than socio-cultural and political attitudes.

BODY IMAGE

Miss Moti and the Big Apple (Joshi, 2007) was self-published as part of Kripa Joshi's MFA thesis. The central character was inspired by Joshi's own lack of body confidence. Her idea was to create a body positive character that was full of life, mirroring herself and her mother's character. Both she and her mother are big women, who are self-sufficient and independent thinkers.

'Moti' has a dual connotation in Nepali, meaning a 'pearl' as well as 'fat'. Joshi has cleverly used the name for both its meaning - a hidden gem in a negative connotation of body image. She uses the same play on the word 'Moti' with image in her first 2 comic covers (**Figure 4**) which conjures the image of 'The Birth of Venus' by Botticelli, with Moti as a goddess of ingenuity.

Figure 4. Covers of *Miss Moti and the Big Apple* (2007) and *Miss Moti and Cotton Candy* (2007). Kripa Joshi. 2012. © Kripa Joshi.

In her work, Joshi is portraying her self-image through the comic in a playful manner, as curvy and vivacious. By drawing and publishing her comics she is confronting her own anxieties about her body image and at the same time enjoying the process of creating herself. Through her work, Joshi deconstructs Nepali notions of body ideals and individual attitudes towards oneself.

In **Figure 5**, *Miss Moti and the Big Apple* (2007), for instance, her character is coyly flirting as 'Eve' with 'Adam' ignoring her beauty over a juicy red apple. The nudity here is not overtly sexual, but at the same time in juxtaposition to the cello is indicative of Joshi comparing herself to an idealised design of her own body as beautiful.

Figure 5. Excerpt from Miss *Moti and the Big Apple*. Kripa Joshi. 2007. © Kripa Joshi.

SELF-EXPRESSION AND SEXUALITY

In **Figure 6**, 'Burn bleed boom' (2017), a self published zine, Shraddha Shrestha depicts a graphic break up. It is raw and honest in its imagery of pain inflicted and wishful vengeance upon the 'ex'. In **Figure 7**, 'The permission game' (2019), she invites the reader into a visual game of seeking permission, which ends either in frustration and masturbation leading to sexual gratification.

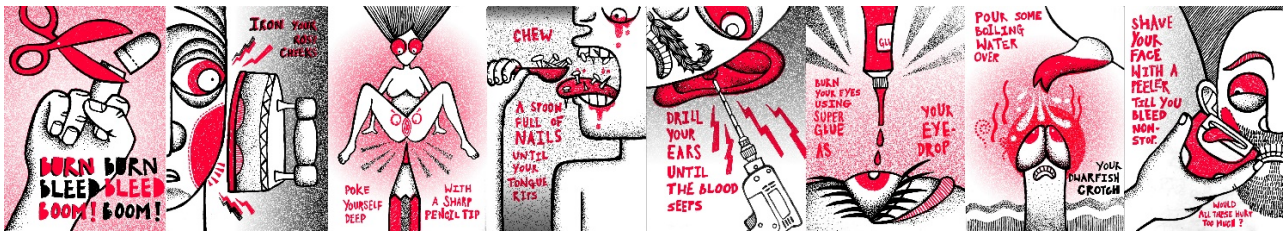


Figure 6. 'Burn bleed boom'. Shraddha Shrestha. 2017. © Shraddha Shrestha.

Figure 7. 'The permission game'. Shraddha Shrestha. 2019. © Shraddha Shrestha.

In both her comics, Shrestha does not shy away from expressing her sexuality or private relationships, which within the Nepali social sphere continues to be a subject of taboo. It is an open secret that people date, and that as unmarried adults in a relationship they are sexually active. As such, it is a socially accepted norm not to be spoken of in public, yet Shrestha candidly challenges this social taboo with her vivid imagery. Shrestha reflects in a sense a radical woman who is not scared to be openly vulnerable and confident at the same time. She can be seen as a nonconformist, in context of Nepali culture, for her progressiveness in portraying her desires and risqué can do attitude.

But why do these women artists choose illustrate their autobiographical accounts instead of imagined ones? Woman-drawn comics allow for dialogue on gender-related issues. They address problems of conformity to social norms and ideals, objectification and oppression of individuality and rights. Autobiographical work such as these, afford the comic artist creative licence. As Chute (2010: 2) elaborates, autobiographical work allows artists to:

> Return to events to literally review them…they productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight…they provoke us to think about how women, as both looking and looked at subjects, are situated in particular times, spaces, and histories.

In Kripa Joshi's and Shraddha Shrestha's comics, the authors have taken a comfortable position in self expressions of both body as an object of anxiety and sexuality/driven by desires. They show readers how they view themselves and offer themselves openly to the reader's gaze and scrutiny.

REAL LIFE, REAL ISSUES

Both Preena Shrestha and Kanchan Burathoki give semi-autobiographical narratives that echo similarity and are reflective of works like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003).

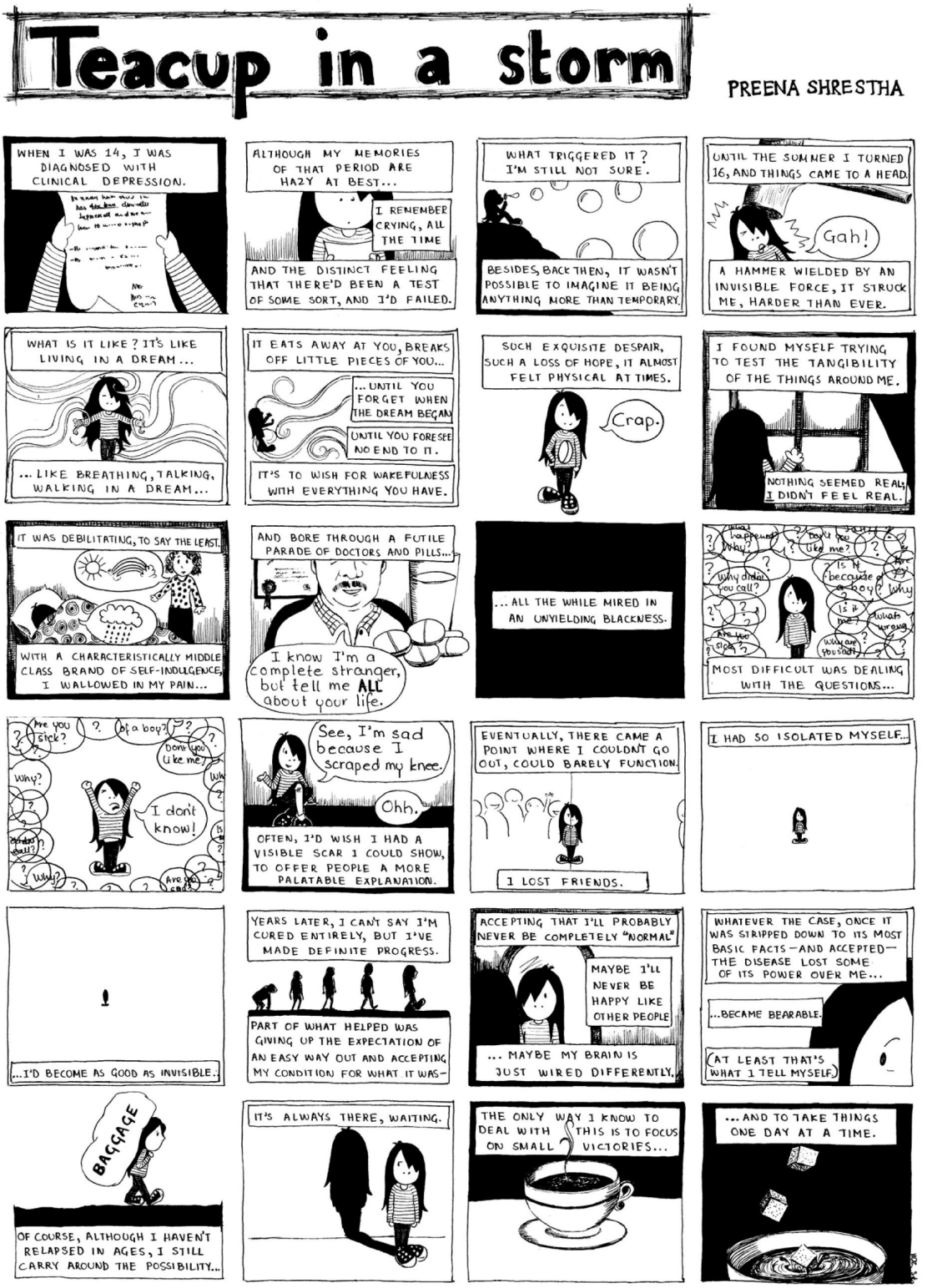


Figure 8. 'Tea cup in a storm'. Preena Shrestha. 2011. © Preena Shrestha.

In **Figure 8**, Preena Shrestha's thought-provoking work, 'Tea cup in a storm' (2011), explores her life and long-term depression, social anxieties and the turmoil of emotions that came with it. The subject of depression is surrounded with stigma in Nepal and is still a topic of taboo (as it is to speak about other mental health issues). The comic format is the medium which in her own words and images allowed her to find a constructive form of therapy and also encouraged her readers to engage with the subject of mental health.

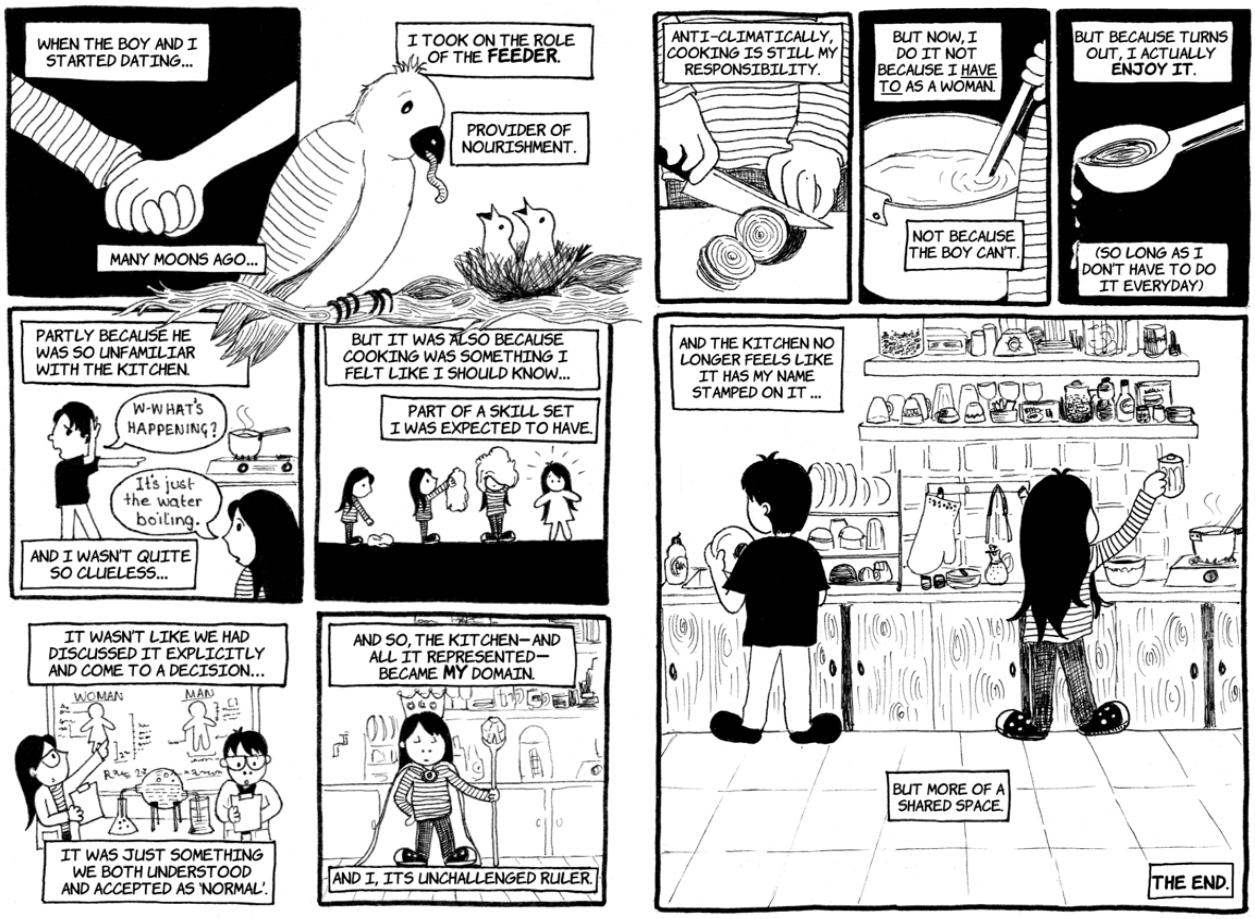


Figure 9. 'Bhanchaghar'. Preena Shrestha. In press. © Preena Shrestha.

In her next comic, 'Bhanchaghar' (in press), shown in **Figure 9**, Shrestha tackles the cultural issue of domesticity and the gender roles that are prescribed in the traditional institution of marriage. She comically describes how she 'chose' to take on the role of domesticated woman/wife, which had been ingrained into her by generations of women. Like her previous comic, she comes to terms with the fact that she cannot fit into the socially-assembled gender role that most Nepali women are assigned to. In her seriousness, Shrestha uses humour through her character who is too little for her big shoes.

The role of women, in the above mentioned comics, come from the position of the daughter, the mother, the spouse/partner and the social image of a woman which carry a tone of wry ambivalence towards their gender roles.

Both Preena Shrestha and Kripa Joshi use tamer forms of self expression, that are safe and appear to be created guardedly against any criticism that could arise from their visual narratives. They do not provoke a dialogue that debates the circumstances of middle class women in Nepal, but rather reiterate through their creativity their positions as part of these women and their class struggles. Shraddha Shrestha on the other hand rebels against it, and is edgier in her questioning and critique of a woman's role and opinions.

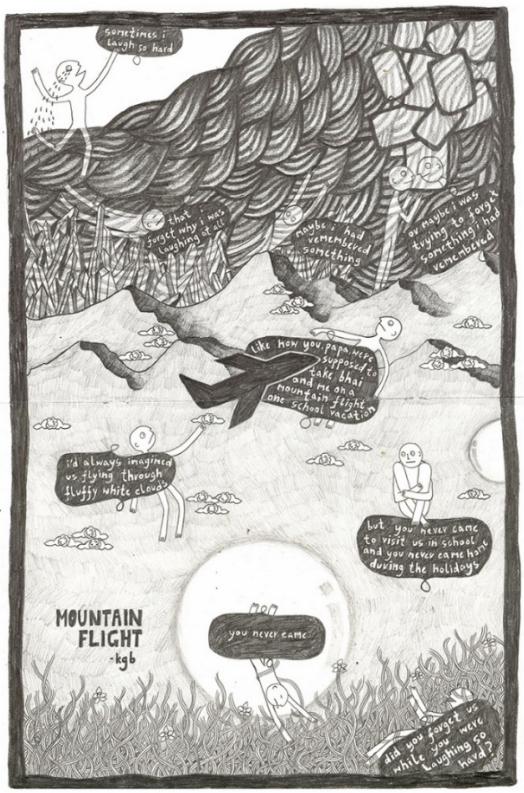


Figure 10. 'Mountain flight'. Kanchan Burathoki. 2013. © Kanchan Burathoki.

Kanchan Burathoki uses the comic medium to combine her poetry with visual images. Two pieces of her self-published work, **Figure 10**, 'Mountain flight' (2013) and **Figure 11**, 'Breath in breath out' (2019), are very personal journeys of trauma, which Burathoki expresses in two different formats. In **Figure 10**, 'Mountain flight', Burathoki writes a poem into a single image format, which is playfully illustrated. This was in memory of her father. On the other hand, in **Figure 11**, 'Breath in breath out', she shows a more sombre tone in narrating how she dealt with the passing of her mother, from struggling, to finding some form of semblance and coming to terms with the fact.

Figure 11. 'Breath in breath out'. Kanchan Burathoki. 2019. © Kanchan Burathoki.

Chute (2010, 2017) and Dean-Ruzicka (2013) have discussed how comics and graphic novels of autobiographical nature allow the reader detailed insight into the author's life. Chute (2010) adds that through this medium, 'Authors revisit their past, retrace events, and literally repicture them' (2010: 2). These are based on memories, histories, encounters and events experienced by the author/artist, which are depicted through the filtered lens of factual [re]imagination. They '…let the reader look at both the subjectivity of the narrator and the cultural forces that have shaped them' (Dean-Ruzicka, 2013: n.p.).

The biopic style comics by Preena Shrestha, Shraddha Shrestha, Kanchan Burathoki and Kripa Joshi are based on their real lives, real experiences and individuality. Their stories become human and relatable. These comics are narratives of self discovery, through memory, experience and self-expression.

METAPHORS

Figure 12. 'To love'. Bandana Tulachan. 2019. © Bandana Tulachan.

Bandana Tulachan uses a figurative expression in her story-telling technique and visual process. In **Figure 12**, 'To love' (2019), she employs fluidity and imagination to express the courage of accepting that 'low' feelings and hopelessness, and finding ones feet through encouragement and/ or asking for help. Many times, like in Preena Shrestha's 'Tea cup in a storm' comic, mental and emotional issues are not openly expressed, and asking for support is limited through social constructs of what is appropriate and what is not. Through her comic, Bandana Tulachan encourages the reader to find a helping hand rather than suppress it.

Similarly, in **Figure 13**, 'Self love', I, Promina Shrestha, employ wordless comics to tell a metaphorical story of finding self love, and learning to cultivate and nurture the self. The comic allowed me to show that, as an individual, one could embrace oneself without the validation of others, especially so as a woman. As women navigating a patriarchal social structure daily, our identities and desires habitually become subverted with social and cultural obligations and expectations. Nicola Streeten (in her Foreword for *Self Love*, 2019) remarked on that in Nepal the perspective of self love does not come from a place of individualism and gendered indulgence, but rather a place of family, friends and the everyday, which is firmly contextualised within the artists cultural positions.

Figure 13. 'Self love'. Promina Shrestha. 2019. © Promina Shrestha.

In this collection of comics illustrated in this essay, the women comic artists, including myself, are using the comic medium as a tool for self expression. In a society like Nepal, the defined gender role of women can be restrictive. Comics provide an ideal getaway to defy these conformities. They allow us to confront the overemphasised expectations of women by Nepali society that we have been brought up in.

ON THE FUNNY SIDE

Figure 14, 'Period' (2018), and **Figure 15**, 'Bad hair day' (2009), by Shraddha Shrestha and Preena Shrestha, respectively, address everyday women's issues of biology and vanity through a sense of humour, in single panel comics. Sometimes things in life just cannot be helped, such as having uncontrollable hair that will not stay put or forgetting it is that time of your month when one is having a great day out, and as artists, looking back at these events adds to comical life anecdotes.

Figure 14. 'Period'. Shraddha Shrestha. 2018. © Shraddha Shrestha.

Figure 15. 'Bad hair day'. Preena Shrestha. 2009. © Preena Shrestha.

In **Figure 16**, Promina Shrestha's 'Are we there yet?' (2018), three different women characters are representative of my own self images (in terms of temperament, attitude, body image and sexuality). Though meant in jest, and shown as a small trekking expedition, the characters are illustrative of my own navigation within society.

Figure 16. 'Are we there yet?'. Promina Shrestha. 2018. © Promina Shrestha.

DISCUSSION

At a glance, these comics do not advocate the larger Nepali feminist movement which aims to give agency to women in terms of rights to citizenship, education, health, labour and so forth but also to incorporate the individual struggles of ethnicity, caste and class within women's rights in Nepal. There is a clear emotional and political disconnect between the private spheres of the artists and that of the larger debate. The comics are not fully representative of class, caste and ethnic representation of Nepal and Nepali women. And yet, by inking their lives, experiences, emotions and thoughts and publishing them on social media sites such as Instagram, they are contributing to the effort through a visual personalised narrative that can be located within the larger global comic feminism and activism.

It is crucial to understand that Nepal's comic scene is a highly gendered space. Political and satirical cartooning is a dominant genre in Nepal, which has been asserted by male artists as their area of expertise. While the narratives illustrated by women occupy a marginal position, depicting the domestic, personal experiences and stories of the single woman. This, in turn, has had a deeper implication within Nepali culture. Political satire is seen as more intellectual than the individual's commentary on personal life, which is perceived as a whimsical or frivolous activity by women (a 'low brow' genre).

Nepali women artists are not afforded as much recognition and visibility as their men counterparts. Although the Nepali comic scene started half a century ago, there is still a prejudiced limitation of accessibility for women, particularly in print media. The internet has been the most available platform for most artists in this regard, which has also supported a shift in readership and demand for this medium.

In my reflection of the collection of comics in this essay, it is disputable whether these comics can or should be characterised as 'feminist'. The artists themselves are not motivated first and foremost by an avowed sense of feminism or activist purpose; rather, their work puts forward the reality of their experiences. The artists and their drawn characters have come in varied shapes and sizes, and are constructs of women's imaginations. These are a cultural phenomenon, where women are realistically portraying their intelligence and humour (Chute, 2017). They have found a way and niche to challenge gender hierarchies, social constructs, gazes and perspectives within this form of popular culture (Lopes, 2006). Comics, as such, have become the perfect instrument for Nepali women artists to tell their autobiographical narratives that shift between reality and fiction, becoming both engaging and relatable to other women (Chute, 2010).

In my interviews with the comic artists, none confirmed or believed that they are actively partaking in feminism or trying to create any form of social commentary/discourse. Kripa Joshi, for instance, explains it this way:

> Even though I didn't start off to make Miss Moti a feminist, over time she has become more so, especially when I started the Miss Motivation series…Women are placed under a lot more pressure in terms of how they look or behave,…Miss Moti breaks those barriers by being a plus sized brown woman who encourages self acceptance. (K. Joshi, personal communication, February 22, 2019)

However, through their body of works, the Nepali women comic artists subtly depict the individual woman's struggles in their visual accounts. And it becomes clear that the artists are in a sense acting as agents of feminism through visual story telling (Chute, 2010). Their illustrations facilitate an expression of self, identity, and life that they as women and as personalities are part of a culture that is still highly patriarchal and restrictive in terms of women's position in society (Tamang, 2009; Leve, 2001). As such, they have proven that they are autonomous, and not swayed by social taboos or allow public opinions to dictate their works.

It has been my observation that even though comics in Nepal are far removed from the everyday of the general population[11], Nepali women's comics have a specific readership or group of followers that have access to these comics and others (in the larger term of comics and graphic novels). In their own way, these women artists and their comics have come out in Nepal are representative of a small pocket of women and their issues and stories.

REFERENCES

Acharya, M. (1994). Political participation of women in Nepal, In Nelson, B. and Chowdhury, N. (eds.) *Women and Politics Worldwide* (pp. 478-495). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Anderson, A. (1993). Introduction. In *Tainted Souls And Painted Faces: The rhetoric of fallenness in Victorian culture* (pp. 1-21). Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press

Bajracharya, S. (2018). *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and ritual.* Available at: https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/nepalase_seasons_-_combo-_96_ppi (Accessed 17 February 2020).

Bechdel, A. (2006). *Fun Home: A family tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Bhatt, R. M. (2013). Reading gender in Indian newspapers: Global, local or liminal. In Rudby, R. and Alsagoff, L. (eds.), *The Global-Local Interface and Hybridity* (pp. 121-132). Berlin: De Gruyter.

Boserup, E. (1970). *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Burathoki, K. (2013). Mountain Flight. Available at: https://kanchang.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/mountainflight.jpg (Accessed 3 December 2018).

Burathoki, K. (2019). Breath In Breath Out. Available at: https://kanchang.wordpress.com/ (Accessed 3 December 2018).

Burathoki, K. (2019, February 21). Personal interview.

Chitrakar, M. (2012). *Nepali Art*: *Issues miscellany*. Patan, Nepal: Patan Museum.

Chitrakar, M. (2017). *Nepali Paintings*: *Through the ages*. Patan, Nepal: Patan Museum.

Chute, H. (2010). *Graphic Women: Life narrative and contemporary comics*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Chute, H. (2017). *Why Comics: From underground to everywhere*. New York: Harper.

Dean-Ruzicka. R. (2013). Mourning and melancholia in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A family tragicomic*. *Image Text, 7*(2): n.p. (Accessed 13 September 2019).

Gellner, D., Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. and Whelpton, J. (eds.) (1997). *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu State: The politics of culture in contemporary Nepal (Studies in Anthropology and History)*. New York, Routledge.

Joshi, K. (2007). *Miss Moti and the Big Apple*. Available at: https://www.missmoti.com/ (Accessed 17 October 2019).

Joshi, K. (2012). *Miss Moti and Cotton Candy*. Available at: https://www.missmoti.com/ (Accessed 17 October 2019).

Joshi, K. (2019, February 22). Email interview.

Kühl, S. (2016). The Angel in the House and Fallen Women: Assigning women their places in Victorian society. Open Education Resources. Available at: https://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/resources/documents/angel-house-and-fallen-women-assigning-women-their-places-victorian-society (Accessed 17 February 2020).

Lent, J. A. (2015). *Asian Comics*. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi.

Leve, L. (2007) 'Failed development' and rural revolution in Nepal: Rethinking subaltern consciousness and women's empowerment, *Anthropological Quarterly*, *80*(1), 127-172.

[11] Though Nepal has a history of comics, particularly in satire and political caricature in national dailies, other forms of comics and graphic novels are not popular in circulation or a common medium read by a large body of the population (Lent, 2015).

Lopes, P. (2006). Sequential tarts: Gender intervention in American comic book culture, American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, August 2006.
Merino, A. (2001). Women in comics: A space for recognizing other voices, *The Comics Journal*, *237*, 44-48.
Pal, P. (1974). *The Arts of Nepal (vol. II)*. Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Shrestha, P. (2009). Bad hair day. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/preenas/ (Accessed 20 February 2019).
Shrestha, P. (2011). Teacup in a storm. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/preenas/ (Accessed 20 February 2019).
Shrestha, P. (2018). Are we there yet? *Creating Heroines zine*. British Council, Nepal.
Shrestha, P. (2019). Self Love. In B. Tulachan, K. Burathoki, M. Lama, R. Lamichhane, P. Shrestha, P. Shrestha, S. Shrestha, U. Shrestha, *Self Love*. VIrangana Comics, Issue 1, Fine Print Publication, Kathmandu.
Shrestha, P. (2019, February 20). Personal interview.
Shrestha, P. (in press). Bhanchaghar. In B. Tulachan, K. Burathoki, K. Joshi, M. Lama, R. Lamichhane, K. Manandhar, D. Manandhar, P. Shrestha, P. Shrestha, S. Shrestha, *Bhanchaghar (2020)*. VIrangana Comics, Issue 2, Fine Print Publication, Kathmandu.
Shrestha, S. (2003). Untitled 1. *Kamana Gaijatra*. Kathmandu, Nepal.
Shrestha, S. (2003). Untitled 2. *Kamana Gaijatra*. Kathmandu, Nepal.
Shrestha, S. (2003). Untitled 3. *Kamana Gaijatra*. Kathmandu, Nepal.
Shrestha, S. (2017). Burn bleed boom. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/macha_73/ (Accessed 20 February 2019).
Shrestha, S. (2018). Period. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/macha_73/ (Accessed 20 February 2019).
Shrestha, S. (2019). The Permission Game. In B. Tulachan, K. Burathoki, M. Lama, R. Lamichhane, P. Shrestha, P. Shrestha, S. Shrestha, U. Shrestha, *Self Love*. VIrangana Comics, Issue 1, Fine Print Publication, Kathmandu.
Shrestha, S. (2019, February 20). Personal interview.
Shrestha, S. (2019, July 24). Personal interview.
Streeten, N. and Tate, C. (2018). *The Inking Woman: 250 years of women cartoon and comic artists in Britain*. Brighton, UK: Myriad Editions.
Tamang, S. (2009). The politics of conflict and difference or the difference of conflict in politics: The women's movement in Nepal, *Feminist Review, 91*, 61-80.
Tulachan, B. (2019). To Love. In B. Tulachan, K. Burathoki, M. Lama, R. Lamichhane, P. Shrestha, P. Shrestha, S. Shrestha, U. Shrestha, *Self Love*. VIrangana Comics, Issue 1, Fine Print Publication, Kathmandu.
Tulachan, B. (2019, February 15). Personal interview.
Tulachan, B., Burathoki, K., Lama, M., Lamichhane, R., Shrestha, P., Shrestha, P., Shrestha, S., Shrestha, U. (2019). *Self Love*. VIrangana Comics, Issue 1, Fine Print Publication, Kathmandu.
Upadhya, S. (1996). The status of women in Nepal - 15 years on. *Studies in Nepali History and Society, 1*(2), 423-454.
Whelpton, J. (2005). *A History of Nepal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wildermuth, N. (2009). Media events and gendered identities in South Asia: Miss World going 'Deshi'. In N. Couldry, A. Hepp and F. Krotz (eds.), *Media Events in a Global Age* (pp. 156-171). London: Routledge.

Citation: Shrestha, P. (2020). Nepali Women in Comics. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 12. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7916

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 13
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

'Can You See Her the Way I Do?': (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008)

Surangama Datta [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), the very first Indian graphic novel in English by a woman, is groundbreaking for multiple reasons. For one, it brings to the Indian graphic arena an 'unusual protagonist', a 'young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman — counterpoint to the hyper feminine prototypes one keeps coming across', as Patil remarks in an interview with Paul Gravett. Secondly, as an experimental text influenced by multiple media such as art styles from across cultures and many literary and graphic texts, Patil's work also generates a rich narrative that visualises the many moods of its reclusive protagonist, in a powerful, intertextual way. The heteroglossia, combined with an experimental use of 'ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images', captures Kari's psychological landscape in all its complexity, creating a unique narrative framed by her interiority. In turn this creates a distinct way of seeing (other characters, places and events) through the eyes of this unusual protagonist. This article engages with both its unusual protagonist, and distinct narrative style, and poses the following question: in what ways does this experimental text appropriate the act of looking? How does it resist hegemonic, masculinist modes of seeing through this? The article interrogates the ways in which the text, that celebrates fluidity and exploration, 1) resists masculinist prescriptiveness through its protagonist's unusualness and unconventionality, and 2) how through its protagonist's unusual gaze generates new, potentially feminist ways of seeing through the lens of love, affection and curiosity.

Keywords: Indian graphic novel, *Kari* (2008), unusual protagonist, feminist ways of seeing, interiority

INTRODUCTION

As India's very first graphic novel in English by a woman, and a queer one at that, Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) has carved out an uncontested position not only within the space of graphic literature in India, but within the twin fields of feminist and queer cultural production at large. Broadly, the plot chronicles Kari's daily life in the aftermath of a 'slipshod surgical procedure' (Patil, 2008: 3) — a massive breakup with her lover Ruth who exits at the very beginning of the text leaving Kari in the 'smog city' Bombay by herself — marking the journey of self-exploration between Kari's attempted suicide at the beginning of the text and her decision to go on living by its closing. Yet, as Patil insists in her interview with Paul Gravett, 'the book is not a coming-out tale. Kari's queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey' (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012). The text, which celebrates ambiguity, exploration and fluidity, resists 'a quickie "suicidal lesbian" synopsis' (Gravett, 2012) through its unusual approach to the theme. With its many intertextual influences, the narrative is partly reminiscent of English Modernist writer Virginia Woolf's 'stream of consciousness' technique, due to its emphasis on interiority and in its reception of external reality through Kari's internal world.

The remarkable quality of this work lies not only in its status as first, but in the way its experimental form and content introduce new ways of perceiving and visualising experience, in this case, that of a queer woman, bringing innovative possibilities into the Indian graphic arena. For instance, its keen understanding of female spaces and homosocial interactions (such as Kari's relations with various women in the text, the interpersonal dynamic between her female flatmates, Billo and Delna), questions of gender performance and non-conformity, Kari's complex friendship with dying cancer patient Angel, her love for Ruth, allows for an interesting study of gender in the contemporary context. By setting in motion a rich narrative of interiority, lush with intertextual references, poetic language and experimental art, *Kari* visualises the emotional experiences of a young female protagonist

[1] *Assistant teacher and PhD scholar in the Department of English, University of Bristol*, UK
***Corresponding Author:** surangama.datta@bristol.ac.uk

coming to terms with the intersection of her many identities: as a woman/lesbian/gender-fluid/loner/jilted lover/ad agency trainee/poet/creative within the space of 'smog city', Bombay (described as an active organism). It does so through its 'crossover literary form […] the story flows from voice-over narrative style text to visuals, then back to voice-over' (Gravett, 2012). Moreover, through heteroglossia and an experimental use of 'ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images' (Patil as quoted in Singh, 2008), the story captures Kari's internal landscape in a heteroglossic way, creating a unique narrative framework predicated upon interiority. Patil's experimental text is influenced by multiple media — from Indian temple art to Japanese silkscreen prints, to literary texts, like Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1989), R. K. Narayan's *A Malgudi Omnibus* (1994), and graphic novels like Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), amongst others — bringing a rich reading experience.

This article, which engages with both its unusual protagonist and unique narrative style that sees reality through her piercing eyes, poses the following questions: in what ways does this experimental text appropriate the act of looking? How does it resist hegemonic, masculinist modes of seeing through this? To this end, it will interrogate the ways in which the text, that celebrates fluidity and exploration, embodies a critique of masculinist prescriptiveness through its protagonist's unusualness and unconventionality; the article will also explore how its experimental form generates new, potentially feminist ways of seeing through the lens of love, affection and curiosity. A quick word about *Kari* (2008) vis-à-vis Indian graphic literature, however, before I begin.

LOCATING *KARI* (2008) WITHIN THE INDIAN GRAPHIC CONTEXT

Over the last two decades, a new, 'inauspicious' form of graphic literature has altered the Indian comics landscape permanently. Harbingered by Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), the first Indian 'graphic novel' that visualises controversies over the highly debated Narmada dam movement in India, the last twenty years have seen the production of stand-alone graphic narratives such as Sarnath Bannerjee's *Corridor* (2004), *Kashmir Pending* (2007), *The Harappa Files* (2011), *All quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), Srividya Natarajan et al.'s *Bhimayana* (2011), among others. Dubbed as the Indian comics 'visual renaissance' (Gravett, 2010), these texts are known for bringing fresh narrative traditions into the Indian graphic arena. They offer a break from visual traditions set by earlier (children's) comics such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) and *Chacha Chaudhury* (1971) both in terms of style and content. If these earlier works projected idealised, 'auspicious', 'appropriate' images of India through their 'bright colourways, clear, strong lines and intricate, often patterned detail' (Varughese, 2018: 17), frequently serving as 'educational content' (Stoll, 2017: 1), these modern texts, some of them historical fiction, turn a questioning eye towards socio-political shifts in the subcontinent. As a collective, these texts generate a new wave of visual expression that is 'inauspicious' (Varughese, 2018: 4) and interrogatory in nature.

The emergence of these texts as a cluster of post-millennial graphic novels grappling with issues of nation, urban spaces and identity, has meant that they have frequently generated questions surrounding Indian modernity and graphic constructions of 'Indianness'. Academia has responded accordingly. Scholars such as Emma Dawson Varughese, for instance, have interrogated the ways in which 'inauspicious' modes of art within these texts 'encode a sense of post-millennial modernity' and offer 'new ways of (Indian) seeing' (Varughese, 2018: 4). Meanwhile, through her study of Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), Preeti Singh analyses the way in which political selves are constructed through these texts (Singh, 2018). Another strand of criticism has highlighted the complex relationship between the city, modernism and the subject (Nayar, 2016; Nambiar, 2013; Davies, 2019) and interrogated the ways in which city and urban spaces are re-appropriated within these narratives, often through the critical gazes of their protagonists (Nambiar, 2013). Broadly, then, criticism in this area has formulated the ways in which these texts have enabled a new mode of visuality, of seeing, vis-à-vis modern Indian experiences and national identity (Nair, 2017; Nayar, 2016; Varughese, 2017; Varughese, 2018).

Kari (2008), published during the first wave of production, alongside Sarnath Bannerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's works, stands out despite its common theme of engagement with the city through its focus on the 'unusual […] deeply introverted, asocial and queer' protagonist. (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012). Mentored by Orijit Sen within a close-knit and relatively small community of graphic novelists, Amruta Patil's experimental text breaks away from its counterparts through its *avant garde* exploration of gender and identity through Kari. Indeed, as Gravett denotes: 'Now that the graphic novel is emerging in India, notably from innovators like Sarnath Banerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Amruta wanted to send out an unusual protagonist into the literary scene' (Gravett, 2012). Published in 2008 by HarperCollins Publishers India in New Delhi, *Kari* (2008) chronicles the life of a queer misfit who 'trawl[s] the drains dream after dream, [and] can smell the sewer everywhere' (Patil, 2008: 41), is one of the more canonical graphic novels in the country. However, Patil, as a creator, frequently engages with marginalised voices, as is evident through her subsequent graphic novels, *Adi Parva: Churning of the ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood*

and flowers (2016), both of which retell stories from the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of marginalised characters, Ganga and Ashwatthama.

For a while, *Kari* (2008) remained the only graphic novel by a woman in English in India, and still remains one of the few queer graphic novels. It was not until the dire incident of December 2012 that a new wave of feminist texts began to emerge. The *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back!* (2015), *Elephant in the Room: Women draw their world* (2015), Ram Devineni and Dan Goldman's *Priya's Shakti* series (2014-2019) are artistic responses to the infamous 'Nirbhaya' gang rape in Delhi, December 2012. This devastating assault case that left the country shocked also led to an unprecedented gain in momentum within Indian feminist discourse. Leading to massive protests across the country, and generating furious women's rights debates across media, it created a political moment within contemporary Indian history that facilitated the production of overtly revolutionary narratives such as these. For instance, the *Drawing the Line* anthology was first produced by Goethe Institute and Zubaan Books, an independent feminist publisher in New Delhi, as part of a week-long workshop run by volume editors Priya Kuriyan, Ludmilla Bartscet and Larissa Bertonasco. Bringing together fourteen young, female, Indian artists, amateur and professional, this collection turns a critical gaze towards gender discrimination within urban spaces. These newer feminist interventions adopt an activist tone — for instance, referring to Robin L. Teske's concept of the butterfly effect, from *Conscious Acts and the Politics of Social Change* (2000), which argues that seemingly insignificant but consciously subversive acts in fact generate social change by gradually shifting larger structural patterns within society - the foreword to *Drawing the Line* (2015) locates itself as a resistance narrative and identifies as 'a powerful path to intersectional feminism' (Satpathy-Singh, 2015: Foreword, n.p.). *Kari* remains more implicit in its resistance politics. As a text, then situated within two literary movements, the first wave of graphic novels in India, and the more recent feminist traditions, it remains unique through its significant differences. Meanwhile, in terms of queer literary traditions, as Poushali Bhadury argues, 'The paucity of image-text stories featuring queer female characters becomes glaringly apparent when one sets out to provide even a brief overview of available texts […] due to the history of legalised homophobia.' (Bhadury, 2018: 424). *Kari* remains one of the few queer graphic novels by a woman within the Indian context. As a significant text that embodies unique politics, then, it merits serious critical attention.

'MY FAVOURITE FORM OF MOVEMENT IS FLOAT': SEEING THROUGH KARI'S UNCONVENTIONAL GAZE

> Navigation is of essence here […] I am a treacherous, dangerous fish. […] Round and round, cutting through the water silently […] I move in stealth, arms by my side.
>
> (Patil, 2008: 85)

On her twenty first birthday, Amruta Patil's 'unusual protagonist' (Patil as quoted by Gravett, 2012) gifts herself with membership at the local swimming pool. The above excerpt, from her detailed description of swimming in the 'separate Ladies Lane' where she observes other women keenly, captures her proficiency in navigating fluid spaces. (Patil, 2008: 85). Recurrent images of fluidity and navigation within the text are arguably a metaphor for exploring the unconscious, 'the city's lower intestine' (Patil, 2008: 41), an uncontrollable, elusive space. And Kari, as an 'active loner' (Patil, 2008: 79), navigates this space efficiently. Patil's experimental text brings to the Indian graphic arena an 'unusual protagonist', a 'young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman — counterpoint to the hyper feminine prototypes one keeps coming across', as Patil remarks in an interview with Paul Gravett. (Gravett, 2012). Moreover, as an experimental text influenced by multiple media — from Indian temple art to Japanese silkscreen prints, to literary texts, like Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1989), R.K. Narayan's *A Malgudi Omnibus* (1994), and graphic novels like Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) — the text also generates a rich, intertextual narrative that visualises the many moods of its reclusive protagonist, in a powerful, intertextual way. This heteroglossia, combined with an experimental use of 'ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images', captures Kari's psychological landscape in all its complexity, creating a unique narrative framed by her interiority.

In turn, this creates a distinct way of seeing (other characters, places and events) through the eyes of this 'unusual', queer protagonist. Of particular interest to this discussion is the way in which women are seen in this narrative, so this article poses the following question: in what ways does this experimental text appropriate the act of looking? How does it challenge masculinist modes of seeing by counterposing this unusual protagonist as an active observer?

I

In an interview with Paul Gravett, Amruta Patil makes a significant remark about her graphic novel:

> I wanted to send out an unusual protagonist into the Indian literary scene. A young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman - counterpoint to the hyperfeminine prototypes one keeps coming across. And yet, the book is not a coming-out tale. Kari's queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey. She is dark and funny and detached —something you may not expect from a quickie 'suicidal lesbian' synopsis. People love quick synopses.
>
> (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012: n.p.)

She makes two significant cultural observations here: the recurrence of 'hyper feminine prototypes' within popular production, and a quick synopsis as a way of engaging with literature. In the book, two categories of such prototypical femininities are highlighted: 'a rumpled siren' and an 'earth mother' (Patil, 2008: 107), both images frequently represented through advertisements and other forms of popular media. Such categories, indeed, categorisation itself, captures a distinct aspect of masculinist politics: appropriation through containment that risks reducing people to 'quick synopses' (Gravett, 2012).

Within the text, such modes of meaning-making that rely heavily upon structure, organisation and categorisation are reflected, for instance, through Lazarus, a character in the graphic novel who works with Kari, and Billo and Delna's boyfriends. Kari deflects Zap's essentialising, heterosexist advice, 'Eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman', by pointing to the reader in the over-head section of the panel how he 'understands nothing but plies me with advice' (Patil, 2008: 81). The text presents two spaces within 'smog city' — organised spaces on the one hand, hidden alleyways and the sewer on the other. The former, such as Kari's advertising agency, denote order and organisation and is unaffected by the 'waxing and waning of personal moons' (Patil, 2008: 10). Lazarus, Zap and Orgo are a part of this space. In a chapter entitled 'Love Song', where Laz expresses romantic interest towards Kari and gets rejected, he confusedly reproaches, 'Are you, like, a proper lesbian?' (Patil, 2008: 79). Her elusive response, 'I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, act loner' (Patil, 2008: 79) captures the text's resistance to this mode of looking through a 'totalising sweep of the eye' (Nambiar, 2013: 74). It denotes Patil's war against 'quick synopses' (Patil as quoted by Gravett, 2012) — of people and literary texts — that she actively resists through her graphic novel.

II

Patil's unusual protagonist resists such 'quick synopses' and simplified categories systematically. Throughout the text, Kari is visualised as a misfit who does not conform to social conventions. The recurrent associations between Kari and the sewer are interesting in this context. For one, it generates an unusual metaphor to describe a woman. It subverts the historical association between women and beauty across cultures. In fact — quick digression — the text ironically plays on such metaphors. For example, in the commercial for hairstyling products where 'rumpled sirens' audition is entitled 'Fairytale hair' (Patil, 2008: 65), the house that Kari shares with her 'degenerate' female flat mates, Billo and Delna, is called 'Crystal Palace' (Patil, 2008: 16), and the models who audition for 'Fairytale hair' are referred to as 'urban […] princesses' (Patil, 2008: 64). The sewer imagery offers a stark contrast. Kari frequently appears in stinky, dirty locations such as drainage areas, and on one occasion, her 'clothes smell funny' from falling into 'the stinking river of effluents' (Patil, 2008: 8-10). Such imagery takes attention away from physical appearance and engages the reader with the internal, the unusual. Her minimalist clothing style achieves a similar purpose — it redirects the reader's gaze, taking it away from her physical appearance and placing it instead on her mind-scape, an interesting visual tactic. Indeed, if anything captures attention within her appearance, it is her intense eyes. One character in the graphic novel in fact describes her as 'the young lady with burning eyes.' (Patil, 2008: 71), and indeed, it is not surprising that eyes are foregrounded. After all, they represent seeing, expressing and visualising.

The parallel drawn between Kari and the sewer, a space of fluidity, exploration and unpredictability, highlights the text's celebration of the internal, the unfathomable and the infinite. It foregrounds her internal landscape, in turn, that frames the narrative of the text (discussed in the next section). The sewer, a dark, fluid space, parallels Kari's nebulous, unusual identity and her dreams:

> I, Kari, twice born, who trawl the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere. My thoughts keep returning to the city's lower intestine. To the gutters and hastily dug out canals that empty her bladder and swell her arteries with clean blood.
>
> (Patil, 2008: 41)

The recurring image of 'trawl[ing] the drains dream after dream' is further emphasised by how her 'thoughts keep returning to the city's lower intestine'. The image is almost wave-like in its recurrence, and links directly with the text's frequent visualisation of fluid spaces such as sewers, rivers, and streets flooded with rainwater. Moreover, the sense of journey that is emphasised through the image of trawling the sewer, is paralleled by how 'the city has made a boatman of me [Kari]' (Patil, 2008: 31). The corresponding image, spread across two pages, depicts a dark cityscape with its dirty sewers as Kari, a shadowy figure, stands on the edge looking into the darkness, her back turned to the reader. The visual juxtaposition of Kari and the sewer highlights the parallel between the two. Four smaller panels appear on the page on the right, against this background. These images are close-up shots of the protagonist rowing a boat, her figure surrounded by water from all sides. Interestingly, these portray the action of rowing without reaching any destination, the act of rowing itself being meaningful. This imagery celebrates exploration over destination, fluidity over form. It is the sewer that connects one part of the city to another, one part of consciousness to another, and is a serpentine space. The inventiveness of this fluid space is highlighted by images of travelling, trawling, traversing — communicating a sense of being constantly in motion. The recurrence of these watery images in Patil's text sets the tone for, as well as parallels, the exploration of Kari's identity as a queer woman, as she keeps returning to the sewers over and over again through the text.

Figure 1. Kari and the sewer. Excerpted with permission from *Kari* (pp. 32-33) by Amruta Patil. © Amruta Patil.

Kari's gender identity is equally nebulous. The boatman reference is interesting in this regard. Alluding to the mythological Charon, the boatman between this world and the next, the narrative captures a sense of in-betweenness. Although frequently read as a lesbian protagonist, throughout the text Kari refuses to identify entirely with this category. I agree with Poushali Bhadury's assertion:

> Scholars and reviewers alike have usually described Kari as a lesbian character. However […] she aspires to the elusive "genderless" quality kd lang possesses' […] and push[es] towards a non-binary, androgynous identity.
>
> (Bhadury, 2018: 428)

When Lazarus, a male colleague who is romantically drawn to her, asks her if she is a 'proper lesbian', she responds with, 'I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner' (Patil 2008: 79). In the overhead text of the panel she thinks to herself:

> I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshy, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate.
>
> (Patil, 2008: 79)

This sensual description of the word 'lesbian' mirrors an equally sensual image of consuming fruit in Angel's house in a previous chapter, 'Secret lives of fruit':

> I play with fruit […] Avocado, kiwi, mangosteen. There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren. A fruit that lingers on your fingertip with unfruitlike insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one hundred percent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. There, I said it again: Lush.
>
> (Patil, 2008: 66)

The panels corresponding to this description are just as sensual. Three of these depict the fruits from different angles, and one panel portrays her rubbing a peach against her face, feeling it sensually. The insistence with which she plays with these fruits is matched with the way the word 'lesbian' rolls in her mouth. In addition, the lushness of the fruits mirrors the fleshiness of the word 'lesbian'. Resembling a woman's bottom, the peach is a particularly significant metaphor. It is placed on the palm of her hand, as she examines it carefully. As a perpetual explorer who resists labelling, she distances herself equally from the concrete, tangible category of 'lesbian'. She loves women without committing to the tag 'lesbian', nor does she dismiss it entirely. Engaging with the seductiveness of the word but remaining non-committal, she 'espouse[s] nothing but Ruth' (Patil, 2008: 71).

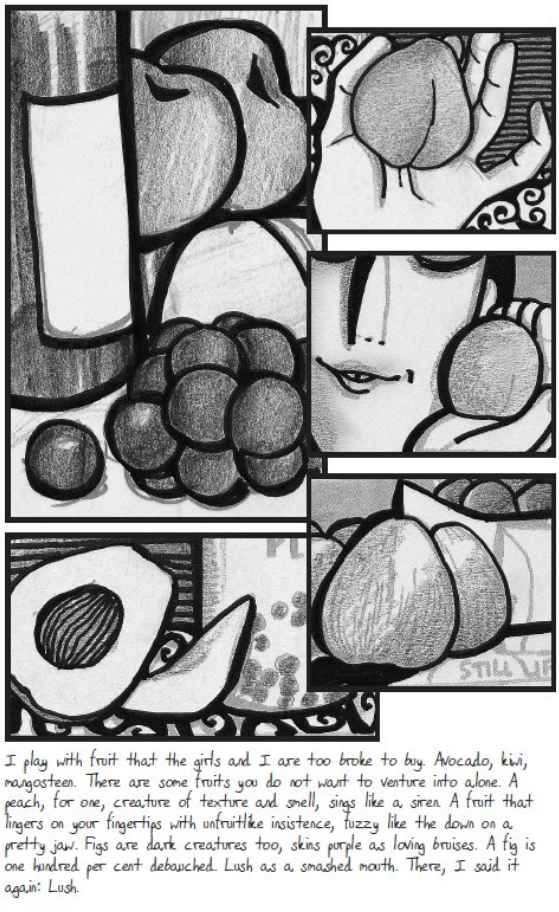


Figure 2. Kari and the fruits. Excerpted with permission from *Kari* (p. 66) by Amruta Patil. © Amruta Patil.

Indeed, as the text nears its close, Kari moves further towards androgyny. In its second last chapter, 'The awards ceremony', she decides to get her hair cut into a 2 mm buzz-cut to attend a crucial awards function. She refuses to adopt either traditionally feminine image of 'rumpled siren' or 'earth mother', deciding instead to look like 'GI Jane' (Patil, 2008: 110). She rejects the barber's offer to give her one of the 'lady's patterns', or at least a 'lady's boy-cut' and is as visibly pleased as the barber dismayed that her 'face looking boy type' (Patil, 2008: 107). In this colourful panel in an otherwise greyscale text the protagonist stands boldly facing the reader on the streets of 'smog city' Bombay, proudly announcing, 'Bring on the ladies'. The use of colour in the text offsets epiphanic moments while greyscale is used for the mundane or the morbid. This moment in the text is significant for at least two reasons: one, it heralds the emergence of fresh ways of representation within contemporary Indian graphic narratives, and two, it is a reflection of Kari's internal world that is celebratory of subjectivity.

Figure 3. 'Towards graphic androgyny'. Excerpted with permission from *Kari* (p. 107) by Amruta Patil. © Amruta Patil.

III

Kari's world is populated mostly by women, and they are viewed through the lens of the protagonist's love, affection and keen observation. In this section I will demonstrate how the text generates an alternative an 'unusual' mode of looking (at women) through the lens of curiosity and love. If on the one hand the text problematises mainstream representation of women through Kari's satirical gaze, it equally presents an alternative way of seeing them.

As a keen observer Kari brings out 'unusual' desires that operate within the big city. In Sandhya Devesan Nambiar's words, 'as a tale of the city "down below", *Kari* spawns illicit, secret desires, presenting the urban woman in the city in her various forms, working, suicidal, victim of household' (Nambiar, 2013: 74). By giving voice to these desires, she looks beyond convention, beyond 'quick synopses' (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012). One of the many instances of this is her description of Billo and Delna, her two female flat mates. Describing her happier memories with them, Kari recounts:

> I love it when the boys aren't around. The girls are a lot cheerier, and a lot more interested in one another. I can smell the peaches of Billo's perfume, Delna makes chicken in Coke and stir-fried spinach. On such days, the conversation wanders along a familiar track. Food, gossip, the occult, and then the moot-issue talk that ends either in a head massage or in (Delna's) tears. The other thing that happens during these suppers is that the girls mother me and shamelessly flirt with me in turns. Make no mistake - there is no such thing as a straight woman.
>
> (Patil, 2008: 58)

The imagery of smells (in Billo's perfume), touch (head massage) and taste (Delna's chicken) creates a lush, multi-sensual picture. Through her keen observation of these women she claims that 'there is no such thing as a straight woman', implying that conventionally heterosexual women too, and not only the queer, cannot be contained in representation. These women turn their attention to Kari when their boyfriends are not around, and in these (though transient) moments, a different aspect of their sexuality is revealed. What this implies is that *Kari* offers a multidimensional view of the people and places around her. This is in direct contrast to the narrative generated through masculinist discourse. Through her fluid but detached observation, she brings out the many incongruities that envelop the subconscious of the city. Indeed, her resistance/critique of the masculinist system is manifested broadly through the subversive use of interiority on the narratorial, diagetic level. Interiority as a narrative tool enables visualisation through the subversive gaze of its protagonist offering resistance to the symbolic gaze of patriarchal order, and a masculinist mode of seeing.

Kari's position as an observer, combined with this mode of visualisation, is an interesting narratorial choice. As a narrative of interiority with Kari's consciousness at the centre, and Patil's eloquent use of the visual and textual tools, the reader is conditioned from the very beginning to subscribe to, or at least empathise with, Kari's gaze. In this context, there is a significant moment in the chapter 'Secret lives of fruit': women waiting to audition for a commercial for hair styling products at Kari's ad agency are depicted within the panels as sensuous looking, scantily dressed models whose portfolios include pictures in lingerie (Patil, 2008: 65). This would certainly not seem unusual within the advertisement industry with popular media frequently portraying women as 'rumpled sirens', laying emphasis on their sex appeal (Patil, 2008: 107). It is through Kari's gaze, however, that the ridiculousness of this phenomenon is foregrounded. She ironically observes, 'If hair-product audition equals so much cleavage, lingerie audition equals what?'. Visually, the panels portray the protagonist holding the photographs in her hand and only her thumb is visible. The camera angle places the reader at the same position as her. As a result, the reader's gaze is bound to coincide with Kari's, with the reader's thumb positioned exactly like Kari's in the panel, creating a parallel. Reinforcing the bond forged between the protagonist and her audience, this appropriation orients the reader towards her perspective, which problematises the masculinist gaze.

Moreover, the pictures are offset from her through a colour variation. The frame and the finger are in grey-scale, whereas the images are in bright colours, emphasising a contrast between her perspective and masculinist representation. Interestingly, an actual photograph is also pasted into this panel alongside Patil's drawings, alluding to a larger, cultural phenomenon in society, in that the woman's face is cut off and only her body, especially her breasts, are visible. Indeed, this is quick satire on masculinist ways of seeing that isolate the woman from her own body. Kari's appropriation offers a moment of intervention, a disruption of what is otherwise normalised in popular culture. There are other similar moments across the text that critique such representation. For instance, an image of a 'coy Hindu bride' appearing in an advertisement is similarly critiqued within the text (Patil, 2008: 23). It shows a woman's side profile where she looks down shyly, lush hair falling over her face, her eyes big and her lips sensuous. The bride too is represented as an object of masculinist desire. Capturing the cultural fantasy of demureness and obedience in women, she is as much an object of male gaze as she sensually 'pours the lotion and steps over a threshold' as the siren (Patil, 2008: 23) The advertisement appears on television, and in this case too, Kari is the critical spectator to this unidimensional image.

Turning, finally, to the gaze through love. In the preface to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's groundbreaking anthology, *Same sex-desire in India* (2000), Vanita articulates gracefully and poignantly, 'Love need not take an explicitly sexual form, but it is nearly always expressed in the language of poetic excess and metaphoric power' (Vanita, 2000: xiv). In this book about same-sex love in Indian history and literature from the ancient to the modern world, Vanita's observation captures how love frequently produces a specific mode of poetic expression within literature that is more universal than not. The language of *Kari*, a text that narrates through the internal world of its protagonist, and which on one level captures the journey of a heartbroken lover, embodies such 'poetic excess', both visually and textually, in its narration of Ruth. It corresponds directly to Kari's state of mind, capturing the 'waxing and waning of [her] personal moons' (Patil, 2008: 10) The opening panel of the graphic novel, for instance, visualises her separation from Ruth thus: sitting together on a bench, clasping each other's hands after the 'slipshod surgical procedure', an artery joining Ruth and Kari's hearts is cut. Ruth holds the pair of scissors in her hand, as drops of blood soil her white skirt. Yet, they remain connected through a second artery that remains intact (Patil,

2008: 3). This metaphoric depiction captures at once the pain of severing ties and cutting romantic cords with a lover, that coexists with an undeniable connection forged through memory, nostalgia and longing. This magic realism representation captures complex feelings and co-opts the emotional into this mode of seeing. The poetic, metaphoric quality of the depiction captures the imaginative, and visualises the transcendental, that goes beyond the ordinary and conventional. In other words, it resists containment.

This (visual) language of love enables a mode of seeing that transcends the ordinary and engages with the imaginative, the exploratory. Love takes a poetic, magic realism form within the text that finds beauty in unusual places. This is most visible in the text's depiction of cancer patient Angel, an 'actively dying person' (Patil, 2008: 36), who, just like the sewer, is smelly and ill. The theme of death connects to the motif of the Boatman. Kari is the boatman, who travels between this world and the next, the real and the imaginative. Angel's last words to Kari are: 'My time is up, boatman. I need you to ferry me over' (Patil, 2008: 102). Kari's 'unusual', loving gaze sees Angel's decaying body and her looming death through non-intrusive, affectionate interest. 'Do you mind that it was your dying I was most drawn to?' she asks (Patil, 2008: 39). The text approaches the idea of death in a unique way, connecting it to the imaginative realm through the image of the Boatman. As a harbinger of unusualness, Kari brings out beauty in strange places (Angel, the sewer), without dismissing the lived realities such as the smell of 'violent gastric juices' (Patil, 2008: 55). In doing so, it brings out the in-between, and makes the ordinary a work of art through her way of looking.

CONCLUSION

'Can you see her the way I do?' (Patil, 2008:64) … this rhetorical question about the act of looking posed by Amruta Patil's queer protagonist opens up a larger question that lies at the heart of contemporary feminist literature. How can one look in resistant ways? How can one see beyond the influences of the everyday, the masculinist gaze? Through the lens of unusualness, non-containment and fluidity, *Kari* (2008) engages in a new mode of representation that systematically defies binaries and totalising ways of masculinist seeing. As India's first graphic novel by a woman, *Kari* introduces a fresh syntax for representation, a new way of thinking about women (and literature).

REFERENCES

Abel, J. and Madden, M. (2008). *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: Making comics: Manga, graphic novels and beyond*. New York: First Second Press.

Bannerjee, S. (2018). An analysis of Devi in the graphic novels of India: A feminist case study. *IOSR Journal for Humanities and Social Science, 23*(10.2), 55-63.

Barker, M. J. (1989). *Comics: Ideology, power and the critics*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Bauer, H. (2015). Comics, graphic narratives, and lesbian lives. In J. Medd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature* (pp. 219-238). USA: Cambridge University Press.

Berger, J. (1973). *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin Books.

Bhadury, P. (2018). 'There is no such thing as a straight woman': Queer female representations in South Asian graphic narratives. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 22*(4), 424-434.

Bramlett, F., Cook, R. and Meskin, A. (eds.). (2017). *The Routledge Companion to Comics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Broude, N. and Garrard, M. D. (2005). Introduction: Reclaiming female agency. In N. Broude and M. D. Garrard (eds.), *Reclaiming female agency: Feminist art history after postmodernism* (pp. 1-25). Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Butler, J. (2015). *Senses of the Subject*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York and London: Routledge.

Chandra, N. (2012). The prehistory of the superhero comics in India (1976-1986). *Thesis Eleven, 113*(1), 57-77.

Clisby, S. and Holdsworth, J. (2014). *Gendering Women: Identity and mental wellbeing through the lifecourse*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Clough, P. T. (1994). *Feminist Thought: Desire, power and academic discourse*. Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell.

Connor, S. (1997). *Postmodernist Culture: An introduction to the theories of the contemporary*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

Coppock, V., Haydon, D. and Richter, I. (1995). *The illusions of 'post feminism': New women, old myths*. Abingdon on Thames, UK: Taylor & Francis.

Cutter, M. J. and Schlund-Vials, C. J. (eds.). (2017). *Redrawing the Historical Past: History, memory and multiethnic graphic novels*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
Das, V. (1976). Indian women: Work, power and status. In Nanda, B.R. (ed.), *Indian Women: From purdah to modernity* (pp. 129-145). New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pty. Ltd.
Davies, D. (2019). *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the global city in contemporary graphic narratives*. New York and London: Routledge.
Eisenstein, H. (2009). *Feminism Seduced: How Global elites use women's labor and ideas to exploit the world*. Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers.
Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and Sequential art*. USA: Poorhouse Press.
Ferguson, A. (1994). Twenty years of feminist philosophy. *Hypatia, 9*(3), 197-215.
Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of Feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. London and New York: Verso.
Fraser, N. and Honneth, A. (2003). *Redistribution or Recognition? A political philosophical exchange*. London, New York: Verso.
Gangoli, G. (2007). *Indian Feminisms: Law, patriarchies and violence in India*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
Goldsmith, F. (2005). *Graphic Novels Now: Building, managing and marketing a dynamic collection*. Chicago: American Library Association.
Gravett, P. (2012). *Amruta Patil: India's first female graphic novelist. Paul Gravett: Comics, graphic novels, manga*. 4 September. Available at: http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta_patil (Accessed 23 February 2020).
Gravett, P. (2010). *Indian comics: A visual renaissance. Paul Gravett: Comics, graphic novels, manga*. October 18. Available at: http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/indian_comics (Accessed 23 February 2020).
Griffiths, M. (1995). *Feminisms and the Self: The web of identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
Hall, J. (ed.). (2015). *No Straight Lines: Four decades of queer comics*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books.
Hatfield, C. (2005). *Alternative Comics: An emerging literature*. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi.
Kapur, R. (1996). Who draws the line? Feminist reflections on speech and censorship. *Economic and Political Weekly, 31*(16/17), 15-30.
Kukkonen, K. (2013). *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
Lau, L. (2010). Literary representations of the 'New Indian Woman': The single, working, urban, middle class Indian woman seeking personal autonomy. *Journal of South Asian Development, 5*(2), 271-292.
Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The invisible art*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
McNay, L. (2000). *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the subject in feminist and social theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
McRobbie, A. (2008). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. 1,000 Oaks, CA: Sage.
Meghani, S.A. (2015). Global desires, postcolonial critique: Queer women in nation, migration and diaspora. In J. Medd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature* (pp. 60-78). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Moi, T. (1989). Feminist, female, feminine. In C. Belsey and J. Moore (eds.), *The Feminist Reader: Essays in gender and the politics of literary criticism* (pp. 116-132). New York: Basil Blackwell.
Nair, R. V. (2017). Rethinking panel culture: Resistance and subversion in Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 24*(2), 266-280.
Nambiar, S. D. (2013). Spaced out: Visuality and the city in the contemporary Indian graphic novel. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, 32*(1/2), 69-77.
Nandi, A. (1976). Woman versus womanliness: An essay in speculative psychology. In B. R. Nanda (ed.), *Indian women: From purdah to modernity* (pp. 146-160). New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pty. Ltd.
Nayar, P. K. (2018). *The Indian graphic novel: Nation, history and critique*. London and New York: Routledge.
Patil, A. (2008). *Kari*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.
Radhakrishnan, S. (2011). *Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Robbins, T. (1999). *From Girls to Grrrlz: A history of comics from teens to zines*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
Rohila, B. (2016). Book review: Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back. *Rupkatha Journal on International Studies in Humanities, 8*(1), 355-356.
Roy, S. (ed). (2012). *New South Asian Feminisms: Paradoxes and possibilities*. London and New York: Zed Books.
Sangari, K. (2002). *Politics of the Possible: Essays on gender, history, narratives, colonial english*. London: Anthem Press.
Sanil, M. (2016). From gods to superheroes: An analysis of Indian comics through a mythological lens. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, 31*(2), 285-295.
Satpathy-Singh, S. (2015). Foreword. In P. Kuriyan, L. Bertonasco, L. Bartscht and N. M. Burton, (eds.), *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back!* (n.p.). New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers.
Seth, S. (2013). Nationalism, modernity and the 'woman question' in India and China. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 72*(2), 273-297.

Singh, J. A. (2008). Amruta Patil and Kari: A short Q&A. *Jabberwock*. February 22. Available at: http://jaiarjun.blogspot.com/2008/02/amruta-patil-and-kari-short-q.html (Accessed 23 February 2020).
Singh, P. (2018). Graphic Delhi: Narrating the Indian emergency, 1975-1977, in Vishwajyoti Ghosh's Delhi Calm. *South Asian Review, 39*(1-2), 86-103.
Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
Stoll, J. (2017). Comics in India. In F. Bramlett, R. T. Cook and A. Meskin (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Comics*. New York: Routledge.
Tabachnick, S. E. (ed.). (2017). *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Taylor, C. (2001). *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Teske, R. L. (2000). The butterfly effect. In R. L. Teske and M. A. Tétreault (eds.), *Feminist Approaches to Social Movements, Community, and Power (Volume One): Conscious acts and the politics of social change* (pp. 107-124). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
Thaker, M. L. (2018). New energy for Indian comics: A qualitative study at Comic Con India. *Inks: The Journal of Comics Studies Society, 2*(2), 160-177.
Vanita, R. and Kidwai, S. (eds). (2001). *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from literature and history*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave.
Varughese, E. D. (2017). *Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Varughese, E. D. (2018). Neelima P. Aryan's 'The prey' from Drawing the Line: A graphic narrative response to the Delhi gang rape. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, 9*(3), 251-263.
Varughese, E. D. (2013). *Reading New India: Post-millennial Indian fiction in English*. London: Bloomsbury.
Warhol, R. and Warhol-Down, R. (2011). The space between: A narrative approach to Alison Bechdel's Fun Home. *College Literature, 38*(3), 1-20.
Waugh, P. (1984). *Metafiction: The theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.
White, H. (1988). Historiography and historiophoty. *The American Historical Review, 93*(5), 1193-1199.

Citation: Datta, S. (2020). 'Can You See Her the Way I Do?': (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 13. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7917


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectitojournals


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 14
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Interview

The Craft of (Queer) Feminism: A Conversation with Neelima P. Aryan, Indian Illustrator and Queer Feminist Woman

E. Dawson Varughese [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION

E. Dawson Varughese is in conversation with Neelima P. Aryan about her work as an illustrator and specifically as a contributor to Bertonasco, Bartscht and Kuriyan's *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back* (2015) in which Neelima's short graphic story 'the prey' features. Together these two women explore ideas of feminism which manifest through creative expression alongside personal experience and endeavour for Neelima as a queer feminist woman living and working in an Indian metropolis in the post millennium era. Specifically, they explore how the text-image interface might capture expressions of feminism different from those expressed in text only and by extension, how this mode of storying facilitates expressions of culturally and socially-situated feminisms, including queer feminisms within the context of urban India.

How did you come to illustration, Neelima? Has it always been part of your life in some way or another?

Drawing has always been a part of my life. My mother is a self-taught artist and in my growing up years, she used to paint a lot. Often my drawings had back-stories and futures that only I knew of. It could be of a woman walking into a supermarket, and if you'd asked me, I'd tell you where she was coming from, that she was going to the supermarket to buy a pencil box and what her plans were after.

Even though I grew up with a little bit of borrowed *Archie* comics and *Tinkle*, *Balarama* and such, it was at 23 when I discovered [the queer USA comic artist] Alison Bechdel that I realised I could do this too, telling stories through illustrations. What Bechdel did with *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008) was to show me the possibilities of a queer life, it was an easy overview of 'queer feminism for dummies', and a way to express politics without making it seem boring and inaccessible. I was coming out, I had just discovered a feminist and an LBT support group, and I had a lot to say! I wasn't confident enough though to talk in these forums. I was shy, I believed that my politics was not strong enough, and that I wasn't articulate enough. So, illustrating comic strips became my way of expressing my politics.

I'm interested to talk to you about your part in the Zubaan publication Drawing The Line: Indian women fight back (2015) which features a collection of creative responses to the Nirbhaya case (the Delhi gang rape case) of 2012 and more broadly, responses to the lived experiences of women in India. Could you tell me how you came to contribute 'the prey' to this collection? What was your creative process?

If you look at all the stories in *Drawing the Line* (2015), most of them are personal narratives of being a woman in an Indian context, some of the stories are direct responses to the 23 year old paramedic's case (*Nirbhaya* is a euphemism given by the media itself), the stories are also from the artists' own experiences, stories that inspire them, or stories they dream of. Not saying that the *Nirbhaya* case did not affect us, it did. Rape was suddenly not something that happened only in a socio-economic class that we actively *other*. It had been part of conversations that we as feminists were having, but suddenly the whole country seemed invested in these conversations. We all seemed to have our own stories to tell, and we told those in *Drawing the Line*.

[1] *Independent Scholar (UK and INDIA) and Senior Fellow at Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Manipal, INDIA*
***Corresponding Author:** edawsonvarughese@gmail.com

I was looking for a story to pitch in my application for the *Drawing the Line* workshop. My mother, an avid Malayalam blogger, read out to me a short story she had written. I felt like I had to make a textless graphic story out of it. So, while I went into the workshop knowing this is the story I will work on, a lot of the other artists developed their narratives through conversations during the course of the workshop.

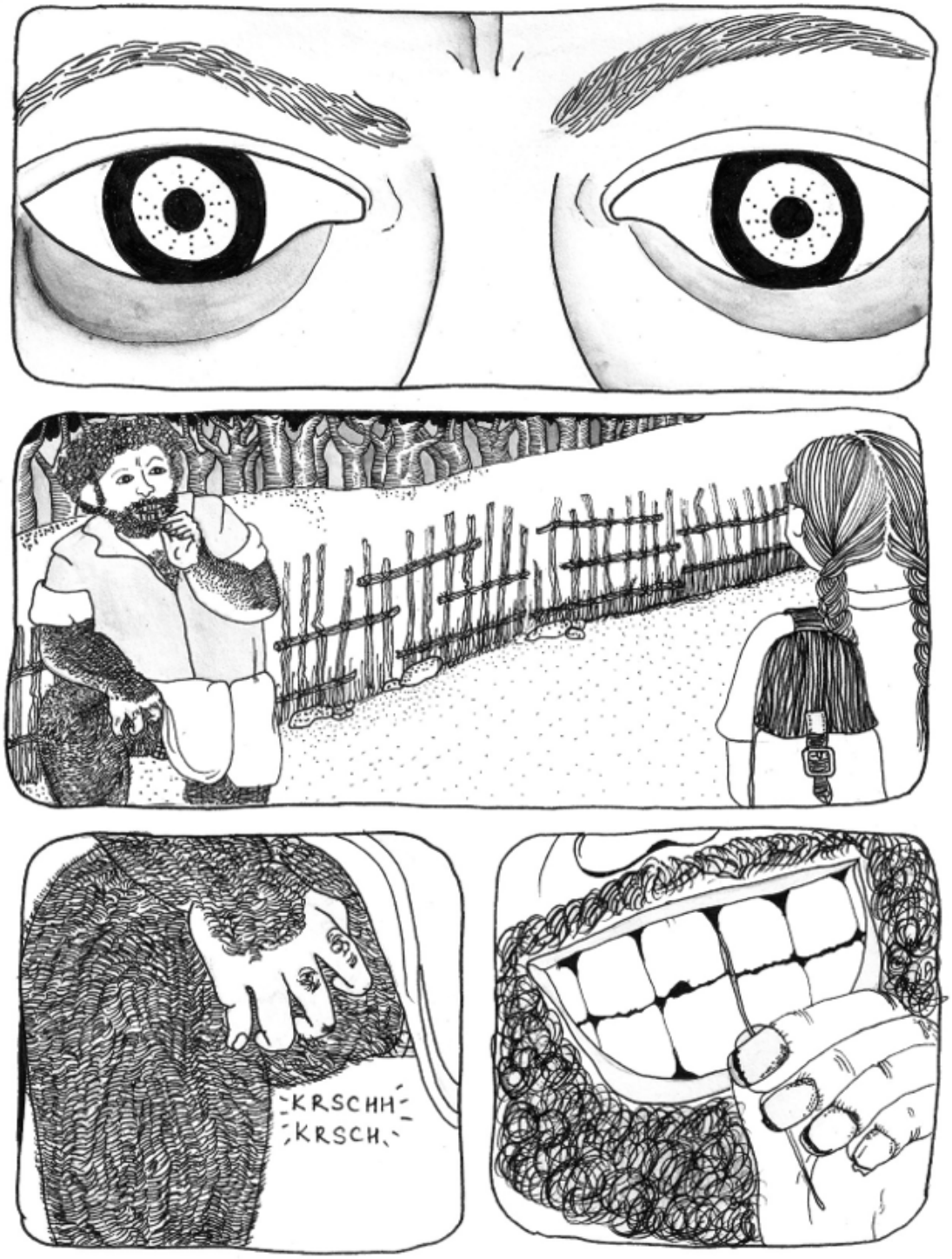


Figure 1. 'Watching' from *Drawing the Line*. Neelima P. Aryan. 2015. (c) Neelima P. Aryan.

The workshop was a week to 10 days of a seamless ideas exchange between fourteen women and the three facilitators. My story, 'the prey' is set in a village in Kerala and hence that had to come through in the landscape, the setting and the characters. I began drawing the story by visualising the antagonists—the man and the bird. Once I got the man right, to my satisfaction, the rest of the things automatically fell into place. These images are strongly reminiscent of my childhood. The frame from inside the kitchen, where the mother stands watching the girl, was one of the most satisfying compositions, in terms of the lighting and the setting. It is a typical kitchen in any of the older households in Kerala. Through conversations and shared feedback during the course of the

workshop, I realised that besides the punch line, it needed some bits of commentary. So, in the end 'the prey' became a graphic short story with text and image.

Working on 'the prey' also became an unexpected collaboration with my mother and her writing. It was her story, and I was giving it a face. Even though I can speak Malayalam fluently, I stumble while reading, and reading literature in Malayalam becomes a whole other feat. Her content is primarily feminist, but also, heavily the musings of a person who restarted with writing as a middle-aged woman trying to find herself a space to express, and explore the world of social media. Occasionally, she reads out to me a poem or two and explains the difficult bits.

Figure 2. 'What is this girl up to?' from *Drawing the Line*. Neelima P. Aryan. 2015. (c) Neelima P. Aryan.

This story, particularly, also uses a certain dialect and language tone that would have gotten lost completely had it been translated into English. However, through a visual translation I could at least attempt to maintain the essence of it in the landscape and setting.

There are many ways in which ideas of 'womanhood' in contemporary India are expressed these days, examples include: autobiography, urban wall art, street demonstrations, creative non-fiction, public lectures, and Instagram posts. What to your mind does the mode of graphic narrative and thus the interface of text and image afford the expression(s) of female and feminist experience specifically? Is there something unique to the mode that allows a certain kind of expression?

There are indeed many ways in which womanhood is represented in Indian culture, and in most of these ways women are somehow still expected to conform. She is a working woman, but she of course is also a mother. There are quicker and simpler ways for her to cook up a meal for her family, but it is her responsibility to make sure even her adult husband is fed healthily, lest he fails to take care of himself. She has to be fair-skinned, energetic, and conscious of her figure, fix the pimples on her face, her heels smooth, and her skin flawless, with a midriff that urges you to reach out and touch. And this is just in advertising. What cinema and tele-serials represent is a whole other universe of submissive misunderstood angels, or conniving go-getter vamps.

I have strangely always drawn women, even as a child. In retrospect, one can maybe joke about my queerness and my affinity to drawing *only* women. But I never saw women like me. I have always been fat, and people with bodies like me were only used for comic relief, or to represent disgust, or to show how not to be. Even in graphic novels, fat is a representation of a stooge, or someone evil and greedy. Because of what we see, and are used to seeing, we are also used to imagining within those boundaries. When we read a book, most often we are told, in much excruciating detail, what the female protagonist looks like. Sometimes even the male protagonist is not spared. Even if we weren't given these details, we would imagine them to look quite like any of the people we see in the media, those whom we (are supposed to) like and desire. The handsome hero morphs into a lithe Ranveer Singh, or a hunky Gerard Butler. We have our own movie version of the book often running in our imagination. While, graphic stories do not let your imagination wander quite as far because it tethers it to the way the characters are illustrated—I love the fact that I can draw them real if I please! My protagonist can be me, a large queer woman. I can have average and normal looking people in my stories; they need not conform to any norms of beauty or body acceptance or gender. I can push those boundaries and force the reader to engage with a body that might be similar to theirs or one that makes them uncomfortable, one that does not appeal to them. It has been my constant aim to construct and deconstruct representation. I have had women come to me after seeing my graphic erotic story 'Shadow Boxer' (in Meenu and Shruti, 2012) overwhelmed to see a representation of a desirable sexual body as being just like theirs.

Relatedly, might Indian graphic narratives, such as your own work, express culturally and socially-situated ideas of 'Indian' feminism? You identify as a queer feminist woman and I wonder how your work might (or might not) allow for expressions of this particular identity within the context of post-millennial urban India?

I grew up outside of Kerala. The landscapes I saw there during my vacations while growing up were very different from the more familiar cityscapes. In 'the prey', the setting of the village, of the house, the clothes, the creepy antagonist, those are all visuals one will find in a village or small town in Kerala. The first ever comic I made was about shaving my head in the context of my struggles with my sexuality, but also an assertion of hair as identity, and how an act like a shorn head can also have a religious interpretation. My stories are situated in my identities of being 'Indian and woman', 'Indian and queer', and 'Indian and feminist'; it is a conscious act of expressing my politics.

There are many women artists online for instance, who are using the graphic narrative to talk about not just feminism and queer issues, but also about the larger politics of the country. After all, the rise of a right wing in India is a feminist issue, and this is the right time for such voices to flourish. Artists such as Krutika Susarla and Priya Dali create a lot of online and offline content that are both graphic and political. While personally for me, it feels difficult to find a voice in this social media boom, where content becomes outdated within seconds, and there needs to be a constant content creation for visibility, I also recognise that it is also a great time for graphic content. It holds an important place in putting across information in the simplest and fastest way possible.

Finally, could you say something about the changing scene for 'queer feminists' in India today - how might your own coming-out journey have been shaped by the cultural and societal shifts India has undergone post millennium? Does the future look positive for 'queer feminists'? And how might your own creative work continue to explore and express such identities?

When I came out in 2003-04, we still hadn't moved onto smart phones. Internet access is what you had at the cyber cafés. I know of people my age, or those who came out at that point, who never searched online about being gay. I chanced upon a film festival that led me to a helpline for lesbian bisexual women, and further introduced me to a feminist and a queer feminist space. I found my little bubble. About 10 years later, Pride in many cities was already four-five years old, 19-year-olds had seen newspaper articles and sought others like them and had come out. And now, the internet is a great space to find support to come out in. Support groups have social media presence and there are more helplines than back in 2003. Can you imagine what it might have been like for someone who came out about 10 years before me? But the truth is that the support group I became a part of turned 20 years old in 2015.

In October 1998, Streesangam, an autonomous voluntary collective of lesbians, started a zine called *Scripts*. In 1999, I spent a whole summer vacation reading and feverishly taking notes from Ashwini Sukthankar's *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian writing from India* (1999). (It took me another four years to discover Streesangam and come out of the closet.) Gaysi started as an online blog space for queer women to express themselves, and have been visibly creating a lot of offline buzz in the past couple of years through their zines and zine bazaars. They completed 10 years of publishing in 2018. On October 6, 2018 marking one month of the striking down of the homophobic section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, *Scripts* magazine, 20 years since its inception, went online.

There cannot be a better time for being a comic creator, in the sense of the exposure one's work can receive. However, it is definitely a really hard battle, considering a lot of it thrives on likes and shares. While the future does look immensely positive to me, I am not sure how much a part of the rat race I see myself. There is growth for me in seeing the kind of work that exists out there, and I mean in the Instagram 'verse for instance. Nevertheless, I worry that I may not be cut out to keep up with the pace of content sharing.

I will hence decide to focus on creating work just for my creative satisfaction and expression, send it out into the 'verse'. What comes of it one shall wait and watch.

Thank you.

REFERENCES

Bertonasco, L., Bartscht, L. and Kuriyan, P. (eds). (2015). *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Bechdel, A. (1983-2008). *Dykes to Watch out for*. New York: Firebrand.

Butalia, P. (2013). *Dark Room: Child sexuality in India*. London: HarperCollins.

Meenu and Shruti (eds). (2012). *Close, Too Close*. New Delhi: Westland Tranquebar Publishers.

Sukthankar, A. (ed.). (1999). *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian writing from India*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Citation: Varughese, E. D. (2020). The Craft of (Queer) Feminism: A Conversation with Neelima P. Aryan, Indian Illustrator and Queer Feminist Woman. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 14. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7918


http://www.lectitopublishing.nl


https://www.facebook.com/LectitoJournals/


https://twitter.com/lectitojournals


https://www.linkedin.com/in/lectito-journals-9a675010b/

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 15
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

From *Shakuntala* to *Sanitary Panels*: Women in Indian Graphic Narratives

Debanjana Nayek [1*]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

The journey of graphic narratives in India began in 1967 with the publication of the first issue of *Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)* comics, with protagonists based on the mythological tales. These comic books glorified Indian heritage, making every mythological and historical story of India *amar* or immortal and claimed to present a complete picture of the culture and essence of India. However, these comics reinforced gender prejudice and conventional gender roles of a society where women are only portrayed as demure beings in a patriarchal framework. Indian graphic narratives have come a long way from solely idealising Hindu/Vedic past to the contemporary digital comics where individual stories are shared. This article aims to look at the history of graphic narration in India from a feminist perspective. It will analyse the gradual change in the representation of women from the printed comic books of 1960s to contemporary printed graphic novels as well as webcomics. While *Amar Chitra Katha (ACK)* comics overtly sexualised and fantasised Vedic women, contemporary Indian graphic novels have made a space for the everyday woman and her struggles. This space expanded and when it branched out into the digital realm any woman could voice her own problems by using images and text. This article will attempt to understand how this change has occurred in the portrayal of women in Indian graphic narratives and how the 'gaze' has also undergone an evolution. It will look at the question of authorship, the different forms of media involved as well as the socio-cultural milieu that propelled the transformation in female characters over the years.

Keywords: Indian graphic narratives, female body, gaze, sexuality, representation

> In the graphic novel world, girls are the new superheroes. They are action stars, the focal point, the figures whose backstories, ideas, inclinations, struggles, and triumphs are presented with detailed attention in autobiography and fiction alike.
>
> Chute (2017: 275)

INTRODUCTION

In 1967 when a young Indian journalist was watching a children's quiz show on television he observed that the participants could easily answer questions from diverse topics, like global politics, world wars and even from Greek mythology but he was dismayed to discover that these children were unable to answer who was the mother of Lord Ram, an extremely rudimentary question from the Sanskrit epic, *Ramayana*. The journalist realised that Indians were not well-acquainted with their own epics and did not feel interested in knowing about the mythology and the folk tales of the nation. He understood that even twenty years after independence, Indians were reading only the stories of Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Bobbsey Twins, Tintin, Richie Rich and Enid Blyton. Both leisure reading and the education system of the country had significant impacts of colonialism on them. With an objective to change this scenario and to offer India's readers intriguing retellings of the Sanskrit epics and regional folk tales, the journalist started creating comics based on historical and mythological figures. The journalist was Anant Pai, also known as 'the Father of Indian comic books' and in the year 1969 he had published the first-ever comic book of India, titled *Krishna*. This was followed by a series of four hundred and thirty six comics, until 1991. Barring a few issues, most of these comics were based on Hindu gods, goddesses, legendary figures and freedom fighters of India. The name of the comic series is *Amar Chitra Katha* (*ACK*), which means 'immortal picture stories' in Hindi.

[1] *Assistant professor of English at Presidency University*, Kolkata, INDIA
***Corresponding Author:** nayekdebanjana@gmail.com

From its very inception, the aim of Indian comics was to educate the children and the youth of the country about their rich heritage and their traditional narratives. Although this ensured liberation from the strong influence of colonialism on the nation's graphic narratives, it reinforced some of the age-old problems of Indian society. One of them is the issue of representation of the marginalised, particularly the portrayal of women. This article aims to study and briefly analyse the history of graphic narration in India from a feminist perspective. It will look at the eventual transformation in the representation of women from the printed comic books of 1960s to the contemporary printed graphic novels as well as the webcomics of the digital era. *ACK* comics have highly sexualised and fantasised the Vedic female characters, while the modern Indian graphic novels and webcomics have made a space to bring forward the repressed voice of the ordinary woman. In this article, I will use the 'gaze' theories of Michael Foucault, Hannah Arendt (Allen, 2002; Dolan, 2005) and Laura Mulvey as well as the feminist theories of Showalter, Haraway and Cocca to understand how the female characters have traversed from a marginal space in the graphic stories to the centre of focus, from a generalised view of the 'good' woman with an 'ideal' female body to a more individualistic depiction of the modern woman.

THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN *AMAR CHITRA KATHA*

In order to analyse the gradual change in the representation of women in the world of Indian graphic narratives, it is imperative to take into account the women protagonists of *ACK*. The series has published many comic books on the lives of historical and mythological female characters, like *Rani of Jhansi* (no. 51, 1974), *Savitri* (no. 14, 1970), *Draupadi* (no. 72, 1974), *Padmini* (no. 44, 1973), Sita in *Rama* (no. 15, 1970), *Urvashi* (no. 59, 1974) and others. Although there seems to be a space for women in the comic series, a closer analysis of the narratives will reveal that there is a rigid categorisation of the female characters. *Padmini* is the mythical story of a queen who committed *jauhar*, a Rajput custom of self-immolation, along with many other women and children to protect themselves from a foreign invader. Sita is based on the female protagonist of the Sanskrit epic, *Ramayana*, who had to undergo an ordeal of purification through fire to prove her chastity to her husband. The plotline of *Savitri* has also been adopted from another epic, *Mahabharata*, to depict the strong will of a wife to save her husband from the god of death, Yama. In her efforts to bring back her husband from death, Savitri proposed to give up her life as well. Savitri, Padmini and Sita are protagonists who are eulogised for their sole virtue of sacrificing their lives and their desires for their husbands. The only identity of these women is in being a 'good wife' and upholding the traditional role of women in a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, the *Rani of Jhansi* brings forward the story of a historical queen who had fought bravely for the freedom of her country. The narrative of this comic book presents a unidimensional perspective towards the life of a female warrior. It is important to note that the Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai, was an actual historical figure and one of the most prominent freedom fighters of the nation against the British rule. However, a restricted focus on only her patriotism, on her political decisions or her unflawed nature makes her more akin to a mythical character than any real woman. Moreover, in various post-colonial narratives on the queen of Jhansi, the warrior has been delineated as an incarnation of goddess Durga. *ACK* has imparted a visual rendition of that very idea and has further alienated the story of Lakshmi Bai's struggle from the problems of ordinary Indian women of that age. In her book, *The Rani Of Jhansi: Gender, history and fable in India*, Harleen Singh probes deeply into the politics of this 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' (2014: 141).The queen of Jhansi, therefore, becomes only a symbol of aggressive nationalism and patriotism.

The female protagonists of *ACK* comic books are carefully shaped to reinforce the long-established orthodox image of Indian femininity. These graphic narratives have repeatedly used the trope of the 'good' wife or the 'good' mother to depict a woman who is passive and conforms to the paradigm of an upper-caste patriarchal society. Exploring this aspect of the male-dominated Brahminical society, Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar state:

> Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well-defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifehood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women: by implication, these roles complete in themselves and women need not pursue any specialized discipline of knowledge, art or *profession*. The good woman is sweet, gentle, loving, caring and ever sacrificing (2001: 1).

The virtuous Hindu woman, who appeared in the Sanskrit epics, was further described and developed through early Indian literary texts, folk tales as well as children's literature, reflecting a deeply entrenched notion about the 'ideal' woman in the society. Moreover, when this 'good' wife began to be illustrated in comic books, her body became the focal point of the narratives. This is particularly evident in case of the *ACK* comic book on Draupadi (no. 72, 1974). This protagonist of *Mahabharata* is one of the most iconic female characters of Hindu mythology as

she became the dutiful wife of all the five Pandava princes to keep them united and also followed them in their exile. Nonetheless, Draupadi is not the demure, passive sufferer of patriarchy, like Sita, Savitri or other glorified mythical women. She questions the imperial court and the king when she is disrobed and treated like an object of desire in the court by the Kauravas. Throughout the epic, Draupadi's narrative has created many spaces to raise the issues of gender inequality and objectification of women. Although she had submissively accepted her polyandrous fate, she later proved to be a rebellious and fiery character in voicing out her opinions against the patriarchal symbolic order as well as in the seeking of revenge against her abusers. In the grand storyline of *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is a woman who manifested the possibility to subvert gender power structures of the society and this aspect was further developed in later Indian literary texts as well.

When *ACK* published a comic book on Draupadi, it seemed to depict the story from the perspective of the protagonist. The book even introduced her with a promise to liberate the character from the shackles of a patriarchal reading:

> Her birth, sought by King Drupada presaged a purpose. Her steely will, which often gleams through her hapless married life, was shaped by the power and plenty that she knew as the beloved daughter of the wealthy king of Panchala. But for this her tale would have been as passive as that of any other woman of that era, which was less than kind to women. Even as she lived as a woman typical of her times, her fiery personality lent a glow to everything that she did. (Chandrakant et al.,1986: Inside cover)

However, the description swiftly shifted its emphasis from her 'fiery personality' to her dutifulness as a wife. The introduction, on the one hand, acknowledges her difference from other Hindu mythological heroines and, on the other, it also associates that difference merely with her loyalty and her support towards her husbands. It pronounces:

> Though won by Arjuna she had to be the wife to all the five Pandavas. Her success in this task was notable enough to bring Satyabhama seeking counsel on married happiness.
>
> (...)A dutiful wife, she followed her husbands in exile and kept house for them in the forest. An intelligent woman, she plied Yudhishthira with questions on morality.
>
> When Subhadra came in, as Arjuna's wife, Draupadi was jealous. But she controlled it under her regal bearing. (*sic*) (Chandrakant et al., 1986: Inside cover)

Through this account of a strong female protagonist, the comic book actually reverts to a conventional thought process where the qualities of a woman are evaluated on the basis of her role in her husband's life. In spite of being married to Arjuna's brothers against her will, it is her 'performance' and devotion as a wife towards all the Pandavas that is accentuated and extolled. The comic book, through its textual narrative, has espoused Draupadi's lack of agency as her 'control' over her desire and anger. Her pursuit of revenge against her assailants have also been termed as unquenched 'wrath, thus making her 'the total woman; complex and yet feminine' (Chandrakant et al., 1986: Inside cover).

While the textual account of Draupadi's narrative revolves more around her attributes as a wife, the illustrations are a stark objectification of the female body. The protagonist is presented as an object of male desire from the cover page of the book itself. She is shown to be dragged by her hair by Duhshasana to the court where the other Kauravas are looking at her lecherously. It is ironic that *ACK* has singled out the scene where Draupadi was physically abused and disrobed by a group of men to be the representative image of the entire comic book on a strong female character who is known for her 'fiery personality'(Chandrakant et al., 1986: Inside cover).The posture of the woman, her folded hands, her curvaceous waist, the grin on the faces of the men, their glaring eyes, the violence and brutality of the whole scene as well as the line 'The Queen of the Pandavas' at the bottom of the cover, reflect the dominance of patriarchal force on Draupadi. Moreover, the cover page foreshadows the plotline which is predominantly concerned with the unwanted birth of a dark skinned and beautiful woman, her marriage to the five Pandavas, her humiliations at the hands of several men, leading to the Kurukshetra war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The narrative of *Draupadi* pays a great degree of attention to how she seeks help from her male relatives, such as Krishna and Bheema, every time she is in danger and, at the same time, how these men also save her from sexual assaults and later avenge the dishonour she had to experience. It gives a marginal space to her questioning of the patriarchs of the Kuru dynasty, the Kauravas and even her husbands on morality, on Yudhishthira's right to stake her and on the absence of justice in the imperial court.

Draupadi is not the only *ACK* comic book where the female protagonist has been illustrated in a sexualised manner. The images of Urvashi, Shakuntala, Padmini and all other female characters have been portrayed in a similar style. In this context, the representation of women in Indian comic books who are identified as extraordinary and divinely have a significant resemblance with the superheroines of American comic books, like

Wonder Woman, She-Hulk and Power Girl. Carolyn Cocca observes in her analysis of Marvel and DC comics that 'the males are generally drawn facing front with a focus on their musculature, while the scantily clad e females were often drawn from the back or from the side, large-breasted and small-waisted, long-haired and long-legged', creating a 'broke back' pose' where the woman is so much abnormally twisted that in reality it could have been broken or distorted(2016: 12).The 'ideal' Indian woman, too, has unnatural physical proportions and stances only to highlight her curves and her bare waist. They are mostly light skinned and belong to the upper castes of the society, a Brahmin or with a royal lineage. This kind of a graphic impression of the deified Indian woman not only objectifies and sexualises the female body but also disregards the existence of women from lower castes, working class and from all other marginalised communities. The very definition of the 'ideal' confines the identity of the Indian woman to one stringent elitist archetype. On the one hand, the propagandist subject matters of *ACK* indoctrinated children to conform to the conventional gender roles of the society and, on the other, the illustrations made the female body marked with sexism as well as casteism.

These comics posited the female body at the centre of a voyeuristic point of view where the general audience is assumed to be predominantly male. In his work, *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1920), Freud identifies that there is a pleasure in looking, also known as scopophilia and he argues that it is integral to sexuality. He further associates scopophilia with aggression and sexual perversion with a desire to inflict pain. In Indian comics the female body has been subjected to this kind of a sexualised looking where the character is being treated as a fetishised object and the violence that is perpetrated on her becomes more of a source of pleasurable reading than provoking condemnation. The plotline, therefore, is constantly preoccupied with the narrative of violence on the female protagonists and the subsequent redemption or revenge. For these female figures, the violence which they endured has been transformed into a moment of paramount significance in their narratives. The episodes of disrobing or sexual violation of female characters, in *Draupadi* or *Ahalya*[1], become defining points of their lives. Moreover, physical violence is not the only form in which the female body gets oppressed in these comics. There is also an equally strong controlling gaze to which the body is subjugated and this gaze is often shared by both the male characters of the comics as well as the readers. In her groundbreaking essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey explores this objectifying gaze and connects it with Freud's theory of scopophilia. She expounds:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (1999:837)

ACK situates the female body in the panel in a way that even when it is not under the threat of any physical violation, the body is still subjugated to sadism, curiosity and dominance through a voyeuristic gaze. The 'active/male gaze' created by *ACK* is quite analogous to what Mulvey recognises in cinema as they operate in similar methods. She points out that 'the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen', facilitated by 'camera movements' (1999: 838-839). In the graphic narratives of Draupadi, Urvashi, Shakuntala and other women from Hindu epics, the illustrations have focused majorly on their hypersexualised bodies and 'broke-back pose' in every situation, thus initiating the 'male gaze' which is further strengthened by the voyeuristic gaze of the male characters present in the frame and subsequently, by the readers of the comics.

This visual sexualisation of the female protagonist is counteracted by a textual narrative which entirely negates her sexuality. It is because these women have been epic figures of the highly-venerated Hindu religious texts, they are portrayed as erotic 'objects' for men but they themselves never express their sexual desires. The protagonists who could resist a sexual assault with the help of other men or through self-sacrifice, like Draupadi or Padmini, are extolled as resolute, brave and 'chaste' women. On the contrary, the ones who became victims of abuse are subjected to retribution for being fallen women, similar to Ahalya's narrative. In American comic books, Mike Madrid points out that:

> Sex had always been the 'elephant in the room' for comic books. The medium created a world of powerful, muscled Adams and perfect, luscious Eves. They cavort across heaven and earth dressed in

[1] *Ahalya* is another comic book by *ACK*, the graphic adaptation of a story in *Ramayana*. It narrates how the wife of an ascetic is tricked and sexually exploited by a god but when the husband becomes aware of it, he punishes both the woman and the god. Although there are many variations of this story, in every account the rape victim is cursed for being sexually involved with another man.

> skintight costumes that show off almost every detail of their idealized bodies. They are the apexes of humanity, the manifestation of sexual desire. Yet we are to believe that in their personal lives they are relatively nonsexual. (2016: 249)

This puritanical aspect of comics can be evidently discerned in *ACK* and the earlier forms of Indian graphic narratives as well. Owing to the fact that these books were primarily a visual rendition of the epics, the fables and the folklores of the country, the narratives revolved around characters who are divine and free from all kinds of earthly desires. Hence, these plotlines completely effaced the topic of sexuality in an attempt to establish the conventional Hindu moral code, particularly in the minds of school children. This also meant that female characters, like Draupadi, Padmini or Ahalya, would never fight against their sexual assaulters because the crime is not dominantly addressed. The violence has been documented only as a mode to evaluate the chastity of the woman.

These graphic narratives also reveal the 'sexual double standard of comic books' through their characterisations of the female protagonists (Madrid 2016: 250) where the woman is dressed in a highly sexualised form of ethnic attire but the story censors all forms of physical relationships and carnal desires. One such *ACK* comic book is *Shakuntala* which recounts how a king fell in love with a woman when he went for hunting in the forest and married her secretly according to the *gandharva* tradition. The king, Dushyanta, later returned to his kingdom but he had completely forgotten his wife due to a curse. In the meantime, Shakuntala conceived the child of the king and after being abandoned by him, she raised the child under the care of a sage. Whilst this story from *Mahabharata* ends with a reconciliation between Dushyanta and Shakuntala, there are several problems in its textual as well as visual portrayal. Although the love between the king and Shakuntala has been explicitly stated, the news of her pregnancy was divulged almost as a divine intervention. A 'heavenly voice' declared to her guardian, 'O sage, Rejoice! Shakuntala is married to a man worthy of her. She will soon have a son who will be a great emperor'(Doongaji et al., 2009: 12).This information is conveyed a significant time after the king leaves Shakuntala in the forest and whenever there is a reference to her pregnancy it is always far removed from the role of Dushyanta as a father. In the court of the king, Shakuntala is introduced to him as 'your wife, who will soon be a mother' (Doongaji et al., 2009: 17). It is only after the birth of the child, Bharat, that he is associated with Dushyanta as his son. Shakuntala's pregnancy is deliberately dissociated from the father and, in the same manner, any reference to physical relationship has been obliterated. This textual narrative has been further corroborated by the visual rendition of the female protagonist. The comic book has consistently illustrated the female protagonist as a curvaceous woman with an unrealistically thin waist, wearing skimpy clothes. The period of her pregnancy has not been graphically documented. The reader only learns about the news from other sources but never witnesses it as throughout the comics Shakuntala's body remains unmarked by her pregnancy and later, her motherhood. The notion of idealised bodies does not have any space for pregnant women and the imperfections of their physical self, their plumpness or their stretch marks. These female characters might look hypersexualised and nubile but the readers are coaxed to believe that they are not sexual women.

ACK has not only intensified the notion of an 'ideal' woman through their graphic stories but also presented the 'other', those women who did not belong to the traditional paradigm of womanhood. Shurpanakha, one such woman from *Ramayana*, is drawn as dark, obese and huge. She is mutilated by Lakshmana only because she had expressed her desire for his brother, Rama. It is almost, as if, this sexual assertiveness has granted the liberty to a man to maim the face of the woman or to portray her as a demonic figure. The female sexual desire is stigmatised and 'othered'. It was essential to get rid of such stereotypical graphic depiction of female characters in order to give rise to Indian comics' 'new woman'.

THE CHANGE IN THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

The Indian comic book became synonymous with the *ACK* series from the 1960s till the early twenty-first century. The idealisation of a certain type of body, the glorification of the upper caste men and women as well as the stigmatisation of sexuality was the primary focus of attention. The female characters of the comic books were allowed to have only a marginal and powerless position in the narrative. The foremost reason behind such a treatment of these characters is that they were depicted by male creators, largely Brahminical Hindus. Since the plotlines of the comic books pivoted completely on the traditional stories, fables and folklores of a male-dominated society, the narratives are simply reflections of how the Brahminical society viewed women. The epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have also been originally written by male authors who had confined women into categories of 'good' and 'bad' on the basis of their performances as a wife. In addition to all these, the comic book industry of India was initiated and dominated for years by male authors, illustrators, producers and even consumers. Therefore, when a comic book on Draupadi was designed to be the story of a powerful feminist, it failed miserably and became only a farcical account of women empowerment.

In the subsequent literary tradition of India, however, there have been many retellings of Draupadi's narrative from a feminist perspective and it is interesting to note that most of these works are by women writers, including Mahasweta Devi, Amreeta Syam and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The comic industry of India has witnessed a similar change in the representation of female characters from the early twenty first century, initially in the printed graphic novels and later in the comics of the digital sphere. The works of the early graphic novelists of the country, Orijit Sen and Sarnath Banerjee, have created a substantial space for females in their plotlines. Sen's novel, *River of Stories* (1994), is the very first graphic novel of India and it brings to the forefront the suppressed voices and collective resistance put up by a tribal community against the government. In this semi-journalistic work, the graphic novelist has recorded the accounts of both the subaltern men and women of the area. Prateek Thomas is another novelist whose graphic story, *Hush* (2010), has directly addressed the grave social issue of child sexual abuse where a schoolgirl is assaulted by her own father. With the help of a gloomy background and wordless visual rendition, Thomas depicts the suppression, pain, fear and trauma of Maya, the abused girl. Graphic novels of modern India dared to transcend beyond the stories of gods and goddesses and speak about the harsh realities of the society where women get sexually assaulted, oppressed and silenced on a regular basis.

BEYOND THE 'MALE GAZE': PORTRAYING UN-EPIC WOMEN

In her study of *Shakuntala* (2010), Nandini Chandra has analysed how the *ACK* comic books have gradually created female role models for its readers, particularly for young girls. These figures have been greatly derived from mythological or traditional narratives, giving rise to an archetypical heroine who is nothing more than 'a domestic goddess after her token autonomy has been established in a token way' (Chandra, 2010). She concludes that,

> What goes in the name of creating a canon of strong independent Hindu women is not strong independent Hindu women, but strength as membership to the dominant group or class. It is Shakuntala's high Vedic lineage which is remarkable and the reason for her iconization. (2010: n.p.)

Hence, it was utterly necessary for the new age Indian comic industry of the early twenty first century to recreate female models for the modern woman who aspires to be much more than to merely adhere to a Vedic lineage.

Ram Devineni, Lina Srivastava, and Dan Goldman created a comic book in 2014, *Priya's Shakti*, which also involves deities and superpowers but only to draw attention to the growing instances of gang rapes of women, specifically the Delhi rape case of 2012, and to give the survivors the courage to fight against their perpetrators. The protagonist of the comics is a brown-skinned young woman from a village who is deprived of her education. She becomes a victim of repeated sexual violence since childhood and later she is raped by a group of men (2014: 8-10). The story revolves around her resistance and her stand for women's rights and equality where she exudes tremendous fortitude and an undaunted approach. In her struggle for justice, she is helped by goddess Parvati and also by a tiger, on which she returns back to her village after being victorious. Ram Devineni hails Priya as 'a new hero for a modern India' (Flood, 2014) and because she is illustrated as sitting on a tiger, she can be equated with the image of goddess Durga.

Priya's Shakti paves the path for an avant-garde feminist hero in several ways. It breaks the long-established notion of the idealised and chaste female body who is never supposed to be subjugated to any sexual advances of potential rapists owing to her divine purity. Her only means of resisting violence are self-immolation, similar to Padmini, or seeking help from any man, like Draupadi. Priya, on the other hand, fights her own battle and, unlike Ahlaya, her rape is not looked upon as her fault. Furthermore, this comic book is associated with an extensive project of featuring the real stories of sexual abuse and rape survivors through augmented reality and an exhibition. It brings to the centre the animated faces of rape survivors, constructs a new kind of female superhero with the superpower of inner strength and in this process, and it helps to shatter the multifarious stigmas around a raped female body. The project's next comic book was published in 2016, named *Priya's Mirror*, and this time the heroes of the narrative are a number of acid attack survivors who join hands with Priya to fight against Ahankar, translated as 'arrogance' (Vohra et al., 2016). The comic book refers to some real acid attack survivors, including Laxmi, Sonia and Monica, and it urges women who had to go through this immense pain to look beyond their physical scars and to understand that their identity is not restricted to their appearance.

Now, the question is what has brought in this radical change in female representation in Indian comic books? The answer to this query lies in the sphere of production and the culture of reading as well as writing of these graphic narratives. This transformation has been brought in along with an expanding number of women writers and illustrators as well as an increase in female readership. For instance, the project of *Priya's Shakti* has a significant participation of women in the relations of production, in the writing, production, planning of the comic books as well as in advisory positions. Many of these women are activists and scholars of gender-based violence, women's issues and social justice. *Priya's Mirror* has been written by a woman, Paromita Vohra, and in both the comic books,

the stories bring together different narratives of trauma from the documentations of real survivors. As the American author, Carolyn Gold Heilbrun observes:

> Biographies of women will offer unmet friends provided the subject of the biography has encountered struggles or dilemmas or crises of choice that the reader can learn from, as one would from a friend's (...) to read as women about women who have braved the terrors and the hopes we [women] share, at least to some degree (...) The secret of unmet friends is that they have called upon the same strengths to escape or endure the same kinds of situations. (1997: 153)

The upsurge of thoughtful comics and graphic novels in India from the late twentieth century ushered in a new kind of visual narratives, produced mainly by women. These works are much more akin to the real, ordinary women of the society and highlighted their everyday struggles. In relation to the previous era of graphic stories, predominantly brought out by *ACK*, and some also circulated as educative posters, these contemporary comics are shaping a 'literary subculture'. This is a new female literary tradition, resembling the one that Elaine Showalter has observed in the English novel where women have always been looked upon 'as 'sociological chameleons', taking on the class, lifestyle, and culture of their male relatives' (1977: 11), until the generation of the Brontës. With the advent of female graphic novelists and comic artists, like Amruta Patil, Priya Kuriyan, Rachita Taneja, Aarthi Parthasarathy, Kaveri Gopalakrishnan, Mounica Tata and many others, the space for female narratives in comics have also been opened up and the characters have a much more powerful presence than before. Showalter has emphasised on perceiving the 'female literary tradition' in its entirety, 'within the framework of a larger society' where these women are 'unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviours impinging on each individual' (1977: 11). There has to be an understanding of the 'collective identity' (Showalter, 1977: 12), leading to the formation of a subversive literary movement where numerous female comic artists and writers of different times as well as diverse platforms can merge into a stronger voice in the hegemonic culture of patriarchy.

Amruta Patil's first graphic novel, *Kari* (2008), Priya Kuriyan's collection of graphic stories, *Drawing the Line* (Kuriyan et al., 2015), the interactive comic project of *Priya's Shakti* (Devineni et al., 2014) as well as Rachita Taneja's webcomics, *Sanitary Panels* (2014-ongoing) and Mounica Tata's *Doodledrama* (2013-ongoing), can be considered as elements of this larger movement of self-expression and resistance against the patriarchal order of the society. All these works bring forth the everyday problems of an ordinary woman and raises the question of sexuality and gender. These female characters, illustrated by women, are removed from the objectifying position of a powerful 'male gaze' of the readers and, at the same, time, through their narrative journeys these characters evolve as sexual beings. Patil's *Kari* situates her female protagonist against the heteronormative structure of the society and documents the lived realities of a homosexual woman in an apparently modern and progressive metropolitan city. Kari and Ruth, two women in love with each other, attempt to suicide for not being able to find acceptance in the society but they are 'saved' (Patil, 2016: 8) and gradually they drift away from each other. The story unfolds how Kari is never actually 'saved' and she questions her existence time and again.

Through her own quest for identity, Kari's experiences, in turn, pose numerous challenges to the 'smog city' (Patil, 2016: 16). The gaze that has always been directed towards the female body in *ACK* comics, elevating the male-dominated society to a position of authority and power, is now zoomed in on the dominant culture itself. Kari observes the city very intently and meticulously as she traverses through its superficiality and its narrow definitions of femininity and relationships. In one of her acts of 'gazing' she is accompanied by her art director, Lazarus, and a camera. The panel shows them as looking at the metropolis and Kari reflects,

> Laz and I have been walking around the city at night, camera in hand, watching homeless people deep in slumber. They sleep on roadsides, under carts and benches, on platforms. Arms holding bodies, legs under legs, a defensive ball against the threats that whiz past at night. It is an appalling this, this watching. (Patil, 2016: 78)

It is almost the body image of the 'grim urban life' (Patil, 2016: 78) that the protagonist records and analyses.

In another instance Kari again employs the two Foucauldian instruments of power, observation and gaze, but this time she is looking at her naked body in a mirror. Interestingly, the reader cannot see any mirror in the illustration and in point of fact, she is directly facing the readers as she states,

> It's not that I have a bad relationship with the mirror. On the contrary, I think mirrors are splendid, shiny things that make great collectibles, whether whole or in smashed bits. Problem is, I just don't know what they are trying to tell me. These things can be troubling. The girls outside the door telling me to wear kohl, and here I am wondering why I amn't looking like Sean Penn today. [*sic*] (Patil, 2016: 60)

By exposing her uncovered body to the readers, Kari allows herself to be absolutely subjected to the examining gaze of the society. The short hair, dark eyes and vexed expression of the protagonist in this panel, along with a

black and white, gloomy sketch of her body is more akin to an image of anatomic parts than a female body on display for visual pleasure. Kari reveals the various ways in which the society wants to formulate an identity for her, by asking her to wear kohl or marry a man and negate her own existence as a homosexual woman where she has to face the question, '[a]re you, like a proper lesbian?' (Patil, 2016: 79).

Through her confrontation with the 'mirror'/readers she, in a way, unveils the disguised examining gaze of the society. This gaze aims to 'cure' and 'discipline' her in the manner Michael Foucault propounds in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*:

> The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. That is why, in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. At the heart of the procedures of discipline, it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected. (1977: 184-185)

Indian visual culture has persistently sculpted an 'ideal' female body through its paintings, graphic stories, advertisements and films. This body is fetishised and dehumanised in order to give pleasure to the male audience at large. It has constantly been put under strict examinations and disciplining. Owing to the excessive glorification of the bodies of Sita, Draupadi, Shakuntala and other mythical women by the dominant culture, it was crucial for the new age comic illustrators to depict the varied kinds of female bodies which exist in the world. The identities of these women transcend beyond their bodies and, hence, even though their bodies are subjected to the examining and differentiating gaze of the society, they do not lose their agency. In other words, Kari's unhesitant acknowledgement of her body and presenting it before her readers strengthens the 'collective identity' of Indian women and propels their 'movement' of self-assertion and expression further (Showalter, 1977: 14).

CLAIMING DIGITAL SPACE

In her 1984 essay, 'A cyborg manifesto', Donna Haraway had envisioned that technology and the Internet would introduce a utopian space for women which will be liberated from the gender power dynamics of the society. While many early cyberfeminists had championed this optimism regarding the digital sphere, in the later years Internet failed to become a 'post-gender' space. It is inflicted with multifarious issues of sexual violence, stalking and gender discriminations. However, for Indian female comic artists the cyberspace has laid bare dynamic possibilities to present their narratives. One of them is the webcomic format. Aarthi Parthasarathy, Kaveri Gopalakrishnan, Mounica Tata and Rachita Taneja are amongst the several women who have stepped into the world of comics through social media and their personal blogs. Although the female illustrators and writers of India had first appeared in the printed culture of comics, the number grew rapidly only in the digital medium. These artists foregrounded tabooed subjects and polemic topics of menstruation, politics, sexual harassment, marital rapes as well as those issues which never feature in mainstream culture.

Mounica Tata is one such webcomic illustrator who brings to light Indian society's obsession with fair-skinned women, the denial of marital rape and child sexual abuse and also to address the themes of social anxieties, trauma, depression and grief. Through a few short webcomic series, under the title *Doodledrama* (2013-ongoing), this comic artist has profoundly delved into the psychological traumas associated with childhood abuse, the anxiety of being popular in social media and the deep angst to conform to the 'perfect' female body image ('This is NOT love', n.d.; 'All about space', n.d.; 'our bodies and us', n.d.). Tata underscores those difficulties in a woman's life which are neither identified nor acknowledged in public. Another webcomic strip of the illustrator directly addresses the prevalent problem of marital rape in India with a brazen image of a crowd of phalluses and a terrified girl whose mouth is shut by a man's hand. The work boldly reveals the plight of several women who are subjected to rape and abuse in their own home. It confronts sexual assaulters, stating:

> You pushed, you shushed, you threatened, you groped. You raped her till she was bleeding and sore. Then you went in for some more (...) If she isn't safe in her own house then, There's no country for women! (Kulkarni, 2018: n.p)

Marital rape is a repressed reality in Indian society; it is an act which is completely disregarded and many a time justified as the 'duty' of a wife. Because marriage is looked upon as a sacrosanct institution, rape within the matrimonial bond is still a non-criminalized offense in the country.

Another prominent webcomic artist, Rachita Taneja, deals with similar socially forbidden topics and challenging socio-cultural issues. The name of her webcomic page, 'Sanitary Panels', along with the cover doodle of a sanitary

napkin and a blot of blood on it (2016: cover page), brings to the centre the unspoken truth of menstruation, sexuality and body politics. Taneja, in an interview, admits that since her work is a feminist comic she had intended to confer it a name 'that immediately breaks the taboo' and, at the same time, 'it gives the impression that the comic is going to be about the things people generally hesitate to talk about' (Aswini, 2019). The male-dominated mainstream media culture posits the extremely sexualised body of a woman at the centre of focus in various visual narratives but absolutely sanitises the realities of menstruation and female sexual desire. Taneja, Tata and other feminist comic artists of the digital space reclaim this centre of power by enhancing the visibility of the subdued and uncomfortable truths about a feminine existence. The social media sites which are often turned into a platform for cyber bulling and stalking by sexual predators, have been utilised as a scope to be 'visible'. The webcomics, doodles and cartoons of feminist illustrators are in a constant struggle to transform social media sites and the larger digital sphere, generally a Foucauldian 'space of surveillance' with a power to control and discipline, into an Arendtian 'space of appearance'. It is an ongoing resistance against the patriarchal, Brahminical society and an effort to establish an 'identity and sense of self' (Marquez, 2012: 19) for womanhood. This courage of going out in the public (Arendt, 1958: 36), beyond the limitations of the household as well as of the paradigm and taboo system of the society, empowers Indian women to a great extent.

CONCLUSION

From crudely objectifying female bodies to encouraging women to speak up, Indian graphic narratives have come a long way since their beginnings. They have not only made a space for female characters but also opened up the scope for female writers and illustrators. Despite *ACK* books being dominated by male writers and illustrators, the new epoch of graphic novel as well as the digital platform of social networking sites have empowered Indian comics to reach out to diverse readers. This inclusivity has acted as the catalyst to transform the 'gaze' of the readers, which is the society at large, towards women and also to other marginalised sections of the society. The modern Indian superheroines are not coy, sacrificial and dutiful wives of the Vedic age. They are constantly putting up a fight against the patrilineal narratives, the objectifying 'male gaze' as well as their real-life abusers by writing and illustrating about them. While the printed comic book industry has welcomed stories about the female sexuality and the female existential crises, the digital era has ushered in the issues of women's rights, stigmatisations, uncomfortable subjects and insurgence. There are an increasing number of women from the rural and the urban places who are participating in this culture of resistance and this movement of 'collective identity'. They are achieving gender subversion by creating comics or even by sharing them in social media or talking about them in both personal and public spaces. Indian comics, therefore, manifest a huge prospect where they can evolve into a platform for women to speak up and for raising issues regarding gender justice.

REFERENCES

Allen, A. (2002). Power, subjectivity, and agency: Between Arendt and Foucault. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 10(2), 131-149. https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550210121432

Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Aswini, K. P. (2019). Rachita Taneja fights social issues with her 'stick figures'. *Mathrubhumi*, 16 Feb. 2019, https://english.mathrubhumi.com/features/specials/rachita-taneja-fights-social-issues-with-her-stick-figures--1.3575139 (Accessed 11 January 2020).

Chandra, N. (2010). The *Amar Chitra Katha* Shakuntala: Pin-up or role model? *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, (4), n.p. https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3050

Chandrakant, K. and Mullick, P. (1986). *Draupadi*. Bombay: India Book House.

Chute, H. (2017). *Why Comics? From underground to everywhere*. New York: Harper.

Cocca, C. (2016). *Superwomen: Gender, power and representation*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Desai, N. and Thakkar, U. (2001). *Women in Indian Society*. Delhi: National Book Trust.

Devineni, R., Srivastava, L. and Goldman, D. (2014). *Priya's Shakti*. Mumbai: Rattapallax.

Dolan, F. M. (2005). The paradoxical liberty of bio-power: Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault on modern politics. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31(3), 369–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453705051710

Doongaji, H. D., Lavangia, A. K. and Shankar, K. P. (2009). *Shakuntala*. Mumbai: ACK Pvt Ltd.

Flood, A. (2014). Indian comic creates female superhero to tackle rape, *The Guardian*, 18 Dec. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/18/india-comic-superhero-tackle-rape-women-priyas-shakti-parvati (Accessed 10 January 2020).

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Freud, S. (1920). A.A. Brill (trans.), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. New York: Global Grey.

Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.
Heilbrun, C. G. (1997). *The Last Gift of Time: Life beyond sixty*. New York: The Dial Press.
Kulkarni, D. (2018). With humour and honesty, an Indian illustrator highlights young women's lives and concerns, *Scroll.in*, 29 April. Available at: https://scroll.in/magazine/875262/with-humour-and-honesty-an-indian-illustrator-highlights-young-womens-lives-and-concerns (Accessed 10 January 2020).
Kuriyan, P., Bertonasco, L., Bartscht, L. and Burton, N. M. (eds.) (2015). *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
Madrid, M. (2016). *The Supergirls: Feminism, fantasy, and the history of comic book heroines*. USA: Exterminating Angel Press.
Marquez, X. (2012). Spaces of appearance and spaces of surveillance. *Polity*, *44*(1), 6-31. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41426920
Mulvey, L. (1999). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In L. Braudy and M. Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory readings* (pp. 837-839). New York: Oxford University Press.
Patil, A. (2016). *Kari*. New Delhi: Harper Collins.
Sen, O. (1994). *River of Stories*. *Scribd*. Available at: https://www.scribd.com/doc/19966450/River-of-Stories-a-comic-by-Orijit-Sen (Accessed 4 January 2020).
Showalter, E. (1977). *A Literature of Their Own* (pp. 11-12). New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
Singh, H. (2014). *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, history and fable in India* (p. 141). Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
Taneja, R. (2014). *Sanitary Panels*. Available at: https://t.co/wIQqmbEQ1V?amp=1 (Accessed 2 January 2020).
Tata, M. (2013) *Doodledrama*. Available at: https://www.doodleodrama.com/work (Accessed 2 January 2020).
Thomas, P. and Eipe, R. (2010). *Hush*. Bangalore: Manta Ray.
Vohra, P, Devineni, R and Goldman, D. (2016). *Priya's Mirror*. Mumbai: Ratparallax.

Citation: Nayek, D. (2020). From *Shakuntala* to *Sanitary Panels*: Women in Indian Graphic Narratives. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 15. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7919

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 16
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

In Conversation with Priya Kuriyan: Reflecting on the Personal, Collective and 'Looking Back' in Indian Comics

Aanchal Vij [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

This interview embodies the dialogue between the personal and the political to the effect that it engages with the interaction between the individual and the collective in the space of (Indian) comics; it explores the trajectory of the comics space through the experiences of Priya Kuriyan and her work.

Keywords: comics, Feminist comics, Indian comics, Indian women's comics, nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

At the International Graphic Novels and Comics Conference (IGNCC) hosted by the University of Bournemouth in 2018, I first thought about the landscape of Indian comics while attending a panel on international comics and nostalgia. The theme of the conference was 'Retro!' and focused on the many relationships that visual narratives share with nostalgia. One of the papers on the panel discussed an Indian graphic novel *This Side, That Side* (Ghosh 2013), an anthology of visual narratives, edited by Vishwajyoti Ghosh that contains stories about the India-Pakistan partition[1] and personal stories of memory and longing triggered by the event. This particular conference made me reflect on my own identity as an Indian woman working on American comics in England. This sparked a personal and perhaps nostalgic meditation on the after effects of Partition on my family, on transgenerational memories, and opened up the world of Indian visual narratives that I had little knowledge about, thus far.

From the ideas born out of this self-reflection and conversations with my grandparents about Partition, and a preliminary study of Indian comics, I presented a paper on nostalgia and one of the stories from *This Side, That Side* at Comics Forum[2] in September 2018, in Leeds. This is where I met the Indian illustrator and comics artist Priya Kuriyan who was there as a part of a panel to talk about her work within the Indian comics landscape. Priya described herself primarily as a children's book illustrator who stumbled upon comics seven year ago. My interview with her was an engaging insight into her worldview of comics as a medium to express personal reflections but also a space that is symptomatic of its historical times. It was a pleasure to be in conversation with Priya who is an immensely warm person and an especially talented creator. In this narrative, I use my engagement with Priya as a lens to explore the intricacies of the Indian comics space, and also offer an insight into her work that embodies in itself questions surrounding gender, nostalgia, culture and the visual form. This article begins by contextualising Priya's work in the Indian comics space, and moves on to some of her specific works and collaborations to read them as the microcosm of the different movements and expressions developing in the industry as a whole. This paper, just like some of Priya's works, is a reflective practice: it lies at the intersection of my personal contemplation over nostalgia and comics, and a collective understanding of the potential of the comics space in India.

[1] The India-Pakistan partition was the division of British India into India and Pakistan - two independent countries - in 1947 (the same year India gained independence from British rule). The Partition was an outcome of years of cultivated animosity between the Hindus and Muslims in India by the colonial power.

[2] Comics Forum Progress: A Decade of Comics Scholarship, took place in Leeds Central Library on 20-21 September 2018.

[1] *PhD student in the School of English at the University of Sussex*, UK
***Corresponding Author:** Av253@sussex.ac.uk

INDIAN COMICS SPACE: AN OVERVIEW

Much like comics produced in the golden age of US comics that introduced the nation to superheroes such as Superman (DC Comics 1938), Batman (DC Comics 1939) and Captain America (Marvel Comics 1941), the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) (Pai 1967) were a series of English-language comics developed by Anant Pai in India in 1967 for educational purposes, and to promote various kinds of national myths in India. The American superheroes promoting their nation's heroism is similar to *ACK*'s stories that promised to offer children a 'route to their roots' (Khanduri, 2007: 174) and contained tales about Indian mythology, religion and culture.

In her work, Krishnamurti explores the role of these comics in supporting Hindu nationalist ideologies but, more relevantly, writes that 'for diasporic readers, the texts work at the nexus of popular nationalist ideology, childhood nostalgia, and the construction of concepts of home and identity' (Krishnamurti 2008: vi). I bring these ideas up here to point out the significance of comic books in relation to censorship; for just as comics are increasingly viewed as a space for dissent, opposition and a subculture, they are as much a space for political propaganda. It is therefore necessary to think about the landscape of Indian comics as equally politicised in relation to the feminist discourse. Do the Indian web comics that give voice to women and other feminist comics offer women a space of wish-fulfilment in a way that other forms do not? I find that this sense of wish-fulfilment operates close to a sense of longing, a nostalgia, for a past that is not oppressive after all. Priya's works such as *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean* (Murray 2015) engage with such ideas of a using comics to bend time, reimagining the past and the future to manifest a better world for women.

EARLY WORKS

Priya is a children's book writer, illustrator, comics maker, director of educational films and animator based in India. A graduate of the National Institute of Design and having published a range of works for children and adults both, it is difficult to put her in a category. Priya's illustration work in several children's books, anthologies, biographies and comics (some of which I will discuss in detail in this article), as she states, has strengthened her belief in the coalescence of image and text in literature. She believes that it makes such literature and data more absorbing and accessible. One of her first few projects was with Toxics Link, an environmental NGO based in Delhi that aims to bring information about environmental toxins into the public domain.[3] The collective worked in collaboration with Priya to disseminate data and safety information about hazardous substances in an accessible fashion to the Indian urban families and youth; it resulted in a part-fiction, part-factual graphic narrative illustrated by her. In our interview, she explained that the visuals that accompany the text in these narratives make the meaning clearer and more direct. She is reminded of the centuries-old cave paintings in India as a large part of our visual and cultural history. Her ideas on this juxtaposition of image and text related directly to some of the questions I am currently grappling with in my own research on expressing personal and collective longing that, especially, manifests itself in visual narratives. Priya said that 'as a child, everyone is an artist' (P. Kuriyan, personal communication, November 15, 2018) and that we have an early understanding of *visuals*; she believes that there is an urge in everyone to create non-verbally - an urge that we lose as we grow up in a world preoccupied with text rather than images.[4]

INDIRA: POLITICS IN COMICS

On her work in *Indira* (Roy 2018) - a graphic memoir of Indira Gandhi, India's first and only female prime minister - Priya spoke candidly about the difference in the reader's narrative or symbolic perceptions of a political figure gathered from, say, a history textbook or a (graphic) narrative form in contrast to using visual art forms. Indira Gandhi is known for her unprecedented centralisation of power in India as she led the war against Pakistan resulting in the formation of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan); she also declared a 21-month long emergency in the country to control civil unrest.[5] She was assassinated in 1984 by her own bodyguards and even today, generations later, people of India have vastly conflicting opinions about her. Priya's work on *Indira* (Roy 2018) helped her gain an insight into Indira Gandhi's personal life and contextualised her professional decisions. Historically, Indira Gandhi's role in Indian politics is perceived as problematic to say the least, but Priya points out how a deeper exploration of her personality, childhood and family life, humanised her more and offered another perspective. Priya, in her artwork depicts Gandhi's personality in a more endearing way, emphasising a more

[3] Toxics Link, Delhi, more information can be found here.

[4] All the quotes by Priya have been taken from my personal interview with her in November 2018 unless cited otherwise.

[5] More on this can be found here

holistic impression of Gandhi that went beyond her contentious political decisions. As pointed out by Bhattacharya in his article, *Indira*, (Bhattacharya 2018). Much like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000, 2004), this artwork primarily uses black and white sketches apart from using saturated colours (as in **Figure 1**) in some of its pivotal moments.

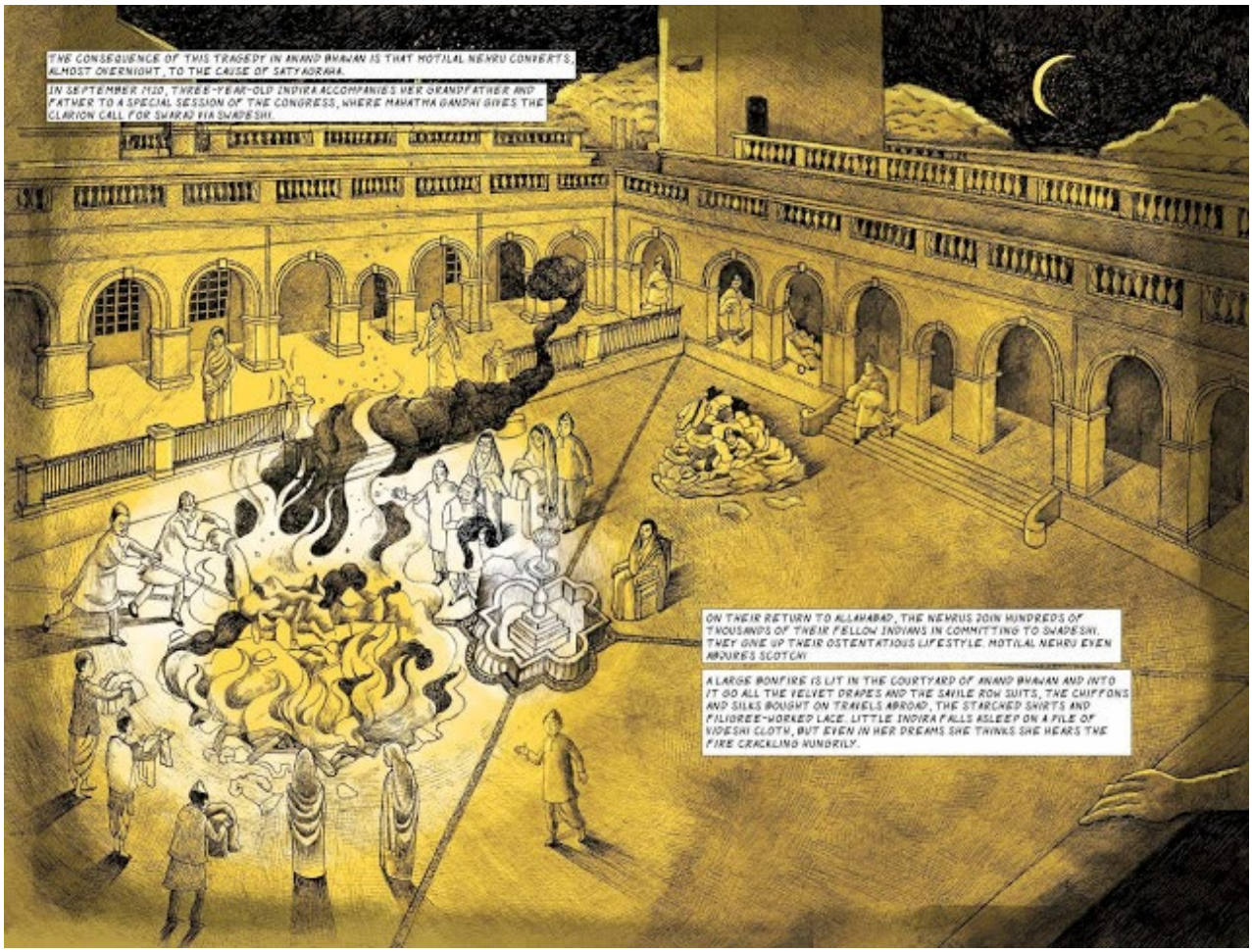


Figure 1. *Indira.* Devapriya Roy. 2018. © Priya Kuriyan.

THE INTERSECTION OF PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

At this point in our conversation, we spoke briefly about the nuanced relationship between the personal and the political that plays out in the visual space of the comic, and Priya mused that it is 'somehow easier to talk about personal politics through comics because of [the comics'] ability to convey emotions through both text and words' (P. Kuriyan, personal communication, November 15, 2018). She said that the medium is unique even in comparison to say, a film, because the editor of the film has the authority to manipulate the linear sequence of frames or shots as opposed to reading a comic or graphic novel where the readers can view all the panels simultaneously on the page or in a different order.[6] Coupled with a study of comics, Priya's articulation of the visual form offers us a way to think about how longing as an emotion can be read visually on a page when the panels and graphics disrupt the temporality of reading conventionally. Her work in one of the short stories titled 'The Old Fable' in *This Side, That Side* (Khair 2013) especially captures this tension between the personal and the political when nostalgia for a time prior to Partition that seems to soak the text, as well as preoccupy the individual characters. The text seems to ask of the reader: What is the significance of looking back as a community? *Who* looks back at *what*? (**Figure 2**).

[6] This recalls Svetlana Boym's theorisation of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia* (Boym 2001), in which she classifies nostalgia into restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia that longs to restore the past in the present and disrupt the linearity of time is a kind of spatialising of temporality that in the layout of a comic book is made possible and fluent.

Figure 2. *This side, that side.* Tabish Khair and V. Ghosh (ed). 2013. © Priya Kuriyan.

On the subject of looking back, I asked Priya about a work that is close to her heart and is inspired by her own personal experience, and she answered in a heartbeat: 'Ebony and ivory'(Kuriyan, 2018) her short story from *The Elephant in the Room* (The Spring Collective 2018) published by (the Delhi-based feminist independent publishing house) Zubaan Books in collaboration with Spring (a feminist collective of women's artists based in Hamburg). *Elephant* was intended to empower, the project brought together sixteen women from different social and cultural backgrounds to write and draw about their lives. The stories seem to throb with the unique voice of these women, the challenges they faced, and the personal experiences that shaped them. Priya's story is about her relationship with her grandmother that delves not just into her grandmother's personal struggles - becoming a metaphor for generations of women who break conventions in order to offer a more liberating life to the next one - but is a brilliantly reflective story of self-exploration. In our conversation, Priya opened up about *looking back* at her grandmother and how Priya's own perceptions of her have changed over time. She found the process of writing 'Ebony and ivory' (Kuriyan 2018) refreshing as it allowed her to meditate on her own experiences as a woman that influenced her perception of her grandmother but also quite jarring as she battled with the emotional difficulties that such an engagement with her past, and her fragmented memories, provoked. She spoke about working individually on her story and yet feeling connected to a larger collective as it was created in collaboration with fifteen other women. *Elephant* brought together sixteen individual stories, in a process of reflective and collective storytelling that created a visual anthology of women-centric narratives of contemporary struggle.

THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE

This discussion about feminist projects led us to another powerful publication by Zubaan in collaboration with the Toronto-based comics publisher named Ad Astra Comix. This project was initiated after the notorious 2012 gang-rape in Delhi[7] that Priya rightly described as a 'watershed moment' in India. As one of the editors of the graphic novel titled *Drawing the line: Indian women fight back* (Kuriyan, Bertonasco and Bartscht 2015), Priya talks about the 'language of violence' (P. Kuriyan, personal communication, November 15, 2018) that changed so heavily after the incident; it brought together thousands of women and men across ages and classes to protest against the brutal gang-rape of a young student Jyoti Singh. The book, an anthology of stories by fourteen women, responded to the tectonic shifts in the public sphere as women were coming out with their own stories of harassment, learning

[7] Gang-rape in Delhi, 16th December 2012. More information about this incident can be found here.

and unlearning about years of oppression and accumulating a new vocabulary to articulate their own stories. The anthology addresses and responds to the tense social climate at the time in India, especially Delhi, and is a refusal to be silenced about gender based sexual violence. In the afterword of *Drawing the Line*, Priya succinctly writes,

> 'We all have stories to tell and the difference is really between thinking about it and getting down to actually doing it. In a world that is dominated by stories that are told from the male perspective, I am so thankful for opportunities like this that help young women storytellers bloom' (Kuriyan, Bertonasco and Bartscht 2015: ii).

Her words encapsulate a significant sentiment at a time when more open dialogue about sexual violence within the space of Indian literature is necessary. This work was a result of a week-long workshop where these fourteen women produced a collection of visual narratives that embodied their act of resistance and protest.

COLLABORATIONS

Priya spoke further about her experiences of working in collaboration with other creators, and projects that she undertook that offered her new opportunities to share her art with creators around the world. One of such projects *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean* (Murray, Dhar and Roy 2015) is a collection of short speculative fictions for which she contributed a short visual prose entitled 'Swallow the moon' (Constable and Kuriyan) along with Kate Constable, an Australian author (**Figure 3**). On being asked if Priya felt that this project felt distinct from her other works on more non-fictional or children's illustrations or memoir writing, she fondly recollected the experience of creating something deeply personal, or 'true', yet set in an alternate universe. While many of the other creators experimented with dystopian futures, Kate and her story took an exciting detour when their ideas came together. Their fictional world, set in the future, is a utopian one and yet has a very nostalgic component to it. It is a story about rites of passage for women, and while has its dark moments, they are made easier and more digestible with Priya's illustrations. The story pays homage to generations of women, taking stock of the horrors and struggles they have overcome together, it is a narrative of cross-generational gratitude.

This conversation with Priya about speculative world-making enriched my own understanding of the relationship between nostalgia and historical fiction. At this point in my research, I am thinking about how an exploration of a reality that did *not* take place can inform our understanding of the one that did. This reminds me of some of the stories from *This Side, That Side* (Ghosh 2013) that engage with the question of 'what if?' to understand the arbitrariness of the timeline that followed Partition. Priya's words about 'messing the timeline' (P. Kuriyan, personal communication, November 15, 2018) and her illustrations in 'Swallow the moon' (Constable and Kuriyan) shed lights on some crucial question about personal and collective histories that occur with the act of looking back.

Priya attributed the relationship between (personal or collective) longing and visual narratives to the association that sequential art has with one's childhood, and even our collective cultural imagination. This reminded me of an excellent talk given by Debanjana Naik (an Assistant Professor at Presidency College, Kolkata) at Transitions, a day-long comics conference hosted by Birkbeck, University of London in August 2018. Naik, whose own research focuses on Indian webcomics and Scott McCloud's 'infinite canvas' (McCloud 2009) (his intention is to delve into questions about identity, gender, sex and more), briefly traced the trajectory of Indian comics in the form of *ACK*. Charts of fruits, vegetables, animals, and so on used to be part of primary school educational work, they came in the form of cheap comics that were typically sold at roadside stalls and railways stations. Through reflecting on this history of comics, Priya arrived at a discussion of contemporary webcomics in India as a new subcultural form of production, and she discussed some of the popular ones such as *Royal Existentials* (Parthasarathy and Krishnan 2014) and *Sanitary Panels* (Taneja 2014).[8] Her talk brought back memories for me of reading hundreds of comics as a child; in hindsight, it made me realise how much Indian visual narratives have been part of my life. Priya's illustrations and ideas on the personal and collective are reminiscent of Naik's work because they underscore the inconspicuous everyday nature of reading graphic narratives for Indians, and, consequently, an instinctively nostalgic association with them.

[8] https://www.royalexistentials.com/; https://sanitarypanels.com/about/

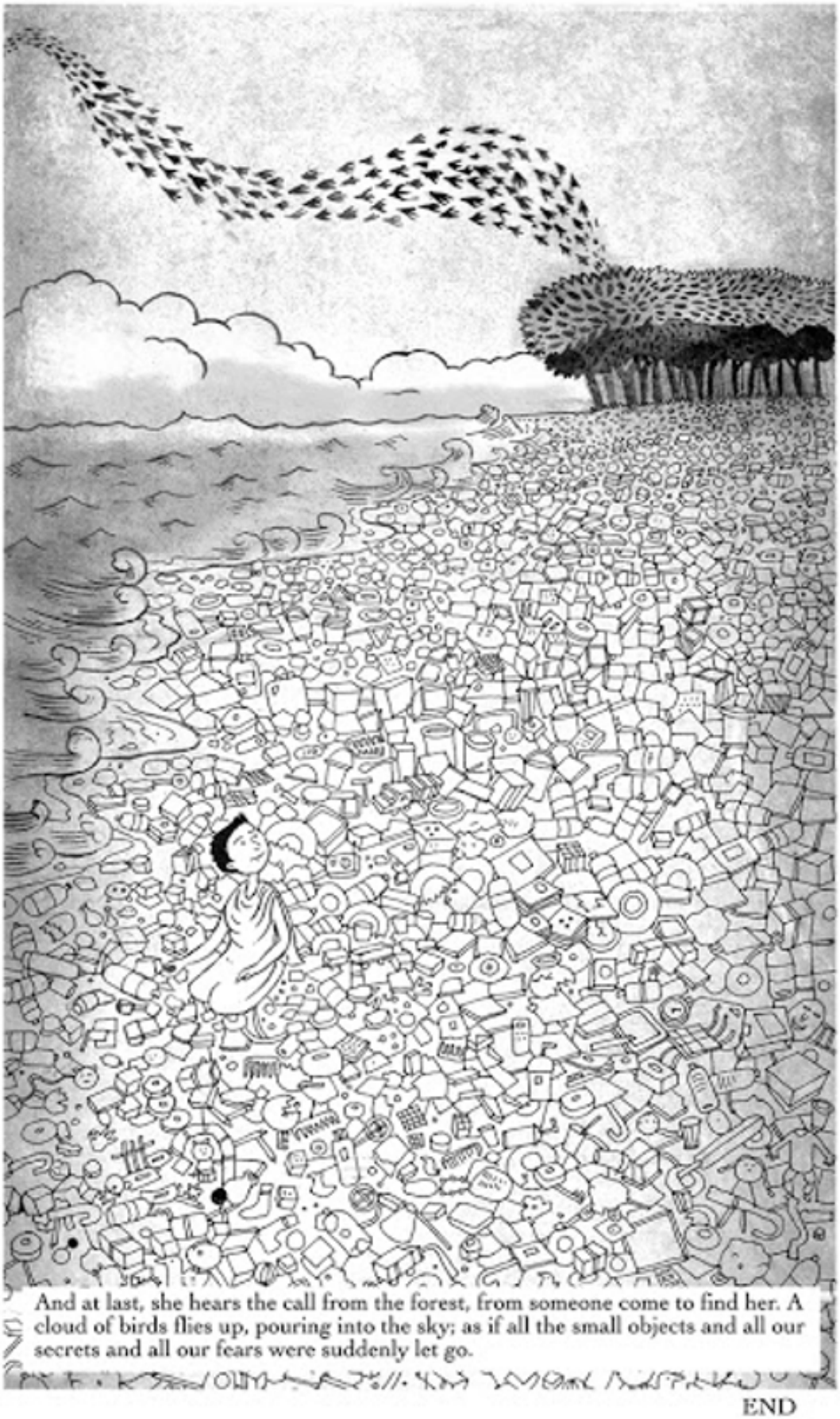


Figure 3. 'Swallow the moon' from *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean.* Kate Constable and Priya Kuriyan. 2015. © Priya Kuriyan.

I shared some of Naik's ideas with Priya and asked her what she thought of Indian webcomics as a 'subculture' that has the potential to subvert the mainstream political discourse, in the nationalist climate of India. She laughed and said that the comics community in India is so small that it is a subculture in itself. Unsurprisingly, this led to an exchange about the potential sanitisation of content and censorship that accompanies an artist's work in these contemporary nationalistic times. She said that she has felt the difference in the work she has undertaken for government or corporate funded projects as opposed to those for independent publishing houses. But that said, she mused that some level of self-censorship is inevitable and perhaps slips in involuntarily given the volatile times we live in, and for better or for worse, arguing that the comics community generally manages to stay under the radar and escape censorship anyway. Priya claimed that she found the visual form incredibly liberating. According to her, while pre-censorship and self-censorship of one's creative endeavours is a reflection of the times one inhabits, there is a lot of original work being done by independent publishing houses like Zubaan and Yoda Press. She briefly talked about webcomics and we discussed some of our favourite ones and excitedly came to the realisation that many of these webcomics were, in fact, female-centric and feminist-run such as *Sanitary Panels* (Taneja 2014). It is crucial to think about the contribution of such webcomics to the Indian discourse of feminism as well as other intersectional feminist issues relating to class, caste, religion, sexuality and other bases of discrimination.

RECEPTION ABROAD

Towards the end of our discussion, I asked Priya about her recent travels to the UK and the reception of her work here compared to India, having attended conferences and residencies, and shared her work widely. She said that while some of her works such as *Indira* (Roy 2018) sparked curiosity in her peers since many had no context about Indira Gandhi's life and personality, and remarked that people responded to it with a desire to know more. She felt that a work like *Indira* (Roy 2018) is a good first step toward forming a more nuanced judgment about her character. Some of her other works such as 'Ebony and ivory' (Kuriyan 2018) were more widely discussed because they are central to the prolific relationship between the personal and the collective, a theme that is widely recognised and identified with by feminists and activists. We approached the end of our conversation as we briefly discussed what she imagined the future of Indian comics and visual narratives will look like. She was positive that in the last 5-7 years more and more people have been opening up to the potential of the comic genre. She believes that self-publishing is going to be the next big thing in India for a variety of independent creators. She talked about the comic festivals happening in Bangalore and Pune and the steadily increasing affinity there towards comics. She remarked that while the community interested in graphic and comic art is increasing, and she has faith in its continued growth, it is still a very small percentage of the global media consumption.

CONCLUSION

This conversation with Priya brought forth some potent themes central to the landscape of Indian comics. It informed my ongoing study of nostalgia and myth-making in contemporary American comics and culture and offered me an opportunity to readjust and locate the theoretical framework of my own research within the Indian context of visual narratives. It was a privilege to speak to Priya and I believe, in some ways, her own work *embodies* the features she ascribes to the comics world: her own work encounters a complex engagement with nostalgia, with the composition of the personal against the collective and, most importantly, with the identity politics of being a woman in the comics industry.

REFERENCES

Bhattacharya, B. (2018). A graphic biography of India's Iron Lady: Indira Gandhi. *Livemint*, 25th March. Available at: https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/kXfWywBfavJJ73EeVcGRsI/A-graphic-biography-of-Indias-Iron-Lady-Indira-Gandhi.html (Accessed 16 February 2020).

Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia.* New York: Basic Books.

Constable, K. and Kuriyan, P. (2015). Swallow the moon. In P. Dhar, K. Murray and A. Roy (eds.), *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean* (pp. 14-32). Delhi: Zubaan Books.

Dhar, P., Murray, K. And Roy, A. (eds.) *Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean.* Delhi: Zubaan Books.

Khair, T. (2013). The old fable. In V. Ghosh (ed.) *This Side, That Side*, (pp. 15-29). Delhi: Yoda Press.

Khanduri, R. G. (2010). Comicology: Comic books as culture in India. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *1*(2), 171-191. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2010.528641

Krishnamurti, S. V. (2008). *'The route to your roots': History, Hindu Nationalism, and Comics in India and South Asian Diasporas* (Dissertation submitted for D.Phil.), York University, Canada.
Kuriyan, P. (2018). *The Elephant in the Room.* In the Spring Collective. Delhi: Zubaan Books.
Kuriyan, P. Bertonasco, L. and Bartscht, L. (2015). *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back!*. Ontario: Ad Astra Comix.
Kuriyan, P. (2018, November 15). Telephonic interview.
McCloud, S. (2009) The infinite canvas, *Scott McCloud.* Available at: http://scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/canvas/ (Accessed 14 January 2020).
Parthasarathy, A. and Krishnan, C. (2014). *Royal Existentials*. Falana Films.
Roy, D. (2018). *Indira.* Delhi: Context.
Satrapi, M. (2000, 2004). *Persepolis.* Paris: L'Association.
Tabish, K. (2013). The old fable, in V. Ghosh (ed) *This Side, That Side.* Delhi: Yoda Press.
Taneja, R. (2014). *Sanitary Panels.* Facebook. Available at: https://sanitarypanels.com/about/
The Spring Collective. (2018). *The Elephant in the Room*. Delhi: Zubaan Books.

Citation: Vij, A. (2020). In Conversation with Priya Kuriyan: Reflecting on the Personal, Collective and 'Looking Back' in Indian Comics. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7920

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 17
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Freestanding Comic

A Reflection on #Metoo, a Story of Sexual Assault and Victimhood in India

Shromona Das [1*]

Published: April 11, 2020

ABSTRACT

This work contains illustrations of Shromona Das, who was seven when she was sexually abused by her uncle. Years later suffering silently with the burden of keeping her trauma a secret, Shromona has finally gathered the strength to call out her abusers via her powerful illustrations.

Keywords: naming and shaming, #MeToo, sexual abuse

All illustrations are from the collection: 'Naming and shaming' by Shromona Das. © Shromona Das.

REFERENCES

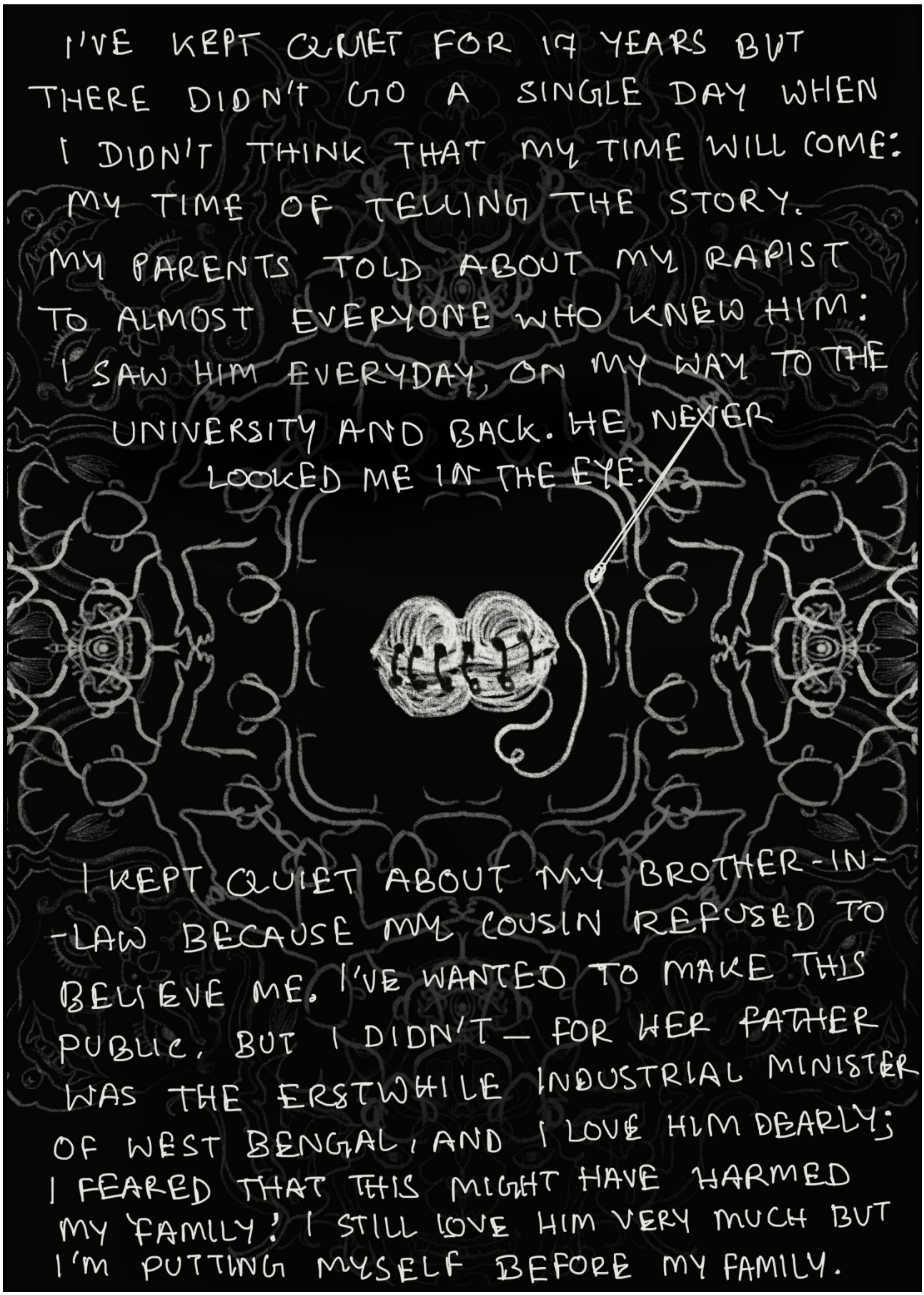
Bagchi, A. (October 26, 2018). Finally Getting The Strength To Call Out Her Abusers, 24 Y.O. Shares Illustrations Of The Trauma She Endured. Available at: http://www.indianwomenblog.org/finally-getting-the-strength-to-call-out-her-abusers-24-y-o-shares-illustrations-of-the-trauma-she-endured/

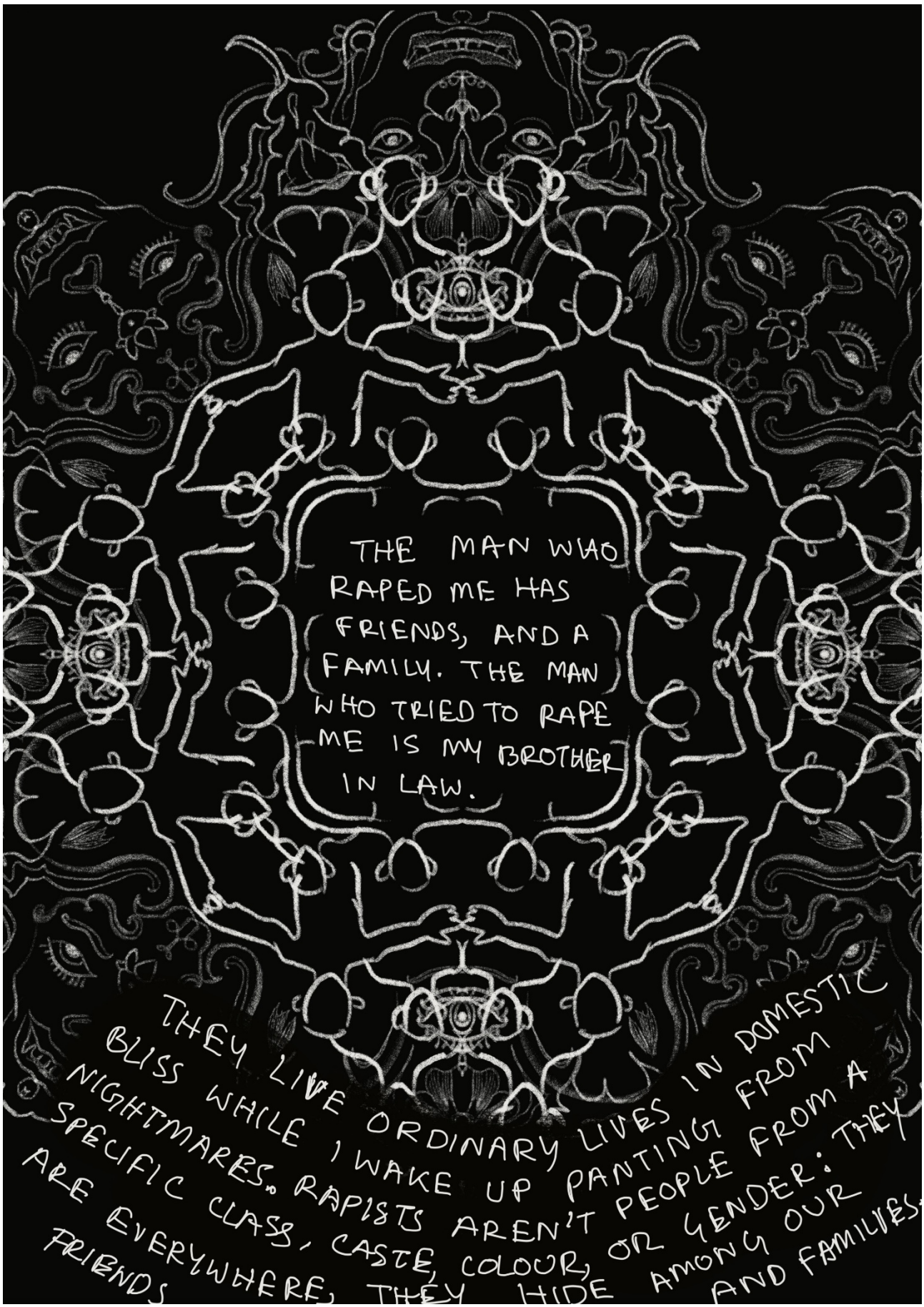
Dasgupta, P. (October 24, 2018). #MeToo In India: A 24-Year-Old JNU Student Called Out Her Abusers In A Powerful Set Of Illustrations. *Huffington Post, India.* Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2018/10/24/metoo-in-india-a-24-year-old-jnu-student-called-out-her-abusers-in-a-powerful-set-of-paintings_a_23570060/

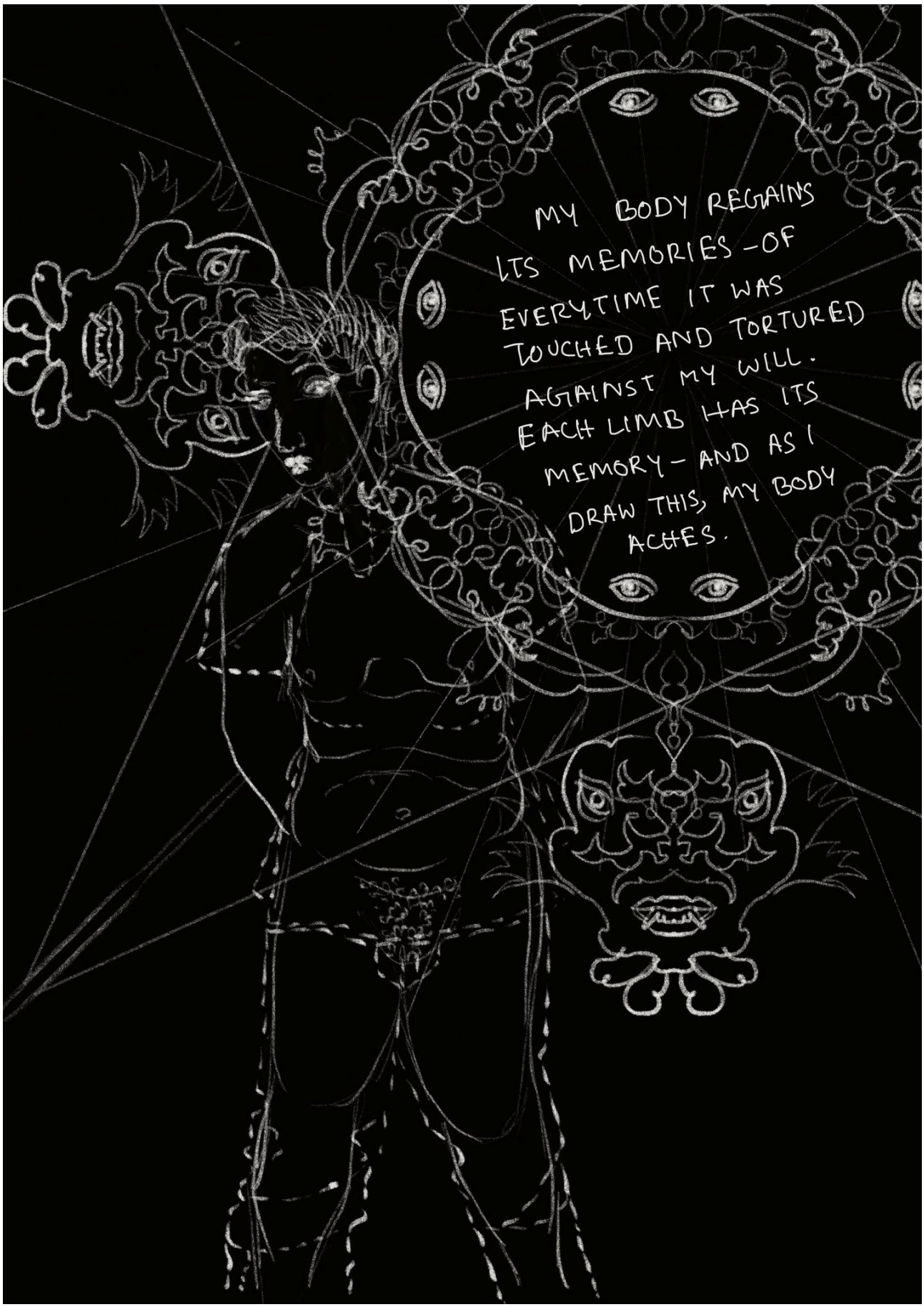
Konar, R. (October 21, 2018). Facebook post (on behalf of Shromona Das). Available at: https://www.facebook.com/rajdeepkonar/posts/10217726786100173

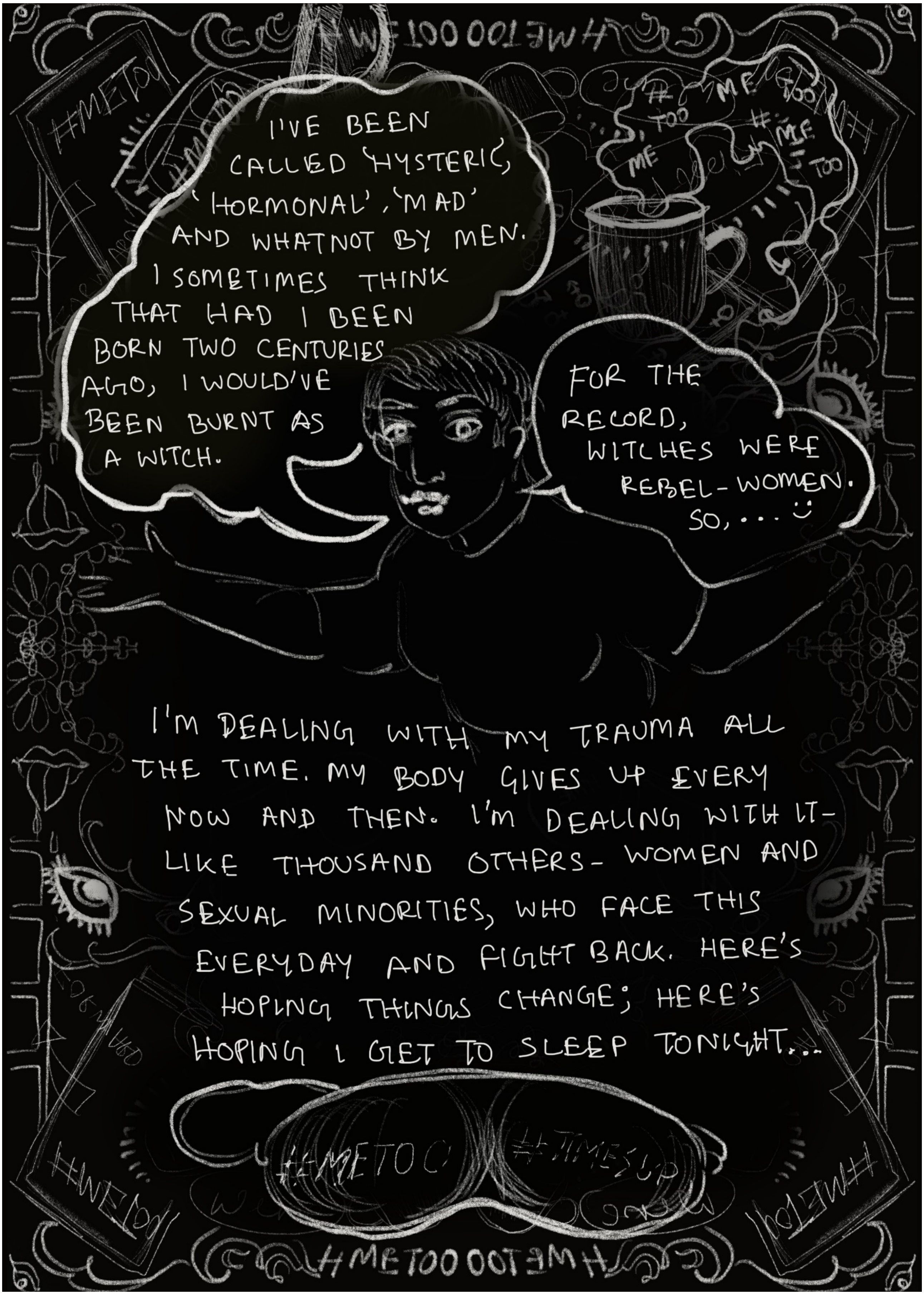
Citation: Das, S. (2020). A Reflection on #Metoo, a Story of Sexual Assault and Victimhood in India. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 17. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7921

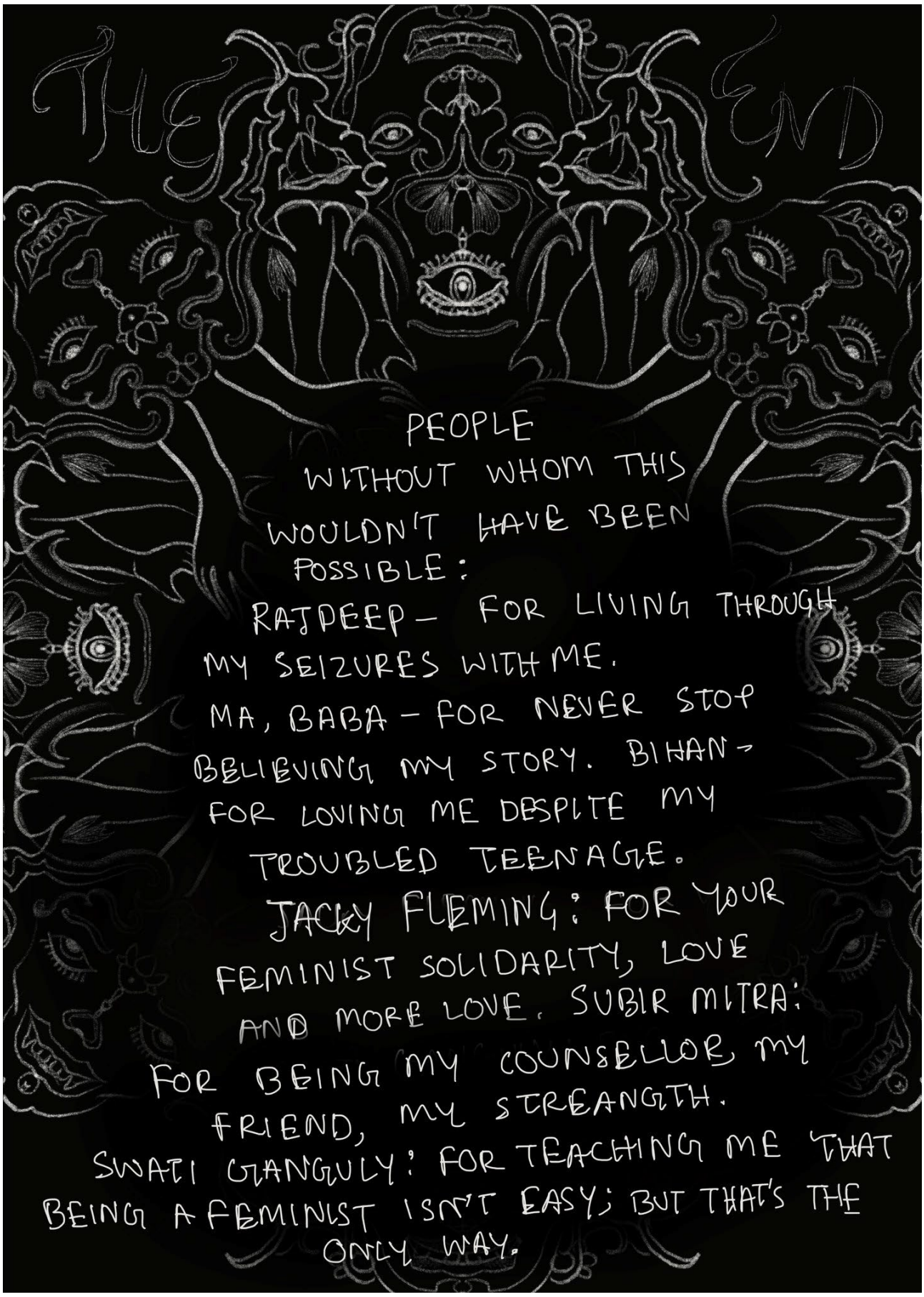
[1] *JNU*, INDIA
*Corresponding Author: Shromona Das

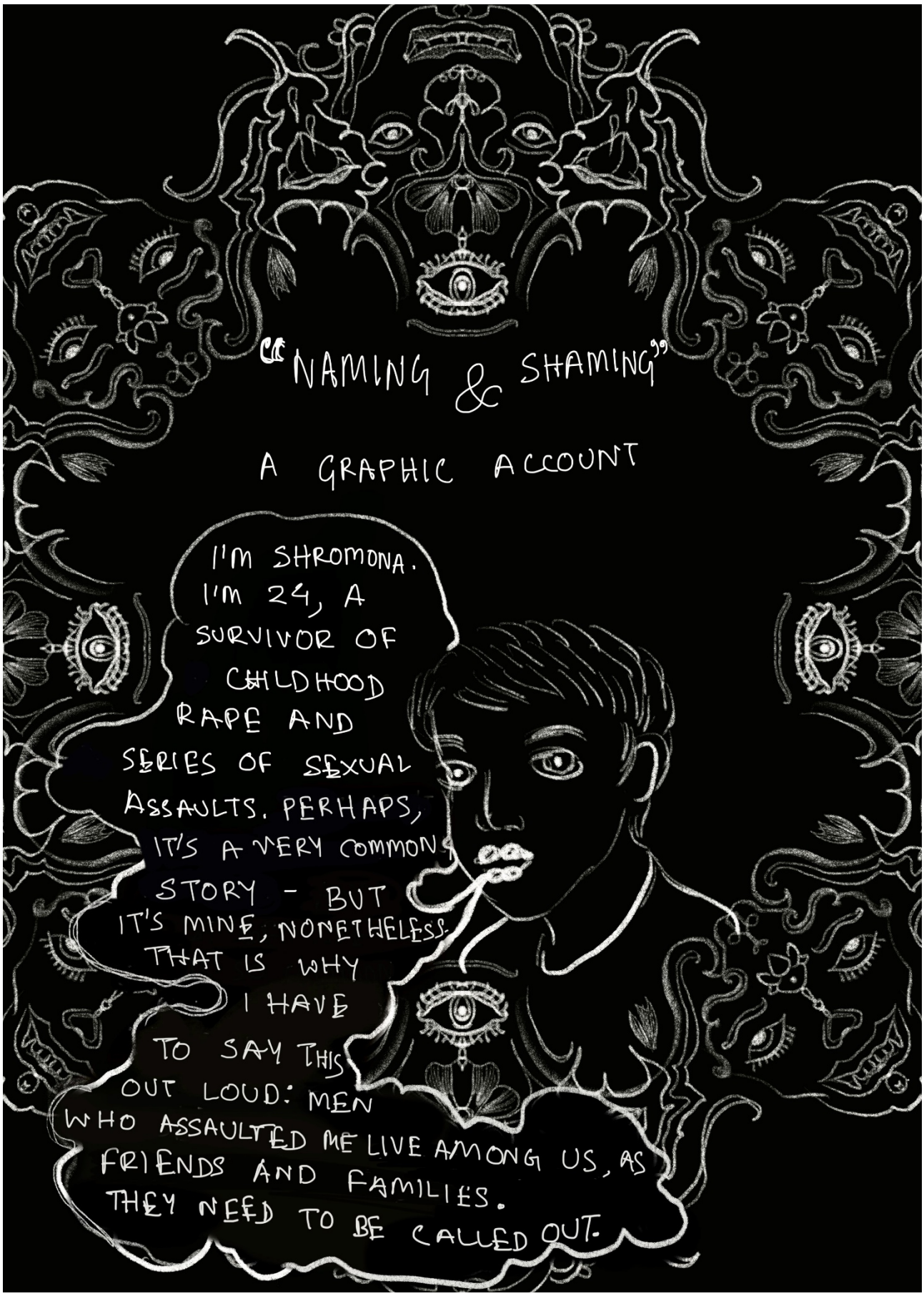


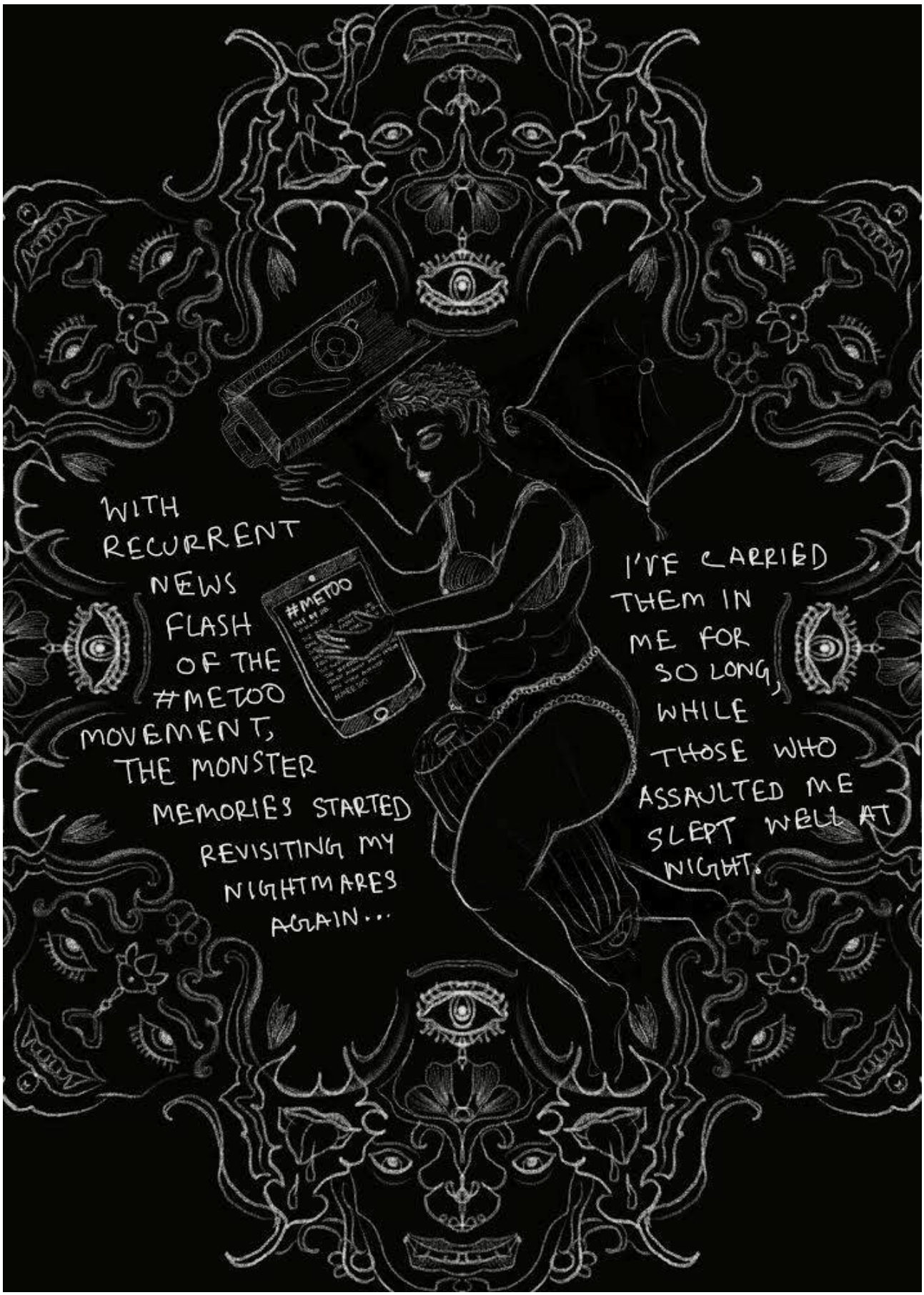


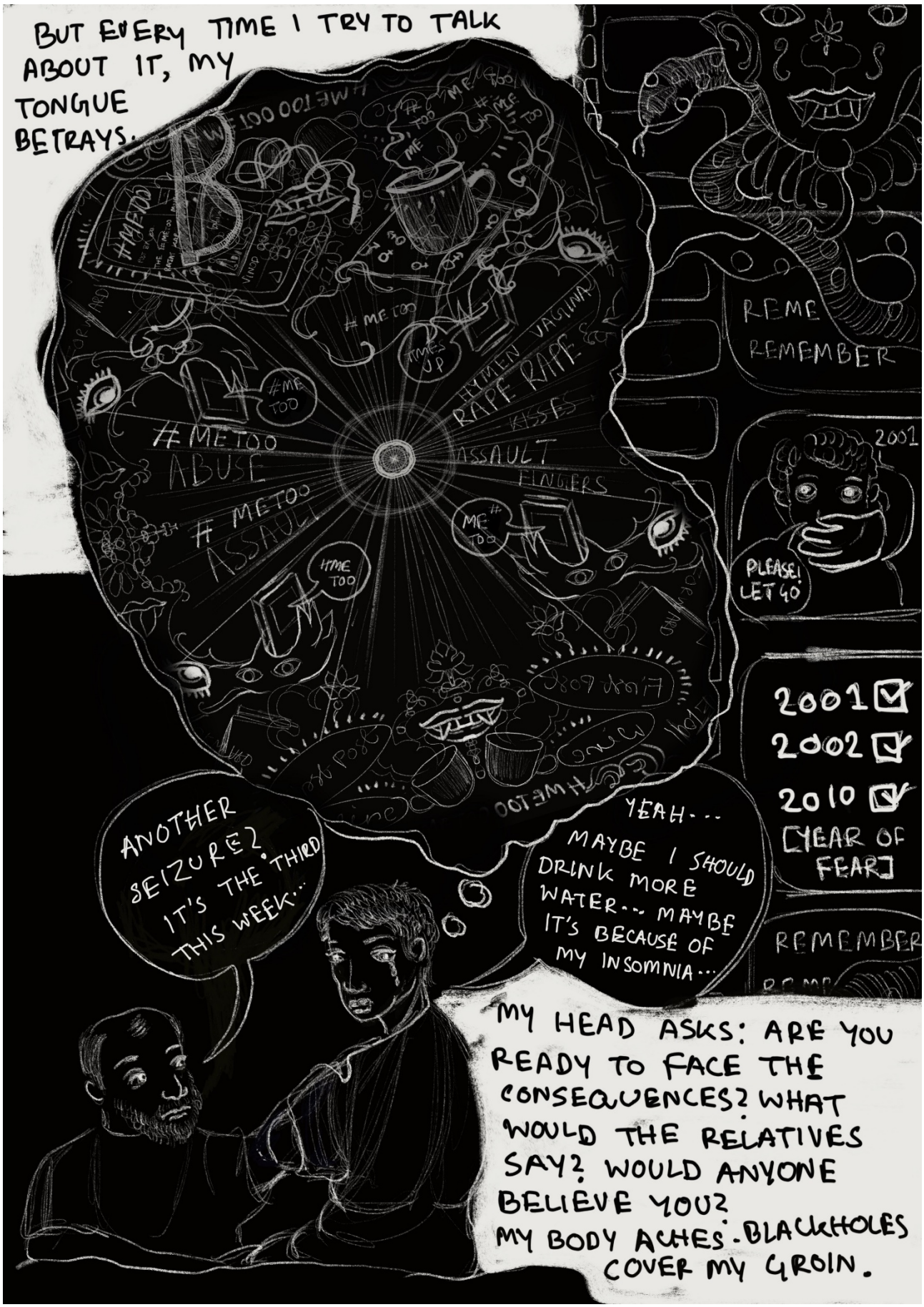


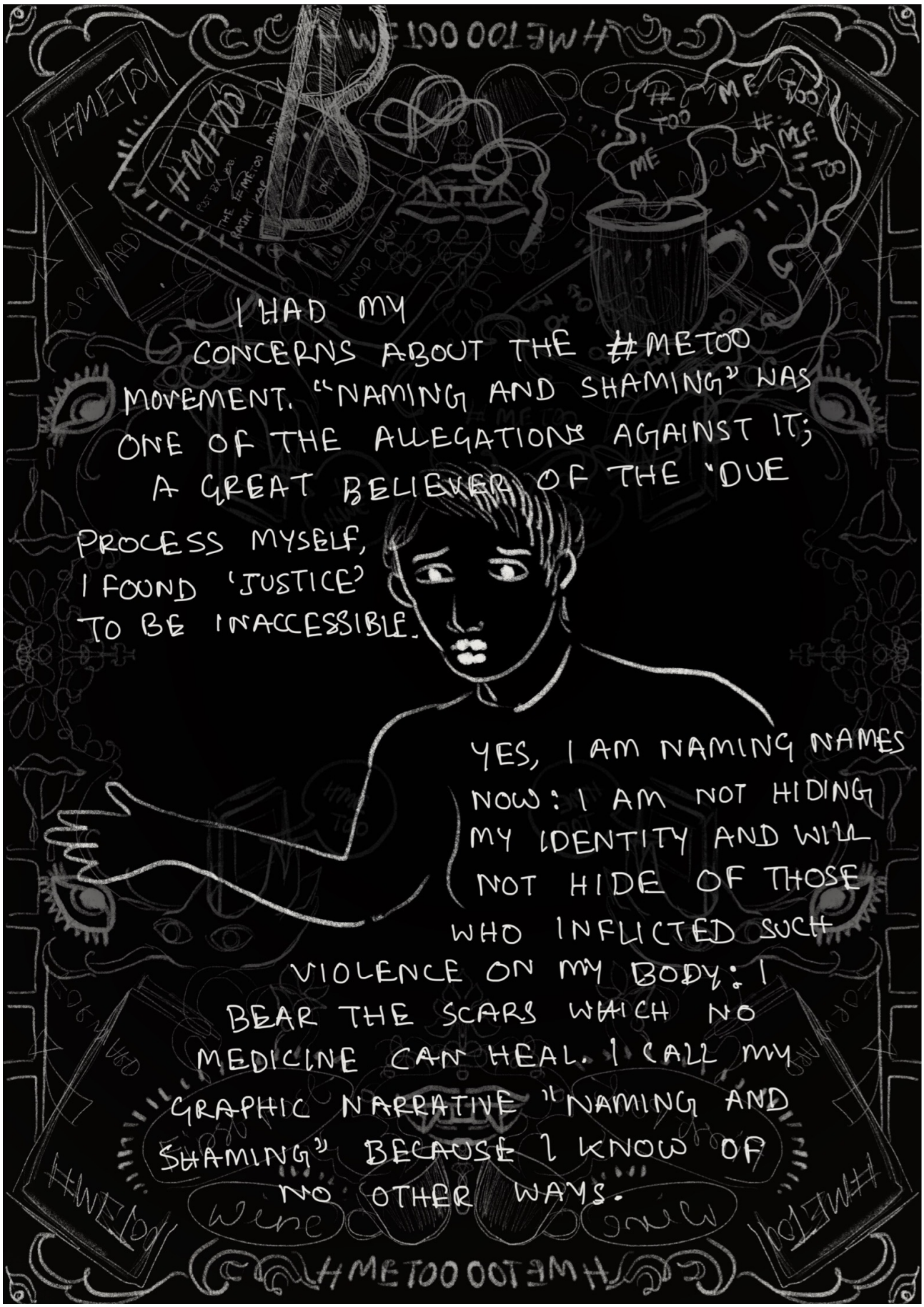


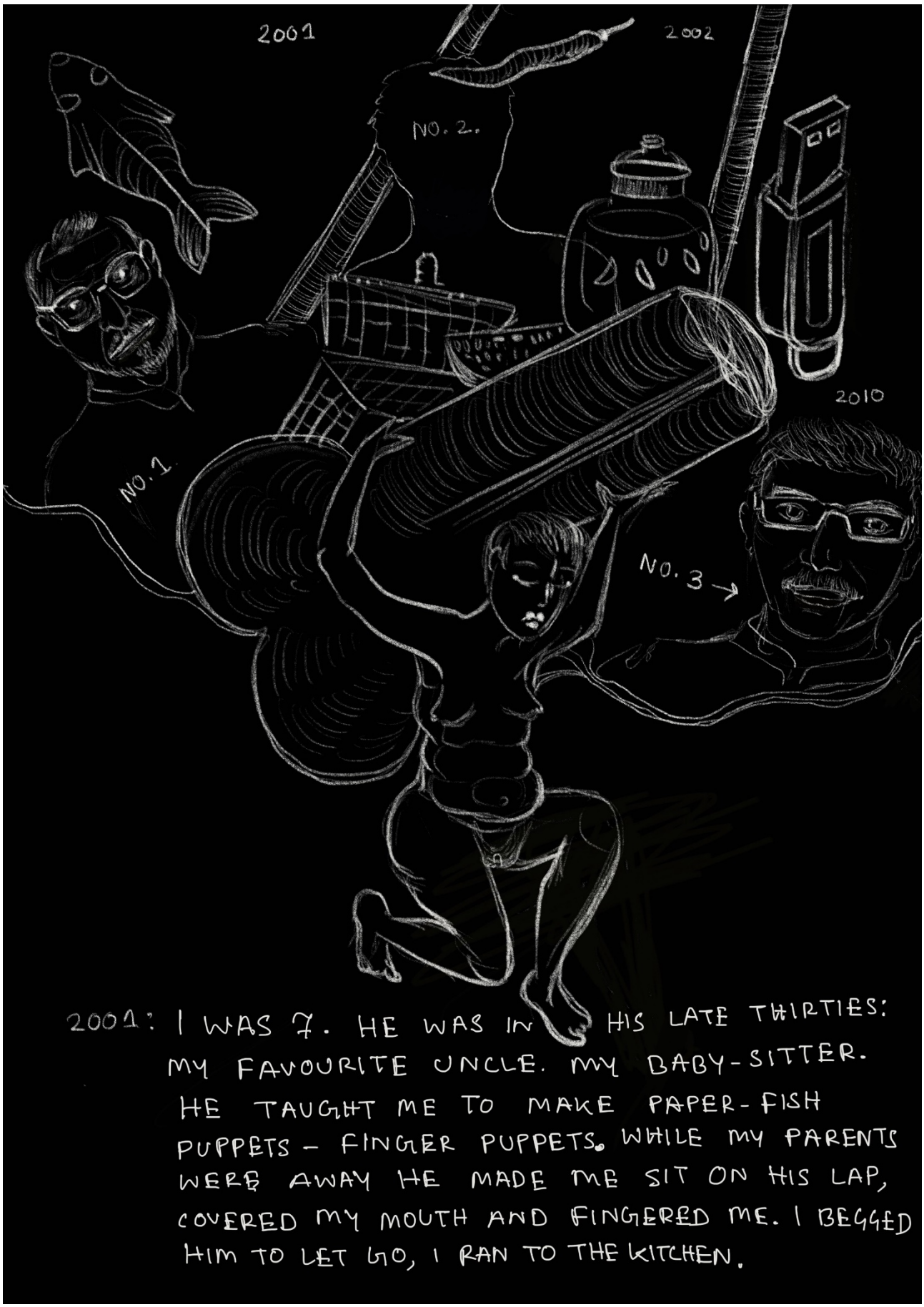


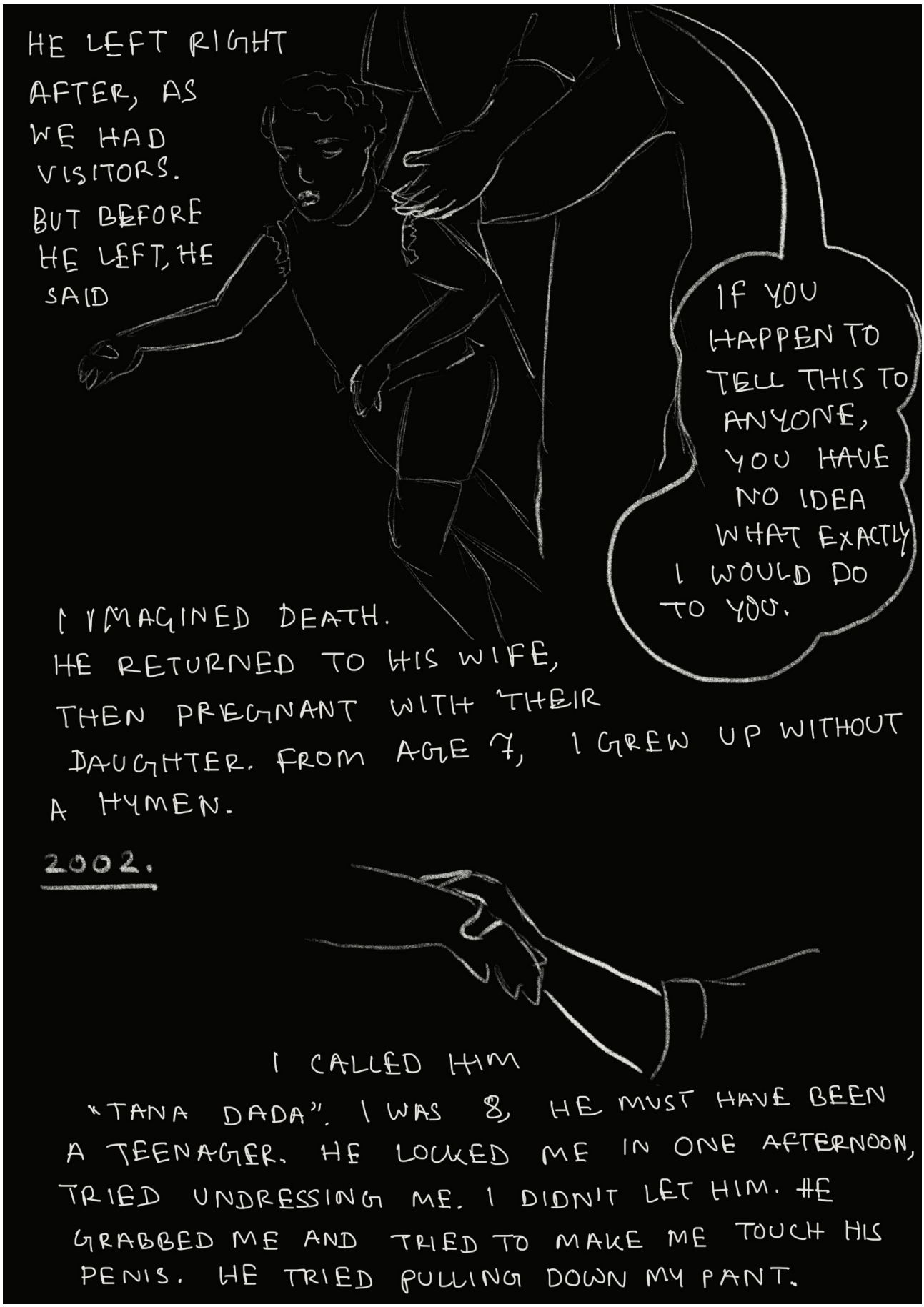


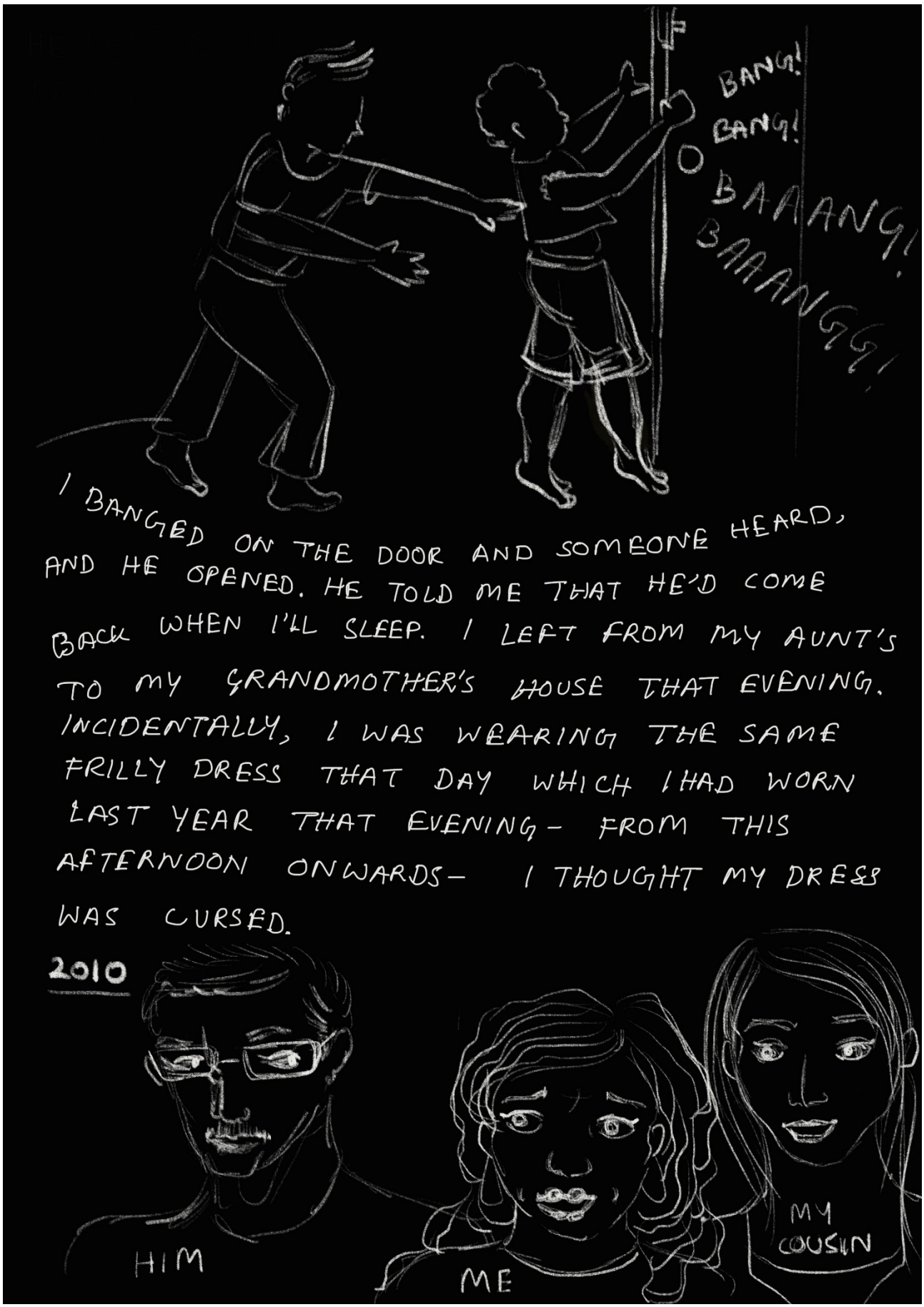


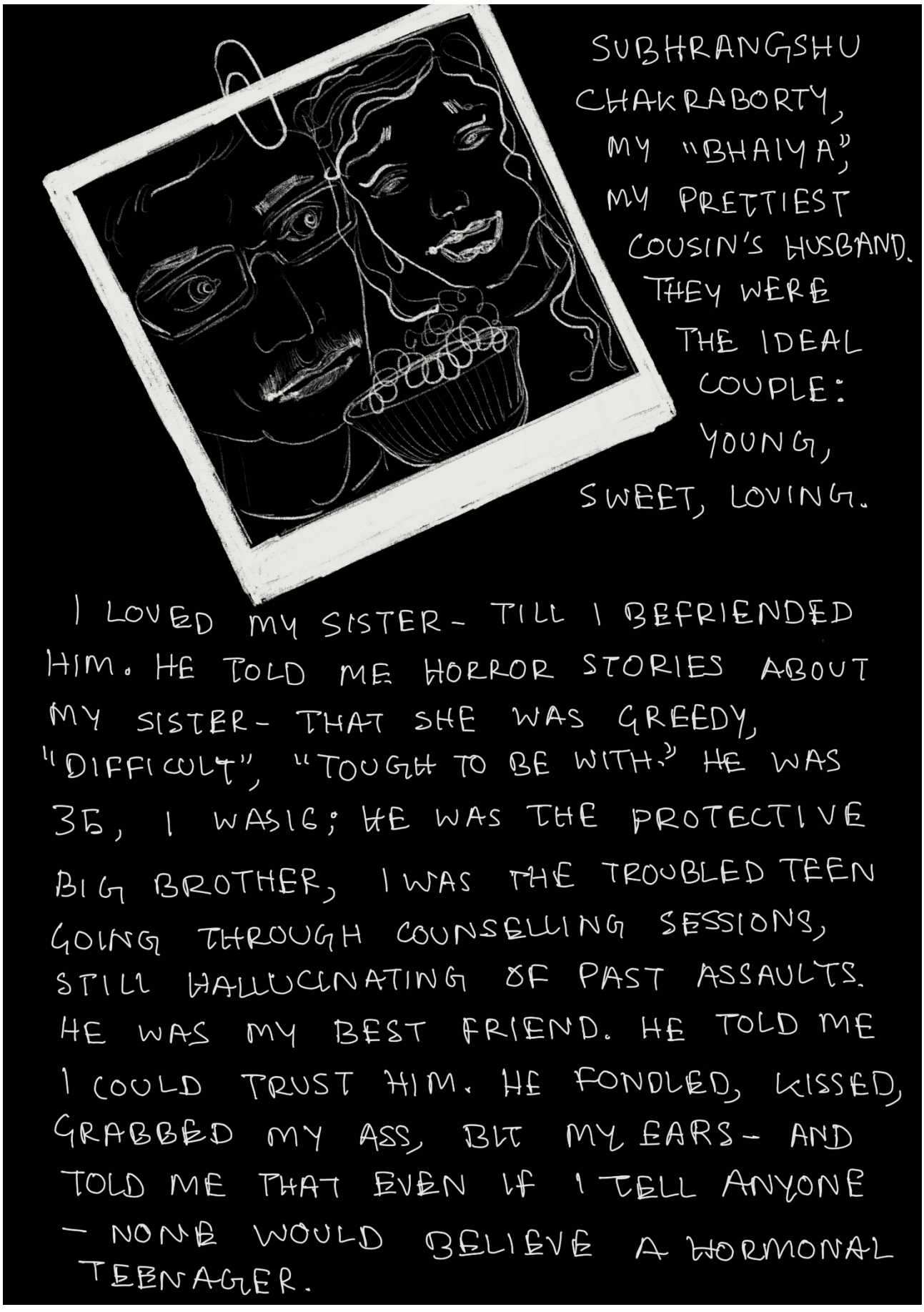


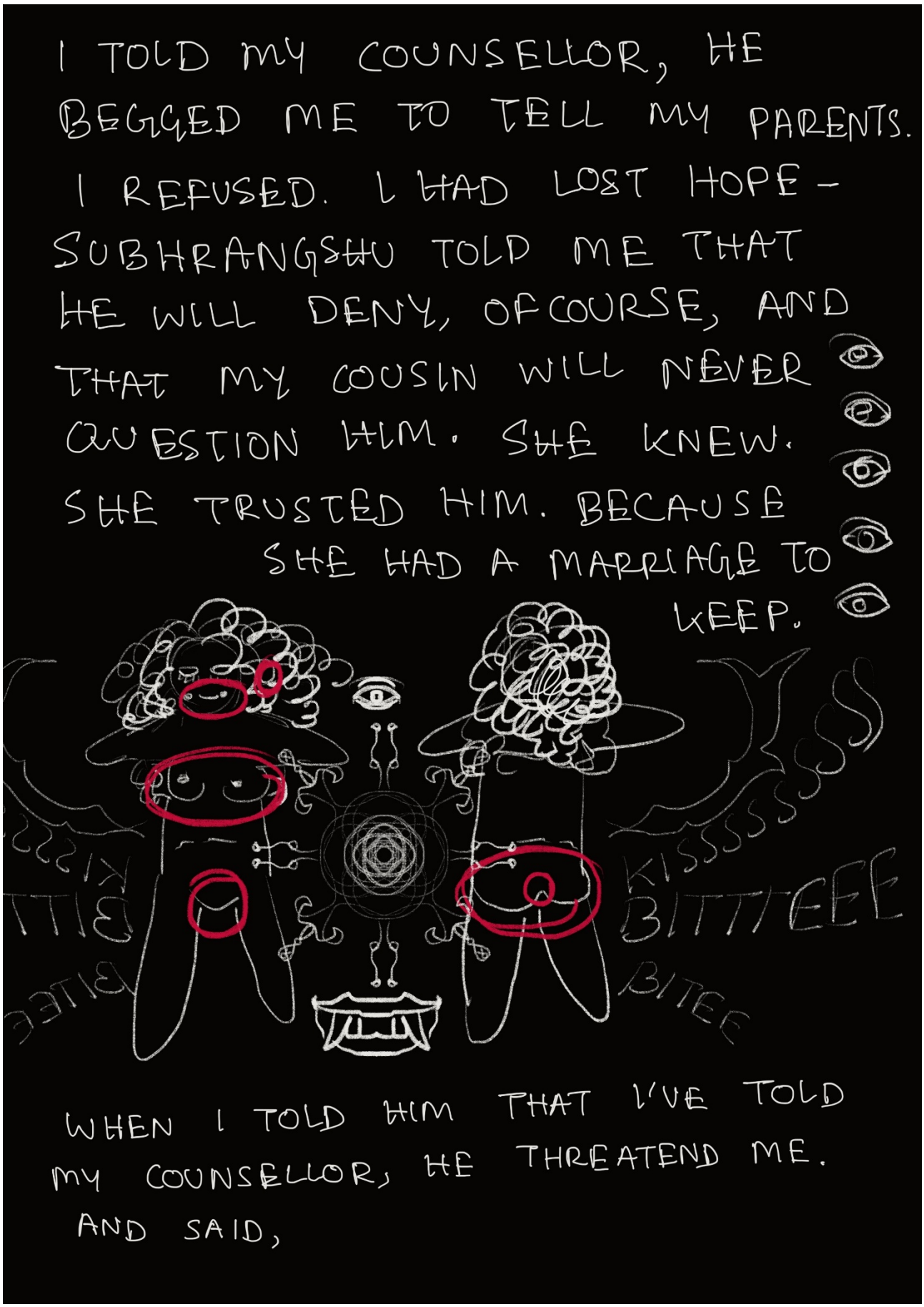


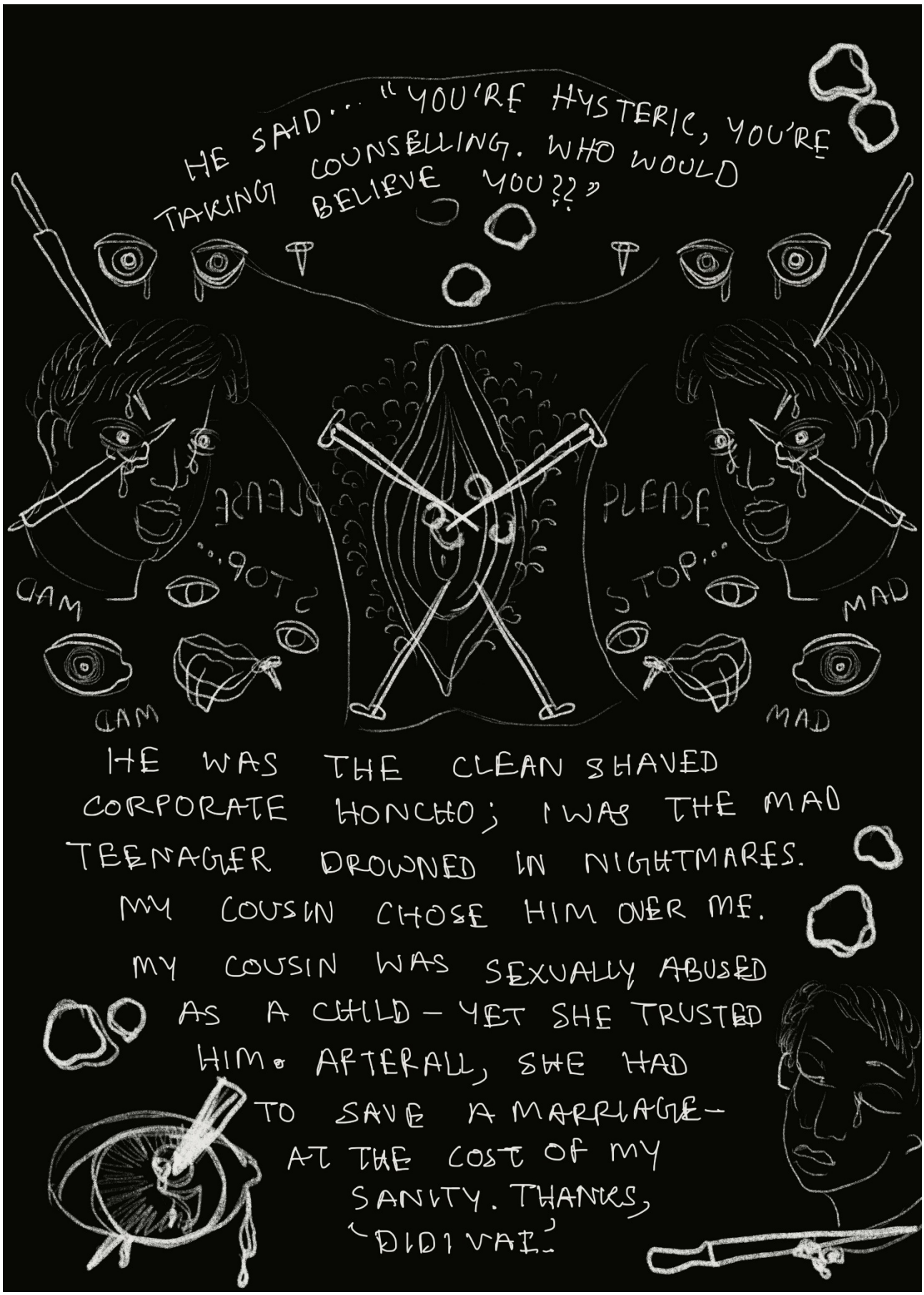












FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 18
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Book Review

Rewriting the Victim: Dramatization as Research in Thailand's Anti-Trafficking Movement

Adam K. Dedman [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

Book's Author: Erin M. Kamler

Publication Date: 2019

Publisher: New York: Oxford University Press

Price: £47.99

Number of Pages: 289 pp. hardback.

ISBN: 978-0-190-84009-9

> When we—members of the privileged West—see her picture, we pity her. We can't help it. Her dark skin, her obvious youth, her fragile frame…Rather than hearing her voice, we focus on her image, static and subdued. Rather than listening to her story, we imagine the worst.

So begin the opening lines of the prologue to Erin M. Kamler's riveting book on the ways the anti-trafficking movement 'flattens' (Parreñas, 2011: 6) the complex realities of migrant sex workers from Burma in northern Thailand. Kamler, an Assistant Professor of Arts and Humanities at Minerva Schools at KGI, has divided her time between South East Asia and the USA for most of the past decade. She first encountered Thailand as a high school exchange student in the early 1990s before human trafficking became an issue of global concern. After an accomplished career as an award-winning musical composer and playwright, Kamler returned to graduate school to pursue research on Thailand that would harness her artistic talents with field-based research as a vehicle to communicate human rights concerns in the region. Her dissertation fieldwork has culminated in this uniquely feminist tome that blends international human rights research with the transformative power of the dramatic arts via a liberatory praxis that Kamler styles 'Dramatization as Research' or DAR (p. 3).

This book is a welcome addition to a growing number of critical texts examining the discursive constructions and corporeal effects the global anti-trafficking movement has on migrant sex workers. In particular, Kamler's book brings to mind two other excellent ethnographies of sex workers in South East Asia: *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia: Professional girlfriends and transactional relationships* by Heidi Hoefinger and *Dealing in Desire: Asian ascendancy, western decline, and the hidden currencies of global sex work* about sex workers in Vietnam by Kimberly Kay Hoang. All three of these books have one thing in common: the use of empirical fieldwork evidence to dismantle the hackneyed tropes of the 'wounded third world prostitute' (Doezema, 2010) in need of intervention by what Kamler calls the 'US Abolitionist Project' (USAP).

Returning to the opening prologue passage, throughout the book Kamler unpacks the nuances behind what Wendy Hesford (2011) refers to as 'spectacular rhetorics' and what Carol S. Vance (2012) aptly terms 'melodramatic narratives' of sex trafficking which obfuscate complexity and effectively pull at the heart strings of uncritical media consumers (usually, but not always, westerners). Such fantasies of 'women in chains' in a dark room somewhere in Thailand have proliferated over the past two decades; collapsing illegal immigration into a nebulous notion of

[1] *PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at The University of Melbourne,* AUSTRALIA
***Corresponding Author:** dedmana@student.unimelb.edu.au

'trafficking', the United Nations 'Palermo Protocol' in 2000 put human trafficking—which it cast in a mostly gendered and criminal framework—on the 'global agenda,' unleashing waves of unprecedented funding, government infrastructure, media attention, and far-flung NGO projects to combat it (read: incarcerate bad men and unrepentant sex workers). Dividing her DAR praxis into three distinct phases, it is to these narratives and 'how they become produced and maintained, and frame lived experience' (p. 44) in Thailand and Burma that Kamler turns in part one of the book: The Field Research Phase.

Kamler opens with a lengthy discussion of her key concept: DAR, a new method for uniting arts-based interventions with social science by engaging in a reflective 'two-way praxis in which research and dramatic writing continually inform one another' (p. 134). She argues that DAR goes beyond the contributions of other methods such as Entertainment-Education (EE) and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). DAR rigorously reframes the epistemological, methodological and ontological foundations of these other approaches with a preferential feminist emphasis on positionality, situated knowledge, and non-binary interactivity between researcher and subject (p. 20). She suggests that EE and TO, while useful close cousins of DAR, lack a feminist focus on the co-constitution of knowledge that DAR seeks to redress by centering the artist-researcher alongside (and not 'outside') the 'subject' (p. 23). DAR utilises 'qualitative field research to uncover the lived experience of the subject' (p. 118) which it then draws from to build the creative and cyclical (artist/researcher and subject in dialogue) dramatisation work that defines the core of DAR praxis. DAR is a collaborative effort, initiated in social science research, that can only come to fruition through dialogical creative practice.

The four chapters comprising part one of the book lay out the research scaffolding Kamler assembles as foundational to this rendition of DAR. Key to her thesis is that gender and the sex industry function 'as a site of national identity construction' in what Kamler describes as 'Thailand's National Identity Project' (TNIP, p. 47). This 'project' has decisively 'othered' ethnic minorities (many from Burma) to exclude them from a range of rights and protections by the Thai government (p. 45); concomitantly prostitution has seamlessly been 'sewn into the fabric of Thailand's development' (p. 55) largely due to what the author claims is a Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition that enables such cultural acceptance. This then, in turn, creates the perfect recipe for systematically exploiting minority labour, particularly women from Burma: 'Labor exploitation and trafficking not only support Thailand's National Identity project, they *constitute* it' (p. 65). In this way the sex industry underpins and maintains the 'traditional gender relations and power dynamics' (p. 66) at the core of TNIP.

In conversation with TNIP, Kamler expounds on the historical roots (the 'white slavery panic' of the early twentieth century) and the neoliberal orientation of USAP and its carceral imperatives emanating from the US government's anti-trafficking apparatus. USAP, in its current form, was envisioned and financially invigorated during the George W. Bush Administration during the early 2000s. Rather than question the neoliberal economic policies of maximum extraction and minimal regulation that create favourable conditions for exploitation (which sometimes leads to trafficking), USAP perpetuates a neoliberal ('reorient[ing] funding provided by the state into the hands of private industry', p. 62) and carceral approach (i.e., lock up more suspected traffickers and your country gets a better grade on the US 'Trafficking in Persons' annual report). One of the more controversial elements of USAP has been the adoption of so-called 'Smart Raids' on brothels in South East Asia which conflates consensual sex work with trafficking 'while reinforcing a victim-versus-criminal binary' (p. 71). Fundamentally, however, Kamler concludes that both USAP and TNIP are essentially 'two contradictory projects' (p. 67) as they are built on different cultural/moral logics: one pursues the elimination of prostitution while the other necessitates the simultaneous presence/othering of migrant sexual labor for its preservation. Fortunately, all is not lost as community-based organisations forging 'narratives of resistance' (Chapter 5) to these hegemonic powers do exist in Thailand and their voices are amplified throughout the book.

For DAR the 'production process itself' (p. 125) is transformative and critical to revealing what Donna Haraway has famously called 'subjugated knowledges'. Thus, in part two of the book ('The Creative Phase'), Kamler presents the nuts and bolts of how she came to dramatise her research findings in each of the main characters for the theatrical production of her research-based musical *Land of Smiles* (see: http://www.landofsmilesmusical.net/) which was staged in Los Angeles and later in Chiang Mai for relevant stakeholders. By theorising embodiment (Chapter 8) she focuses attention not just on the 'what' but the 'how' new knowledge is unearthed in DAR praxis ('the restoration of experience through the body, learning through liminality, and collaborative discovery', p. 149). Kamler develops six female characters but the focus of the musical is really on the two protagonists: Emma and Lipoh who embody the nuances and iconoclastic potential of encountering complexities that challenge absolutist certainties. Lipoh is a valiant migrant sex worker from Burma who has made difficult but agentive choices and refuses to be 'rescued' by Emma, the American NGO employee who comes to Thailand expecting to 'save the girls' (p. 123), but ends up having 'to face her preconceived notions of what it meant to intervene in the life of someone whom she barely understood' (p. 124).

Finally, in Part Three: The Production (or 'articulation') Phase, Kamler brings together the last component of DAR praxis: the collective process of teasing out the narrative import of the musical. She meticulously delineates

how the various narrative strands from NGO workers, migrant sex workers, and the theatrical artists themselves coalesced into a production of 'rupture' (a kind of 'psychic death' that complicates one's perspective with that of another, p. 219) and 'witness' ('a proactive, dialogical process of acknowledging more than the surface of one's visibility', p. 206) for all involved, particularly the artist-researchers. The liminality inherent to DAR allows for 'ambiguity and uncertainty' (p. 224) to be held in tension, interrogated, and then communally processed in group discussion sessions held immediately after each performance. At the same time, Kamler never suggests that DAR is a panacea and admits its limitations (limited reach, noncommerciality, access to adequate material resources, time, and energy, etc.).

While not explicitly a Thai Studies (nor Buddhist Studies) book, Kamler's somewhat simplistic depiction of 'Thai Theravada Buddhism' as a cornerstone of 'Thailand's National Identity Project' (Chapter 2) left me unconvinced. She fails to acknowledge class, regional, ethnic, and temporal variations of Buddhism in Thailand and relies heavily on Vietnamese scholar Thanh-Dam Truong's 1990 book *Sex, Money, and Morality: Prostitution and tourism in Southeast Asia* (p. 45-46, 54, 66) to make her case. Kamler acknowledges diversity in women's 'experiences of migration, labor, and gendered identities' (p. 73) but does not problematise or entertain diverse interpretations of Buddhism in pinpointing it as the root of why she believes prostitution 'is a culturally acceptable act' in Thailand. She writes 'Buddhism further allows for polygamy on the part of males, while placing the idea of sexual impurity on women…' (p. 54) and claims 'that the acceptance of prostitution within Theravada Buddhism plays a key role in upholding this [Thai national identity] project' (p. 66). Such an 'essentialised reading of Thai Buddhist beliefs' (Brody, 2006: 198) immediately reminded me of Nicola Tannenbaum's cautionary piece 'Buddhism, prostitution, and sex: Limits on the academic discourse on gender in Thailand' (1999) in which she repines 'I find it puzzling that most authors simply assume that Thailand is a Buddhist country and that therefore all aspects of Thai culture must necessarily be understood in Buddhist terms…there are other countries with state religions for which anthropologists and sociologists would not give religion such a focal explanatory role' (p. 251). Thus, while I agree with Kamler that Buddhism is a critical component of Thai society, I do not see a need to isolate it and make generalised claims or to assume that the seeming normality of prostitution must somehow be attributed more significantly to 'Theravada Buddhism' than to a broader confluence of Thai cultural norms of which Buddhism is but a part. Thus, while not impinging on the overall argument of her book, I do wish Kamler would have engaged with a broader range of scholarship on Buddhism, Thailand, and prostitution for this section (such as Tannenbaum, Brody, Kabilsingh, etc.). Moreover, while Kamler does make a few passing references to 'faith based' or Christian organisations in her discussion of USAP—which she calls 'a white, Western feminist agenda' (p. 59)—she makes no sustained effort to underscore how this 'project' is also very much central to and monetarily fuelled by the American conservative Christian agenda, just as much, if not more, than 'radical feminists.' Here her discussion (and grounding of 'Lewelyn Brand', the Christian character in her musical) could have benefitted from the rich analysis of another book, *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, sex, and human trafficking* (2012) authored by Yvonne C. Zimmerman.

Lastly, although a rather minor point, in Chapter 2 Kamler, in contextualising USAP, exclusively describes 'corporate greed' as western (p. 64) when it's clear in South East Asia that much of the corporate exploitation of workers is also non-western (Thai, Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, etc.), just as the *majority* of foreign men coming to Thailand looking for sex are Asian, not 'Western men' (p. 55). And to clarify one slight factual error: on page 65 Kamler writes that the US government's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report downgraded Thailand to 'Tier 3' (the worst ranking) in 2015 when this actually first happened in 2014 (in fact, just after the May 2014 military putsch in Thailand, which made it particularly sensitive; President Obama ultimately chose not to impose sanctions).

All in all, Kamler's work deftly challenges 'normative conceptions about victimization and rescue, the role of the West, and agency among sex workers' in Thailand (p. 244-245). Her book exudes innovative interdisciplinarity, brilliantly deconstructing the chimerical binaries that engulf trafficking discourse while prodding policymakers to abandon 'ideologically based policies' (p. 99) in favour of holistic, evidence-based solutions. More importantly, however, the real gem of this book lies in the detailed roadmap Kamler provides for DAR praxis, a generative method that is more than just academic—'it's dynamic, active, and alive' (p. 20). Grounded in liberation psychology and Boalian theatrical techniques, DAR bridges dramatisation and social science by foregrounding the 'situated knowledge' of migrant sex workers (p. 126-128; 193-194) as a decisively 'feminist communication intervention…dedicated to the uncovering, recovering, and articulation of lived experience through the powerful medium of theatre' (p. 236-237). DAR's magic lies in its replicability beyond this project, its original technique for empowering marginalised communities and, one can also hope, the policymakers (p. 243-244) whose decisions affect all of our broken lives.

REFERENCES

Brody, A. (2006). Prostitution in Thailand: perceptions and realities. In Gangoli, G. and Westmarland, N. (eds.), *International Approaches to Prostitution: Law and policy in Europe and Asia* (pp. 185-207). Bristol: The Policy Press.

Doezema, J. (2010). *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The construction of trafficking*. London: Zed.

Hesford, W. S. (2011). *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hoang, K. K. (2015). *Dealing in Desire: Asian ascendancy, western decline, and the hidden currencies of global sex work*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hoefinger, H. (2013). *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia: Professional girlfriends and transactional relationships*. London: Routledge.

Kabilsingh, C. (1991). *Thai Women in Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.

Parreñas, R. S. (2011). *Illicit Flirtations: Labor, migration, and sex trafficking in Tokyo*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Tannenbaum, N. (1999). Buddhism, prostitution, and sex: Limits on the academic discourse on gender in Thailand. In P. A. Jackson and N. M. Cook (eds.), *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand* (pp. 243-260). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

Truong, T.-D. (1990). *Sex, Money and Morality in Southeast Asia: Prostitution and tourism in Southeast Asia*. London: Zed.

Vance, C. S. (Fall 2012). Innocence and experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy. *History of the Present*, *2*(2), 200-218.

Zimmerman, Y. C. (2012). *Other Dreams of Freedom: religion, sex, and human trafficking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Citation: Dedman, A. K. (2020). [Review of the book *Rewriting the Victim: Dramatization as Research in Thailand's Anti-Trafficking Movement*, by Erin M. Kamler]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 18. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/2018/7922

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 19
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Book Review

Peruvian Lives Across Borders: Power, Exclusion, and Home

Cordelia Freeman [1*]

Published: April 11, 2020

Book's Author: M. Cristiana Alcalde

Publication Date: 2018

Publisher: Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press

Price: $28.00 (paperback)

Number of Pages: 230 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-252-04184-6

Peruvian Lives Across Borders by M. Cristina Alcalde is an empirically rich study of migration and belonging that is particularly well placed for current debates occurring across gender, migration, and Latin American studies. At its core, this book is about the connection that Peruvian migrants feel, foster, and renegotiate, with Peru. The migrants who feature in Alcalde's research are transnational, cosmopolitan middle- and upper-class Peruvians who are living or have lived in the United States, Canada, and Germany. Alcalde examines how home is constructed by these migrants abroad and how they create and negotiate a sense of belonging in relation to Peru and their 'Peruvianness'. Through interviews with 48 Peruvians, half of whom are living abroad and half in Lima as return migrants, Alcalde makes a strong case for the study of middle- and upper-class migrants. She uses intersectionality throughout the book to provide important analyses of class, race, gender, and sexual identity and to show how these identities can shift as migrants travel, resulting in vastly different migratory experiences. Exclusion, however, is a persistent theme.

Alcalde determines that the migrants she worked with experience both privilege and discrimination when abroad. While predominantly enjoying the opportunities and comfort of being privileged in Lima, migrants often find themselves facing exclusion in the US, Canada, and Germany. Her interlocutors relate how, despite having never faced marginalisation before, they find themselves 'othered' due to their accent, and de-skilled, with their qualifications and work experience seen as lacking; they are thus prevented from accessing the same opportunities that were available to them back in Lima. Many describe how the pan-ethnic identity of 'Latino' is imposed upon them, even though they had not previously identified with the term. Participants explained that they never felt Latino until they were treated as Latino outside of the continent. However, this exclusion is circumstantial. Alcalde shows how class is a slippery concept to define, particularly in a transnational context, yet it is also remarkably sticky. Even migrants who were forced to take 'lower-status' jobs abroad still identified as middle-class despite not being able to achieve the middle-class lifestyle that they had been accustomed to in Lima. Outside of Peru, migrants face systems of exclusion that they had not previously experienced, but class privilege allows them to experience a sense of security, informed by their class status.

Importantly, Alcalde also explores persistent exclusion *within* Peru. One of the most interesting aspects of this book is how migrants' perspectives of racism and homophobia change when they move abroad and require renegotiation when they return home. Those who had been used to the exploitation of predominantly indigenous, *mestiza*, and Afro-Peruvian women as domestic labour in Peruvian homes began to question these normalised practices. Female middle-class migrants are forced to renegotiate 'home' when they migrate and cannot afford

[1] *Lecturer in Geography at the University of Exeter,* UK
*Corresponding Author: cordeliafreeman@gmail.com

domestic labour, and so take on a greater share of household duties and mediate this with their partner and family. Peruvian men, for example, are more likely to take on chores in the home when abroad. Through this renegotiation of the domestic sphere, these migrants are compelled to reconsider the racialised and classed treatment of the nannies and cleaners who had been part of their lives in Lima. Moreover, lesbian, gay and bisexual migrants who return to Lima have to negotiate their sexual orientation in order to 'belong'. While many had become used to the higher levels of acceptance in the USA, Canada, and Germany (although notably not in Peruvian migrant communities), they found Peru to be intolerant and discriminatory. These LGB migrants reported that they felt forced to put up with homophobia in order to be part of Peruvian life and families, both in Lima and abroad. Even if their class and racial privileges could protect LGB migrants from some discrimination, they still face prejudice, violence, and a lack of recognition in both the public and private spheres.

Despite all the clear positives to this book, there were three ideas that I felt lacked further development: technology, translocalism, and border regimes. Firstly, Alcalde alludes to the role that technology plays in keeping migrants' connection with Peru alive. Whether video-calling family or utilising social media, technology has undoubtedly changed migratory experiences. I was left wanting to know more about how such technology mediates belonging and maintains that migrant connection with 'home'. Secondly, Alcalde uses the concept of transnationalism effectively throughout the book but at times it seemed that trans*local*sm would be a more useful concept. While 'transnationalism' points to 68 results in the index, translocalism does not appear once. Translocalism focuses more on the connections between two specific locations, and these local-to-local relationships would be useful in unpacking those particular connections between Lima and Munich, or Lima and Toronto. Thirdly and finally, the title of the book *Peruvian Lives Across Borders* made me want to hear more about that last word, borders. The visa regimes, paperwork, and travel that migration necessitates are curiously absent here.

I was keen to hear more about the wealthier Peruvians who were able to pay international student fees in order to obtain student visas, the privilege of speaking English in navigating bureaucracy, and the cost of travelling (often with families) across continents as return migrants or holidaymakers visiting their families. Alcalde's key themes of belonging, exclusion, and home are all present in technology, translocalism, and border regimes.

This book will appeal to feminist scholars who are interested in the nuanced experiences of migrants through an intersectional approach. Class here provides a particularly important lens on how social and economic capitals shape migrants' experiences of marginalisation whilst also excluding others. This book also contributes important empirical work to migration studies particularly in the way that Alcalde centres migration as a dynamic process, rather than a one-off event. She shows how returnee migrants should not be viewed as static, as some go through a continual calculation about whether to stay in Lima or leave once again. Migration is also shown here to be a transformative experience, where migrants are forced to reconsider their class and race, and their attitudes towards others. Whether being racialised and labelled as a 'Latino' for the first time, or realising the exploitative nature of domestic labour in Peru, migrants experience deep psychological and emotional impacts.

In *Peruvian Lives Across Borders*, Alcalde impressively uses intersectional analyses to trace the simultaneous privilege and discrimination that middle-class Peruvian migrants experience when abroad but also upon their return to Peru. Yet the ways in which middle and upper-class Peruvians draw boundaries around 'Peruvianness' and belonging necessitates exclusionary practices. Alcalde uses the term 'exclusionary cosmopolitanism' here to illustrate how the opportunities that are open to these migrants due to their class privileges are only made possible by the exclusion of others. Social hierarchies are sticky: even in a transnational context, power can be and is wielded through privileges of class, race, gender, and sexuality. The unique situations that Alcalde's migrants find themselves in, due to their own intersecting identities, dictate their sense of belonging, security, and home. This book therefore deserves a wide readership across gender, migration, and Latin American studies.

Citation: Freeman, C. (2020). [Review of the book *Peruvian Lives Across Borders: Power, Exclusion, and Home*, by M. Cristiana Alcalde]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 19. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/2018/7923

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 20
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Book Review

Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality

Janine E. Carlse [1,2*]

Published: April 11, 2020

Book's Author: Jennifer C. Nash

Publication Date: 2019

Publisher: Duke University Press

Price: £17.99

Number of Pages: 172 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-478-00059-4 (paperback)

More than a decade later, after being placed in the camp of intersectionality 'critic' by her peers, Jennifer C. Nash, in *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), revisits some of her initial thoughts about the usefulness of intersectionality in an attempt to reframe black feminism's engagement with this now widely appropriated feminist theory. In *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), Nash ventures to provide an alternative to the defensiveness and territoriality that she claims has characterised the 'complicated and contentious relationship between intersectionality and women's studies', and in turn women's studies' tense relationship with black feminists (Nash, 2019: 2).

In her seminal article, 'Re-thinking intersectionality' (2008), Nash interrogates the assumptions underpinning intersectionality as an analytical tool for black feminists, identifying 'four tensions within intersectionality scholarship: the lack of a defined intersectional methodology; the use of black women as quintessential intersectional subjects; the vague definition of intersectionality; and the empirical validity of intersectionality' (2008: 1). Nash poses the question of whether black feminists and anti-racist scholars have become overly reliant on intersectionality, bordering on dogmatism.

Acknowledging that intersectionality has been the analytic tool of choice that feminist scholars have used for theorising oppression over the past couple of decades, Nash now is advocating for an expansive and deterritorialised conception of intersectionality that is inclusive of subjects beyond the 'black woman' (Nash, 2019: 32). Nash proposes that when theories such as intersectionality are considered lost, stolen, appropriated, or institutionalised for various ends that they may not have been intended for, this hinders their potential as analytical tools because the starting position has already become one of defensiveness. For Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, seeks to 'encourage and imagine other ways of feeling black feminist, other ways of being black feminist and doing black feminist labor in the academy that eschew defensiveness and its toxicity' (Nash, 2019: 32).

The book has obvious merits within the field of women's studies, making a timely contribution to feminist discourse and scholarship on intersectionality, Nash also attempts to provide a balanced yet challenging account of how intersectionality has traversed the broader multi-disciplinary landscape, particularly stemming from its roots as a legal concept. In chapters one and two, Nash unpacks the history of what she terms the 'intersectionality wars', noting that she has been positioned within the discourse as a 'critic' of intersectionality. Nash then problematises the inclination to polarise positions as either for (supporting of) or against (critical of) the centrality of intersectionality within (black) women's studies.

[1] *PhD Candidate: Education Policy Studies at Stellenbosch University,* SOUTH AFRICA
[2] *Lecturer in Global Citizenship Programme at the University of Cape Town,* SOUTH AFRICA
***Corresponding Author:** JECarlse@gmail.com

In chapters three and four, in an attempt to address the risk of intersectionality becoming dogmatic in approach and application, Nash reimagines alternatives for what it could mean to go beyond intersectionality (in its current articulations) as the main frame of reference for black feminists. After opening *Black Feminism Reimagined* with a concern for how, in the current North American context, black experience and subjectivity is increasingly being theorised through the death of black men and grieving of black women (Nash, 2019: 22), Nash then closes chapter four with a request that we reject 'both the notion that blackness is synonymous with death and the idea that black feminism is dead or dying' (Nash, 2019: 129). This rejection does not require a complete disregard for the value of intersectionality, but rather an acknowledgment of its limitations that ultimately allows for a space to reimagine black feminism through love and letting go, rather than through defensiveness and possessiveness.

How Nash reimagines black feminism is the main theme of this book. As scholars, we should be cognisant of colonial approaches to knowledge, especially in viewing knowledge as property. Particularly in relation to intersectionality, as stated in chapter one, '[T]he language of colonization, often paired with commodification, positions intersectionality as a territory that has been wrongfully, problematically, and even violently taken by outsiders' (Nash, 2019: 44). By proposing a reimagining of black feminism as 'letting go', Nash invites an alternative beyond intersectionality as 'belonging to' black feminism, toward a broader understanding of black feminist theory as grounded in love and vulnerability.

Black feminism as love goes beyond just the personal as political, because it acknowledges that the personal is also vulnerable. Through love there is vulnerability and mutual regard for the 'other'. Nash proposes that we move love from primarily rooted in the personal, towards a theory or conception of justice that considers mutual vulnerability and witnessing (Nash, 2019: 116). Justice, as it is framed through policy and law, invites further interrogation of the connections between black feminism and law. Within this reimagining, law can be a site for black feminism's 'loving practice' (Nash, 2019: 114). For Nash, her 'engagement with law seeks to rescue law's status of death in black studies, tracing how it can be a location of radical freedom- dreaming and visionary world-making rather than simply a death world and the paradigmatic site of antiblackness' (Nash, 2019: 130).

Advocating for an ethics of vulnerability, Nash makes interesting assertions in relation to love, justice, intersectionality and law. She proposes that intersectionality, as 'an analytic that radically occupies law', be pushed toward a commitment to witnessing and empathy, that 'takes hold of legal doctrine and refuses its conceptions of neutrality and uniformity as performance of justice' (Nash, 2019: 129). I would have found more value in this contribution to reimagining if Nash spent more time delving deeper into what this reimagined framing through love, and a commitment to witnessing and empathy, could look like within the legal or juridical space.

In closing, Nash points to the political conditions within the American university and how this frames the lives of black women both within and outside of the US academy. *Black feminism reimagined* comes at a time when a call for reimagining is echoed across various disciplines as a response to the rise of right wing populism in the USA and globally. Reimagining is optimistic and hopeful, it is a useful response to the negative outlooks that can influence scholarship at this time. The pessimistic hailing of the 'demise' or 'death' of black feminism, reminds me of similar pronunciations of the death of the university or the university in ruins, which have led to calls for a reimagining of the university, of scholarship, pedagogy and curricula, and of higher education more broadly. Nash's contribution is a brave intervention into such debates.

REFERENCES

Nash, J. C. (2008). Re-thinking intersectionality. *Feminist Review*, *89*, 1-15.

Citation: Carlse, J. E. (2020). [Review of the book *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, by Jennifer C. Nash]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 20. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/2018/7924

FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 4(1), 21
ISSN: 2542-4920

lectito

Book Review

Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies

Po-Han Lee [1]*

Published: April 11, 2020

Book's Author: Jieyu Liu and Junko Yamashita

Publication Date: 2020

Publisher: Abingdon: Routledge

Price: £175

Number of Pages: 449 pp. hardback.

ISBN: 978-1-138-95989-7 (hbk)

An increasing academic interest in gender relations and women's rights movements in East Asia have challenged the Eurocentric approach to social sciences and cultural studies in this region. Positioning itself against the perspective of Area Studies, the *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies* presents diverse empirical engagements and theoretical debates across a range of geopolitical and disciplinary localities. Consisting of twenty-five chapters, this book is divided into seven thematic sections. This review will prioritise the overarching issues throughout the volume, along with the distinctive contribution of each chapter.

Gender, as a force generating and in turn maintained by social organising in diverse forms, has its own history in East Asia and yet it has become complicated by the processes of 'modernisation' involved with global capital and postcolonial nationalist movements. Resonating with the emerging decolonial interventions in modernity/coloniality where modern gender and sexual knowledge have been identified to be problematic, in their introductory chapter Liu and Yamashita are explicit about their 'mixed feelings' towards the modernisation of East Asian societies, which should not be simply seen as a passive receiver of westernisation, particularly in terms of knowledge production and socioeconomic development.

On the one hand, social and feminist researchers in or from East Asia have been encountering an epistemological problem concerning 'translating' local and regional issues to satisfy the academic hegemony of Anglo-American gender studies, and relatedly, an ethical account regarding how to liberate gendered and sexualised East Asians from an orientalist view. On the other hand, this and many other chapters highlight that the rapid economic growth and independence does not necessarily promote gender equality.

These considerations are well situated in the first section on 'Theorising gender relations in East Asia', in dialogues with western and between Asian theorists. Doing so facilitates an inquiry into gender construction in these societies to go beyond the universal/particular binary. For example, Ochiai's chapter contends that referring to East Asian societies simply as 'Confucian societies' not only overlooks the varied interactions between gender and social classes and between politico-ideological structures and everyday practices, but also conflates the diverse fashions of kinship and familial system that are in place.

Ochiai draws on both historical and materialist approaches to contextualising the developments of and changes in gender relations in Japan and beyond (including Southeast Asia). Ochiai shows that it is important to identify how the modes of production and the travelling of kinship ideologies (especially Confucianism) affect local arrangements of gender relations, which can be mapped out as a 'geography of Asian patriarchy' (p. 16). As follows, her notion of the 'traditionalisation of modernity' (p. 18) challenges the assumption based on a lineal progressivism,

[1] *PhD & Doctoral Tutor (Sociology/Law), School of Law, Politics and Sociology, University of Sussex,* UK.
***Corresponding Author:** Pl236@sussex.ac.uk

which takes the import of the modern contract of patriarchy and patrilineality as more original and traditional than the egalitarian culture existing earlier. Such a historiographic interrogation assists us to reconsider the strategies and tactics deployed for nationalistic identity politics, and this is much discussed in other chapters too.

Complementary to the empirically-informed approach, Jackson's chapter also takes a conceptual approach to understanding the modernity of gender relations and sexualities, based on which she advocates an 'open theorising' (p. 39) that attends to the four dimensions of the social: 'social structure and institutions', 'practices and interaction', 'meanings', and 'selfhood, identity and agency'. She also confirms that male-dominant gender relations were quite a recent product of modernisation, through state-endorsed policies and institutionalisation processes.

Also highlighting the importance of historicisation, the second section on 'Variety in women's and feminist movements in East Asia' opens with Chung's chapter. Citing the contradictions between various women's rights organisations – divided mainly between generations who have experienced different social contexts – there are often tensions between progressive and derogative laws on gender equality. Reflecting on conscious wording of 'feminisms' in a plural form for her chapter title, Ueno considers feminist groups' ambivalence towards western women's rights agenda; in Japan, for example, patriarchy has been reinforced through the introduction of the western path towards modernity, and yet, so have feminist discourses and activism.

These chapters contextualise how women's rights movements have emerged and demonstrated their significance in exposing the always already-gendered aspects of political institutions and everyday interactions. Cho, Ma, and Kam's chapter, focusing on feminist activism in Hong Kong, remarks on the tensions between women's rights groups and male-dominated social movement communities, as one of the topical phenomena commonly shared across locations. They argue that, considering the recent political climate in Hong Kong, the feminist struggle is a 'constitutive part of the overall democratic struggle at the time when space for political freedom and democracy is diminishing' (p. 104). Comparatively, Hu's chapter identifies that, in China, feminism has always had to be tied to the political needs, serving the building or reconstructing of a particular Chinese nation/state at different turning points in history.

The fifth section concerns 'Politics of gendered cultural representation' and I discuss it now because of themes it shares with the first section. In each society, there exist diverse types of femininity and masculinity and womanhood and manhood; hence, pursuing sameness becomes problematic. As Bao's chapter identifies, 'instead of improving women's social status through actively constructing women's subjectivity, the Maoist discourse on gender equality 'erases' women's (and men's) gender and subsumes gender under the category of class' (p. 287), making gender representation in Chinese cinema intertwined with the 'national imaginations of modernity' (p. 297).

Echoing Bao's chapter, Wang's chapter concerning gender representations in Taiwan cinema also illustrates the tactic of using women 'to revisit the national past, to critique the national present and to project the national future' (p. 302), which, indeed, has prevailed in new cinemas in most Asian societies. Pang's chapter considers the imageries of bordering and crossing into Hong Kong-Mainland Cinema, which, respectively, signifies the masculinised state power to control the people vis-à-vis the alternative, feminine imaginations of gender and sexuality.

Reading Kitamura's chapter on media representation in Japan together with Section Three on 'Gendered work, care and migration', we can see how gender is a multifaceted construct that affects and is affected by all dimensions of politics and therefore policies. For instance, Ogawa's chapter – exemplifying with the regional care chain between Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and beyond – examines the nexuses between care labour and movement/mobility and conceptualises the 'feminisation of migration'.

Taking these ideas global, Chen's chapter subsequently explores labour markets on the local and global levels, which are not only gendered but also reproduce the hierarchy between sexes and classes, in general, and between ages and familial roles, particularly in East Asia. Also attending to the stigmatisation and omission of the women's labour force, Zhang's chapter on female rural-urban migrants provides a very comprehensive review of related studies of women's experiences in internal migration, a particularly interesting phenomenon in China considering its unparalleled scale, intensity, and social impact.

Coincidentally, many chapters identify that much work done and facilitated by women has been greatly devalued, through misrecognising the professional skills that care and sex work entail. For instance, Yamane's chapter on the 'quasi-market' regime of care work presents a case regarding the inclination towards privatising care labour in Japan. Meanwhile, Hong's chapter on the development of work-life balance in Korea is concerned with the fact that policies and their implementation are never neutral as declared.

All of the case studies mentioned above are related to Section Four on 'Tradition and transition of family and intergenerational relationships' – a gendered lifecourse is involved with one's accessibility to support resources. Jankowiak's introduction to the family values in China reminds us that each society consists of a variety of cultural practices and subjectivities that cannot be reduced to a particular ideology. Similarly, Yi and Chang's chapter on family and gender in Taiwan finds that, 'substantial gender equality is yet to be accomplished, particularly in the private sphere' (p. 231).

In this regard, Song's chapter concerning the transformation of the family structure in South Korea and Tamiya's chapter attending to the links between gender and poverty, using lone mother households in Japan as an example, are both empirically rich. Yet, it is also noteworthy that, although these chapters offer a gender perspective on different social issues, they seem to consider only the power dynamics between men and women – which, on the one hand, reinforce the gender binarism in this region, and on the other, miss the opportunities to critical intervene in problematising and destabilising the meaning of 'gender' *per se*.

This is a large book, which may contain some creative tensions between the various approaches to gender and gender equality, and this shows exactly how a discipline called gender studies should *sound*: heteroglossia. This is especially interesting when we look at the sixth section on 'Shifting yet surviving ideals and practice of masculinity'. Take Hirayama's chapter regarding 'self-sufficient men' in Japan as an example. It contains one of the most surprising arguments in this book, which challenges a dominant academic and popular discourse. The image of self-made men, through omitting men's dependence on women, sustains 'unequal gender relations by enabling men to covertly take advantage of women's unpaid labour' (p. 334).

Hird's chapter on masculinities in China considers the interlinks between gender performance and socio-political development, in which, for instance, in postmillennial China, 'male honour' as a key component of masculinities has been 'expressed through wealth and concepts such as 'face', 'ability' and 'responsibility', rather than 'righteousness' or slavish devotion to China's political leader' (p. 362), as in the past. Guiohk Lee's chapter looking at how men are portrayed in Korean news magazines reflects that, in the context of rapid industrialisation, drastic changes in performing masculinity have occurred.

Indeed, the chapters committed to the studies of men and masculinities are a great addition and indeed an ineluctable complement to the other that focus on women's experiences. These cases reveal that 'manhood' and 'womanhood' are actually interacting upon and constituting each other, and that the former can never be realised without the latter. Relatedly, also an exciting inclusion is the seventh section on 'State, Militarism and Gender', because the relationships between these three categories have rarely been discussed based on East Asian social contexts and by East Asian researchers.

Na-Young Lee's chapter explores a controversial case regarding the women's movement against US military prostitution in South Korea; she analyses the way in which women's bodies are 'nationalised', as a tool to achieve state goals – through instrumentalising their sexual and care labour, which becomes more acute in times of conflict and recession.

Similar to other anticolonial independence and national liberation movements in Asia, using women's pain for nationalistic movements gives very limited space for discussions over how patriarchy has contributed to recolonising women of a lower class. Recalling the chapters on cinematic narratives of femininity, we can see that women are often regarded as embodying a national shame that needs to be forgotten, and this can be observed from the representation of women in post-war films.

This critical statement, followed by Okano' chapter on the reconciliation process of the 'comfort women' issue in Japan, concludes this book powerfully with an advocacy for democracy based on the ethics of care. Okano refers to Carol Gilligan's theory of care ethics to argue that care ethics can be useful for promoting non-violent democracy since they are 'attentive to the fundamental vulnerability of human beings and their difficulties and various needs in healing the wounds from the past' (p. 403).

The normative theory concerning the ethics of care is actually complementary to the first two theoretical chapters, which take an empirical approach. Put together, they provide a better picture that captures the dynamic transformation of gender relations in East Asia and propose a feminist interpretation of the pursuit of restorative justice. Such a critical intervention gives us an alternative way of rethinking democracy and gender justice. In this light, the authors of almost all of the chapters continually remind us of the importance of self-reflexivity as a researcher and an advocate. However, as far as I am concerned, facing squarely the ambivalence, and sometimes contradictions with regard to studying gender relations in East Asian societies is an undersold contribution of this book.

Presenting rich case studies, the *Handbook* shows a great ambition to explore the different aspects of gender relations and illuminates the complexity of the context in which gender has been constructed and performed. Yet, at times these analyses seem irrelevant to a feminist commitment to challenging the man/woman binary and related heterosexist assumptions. This leads us to rethink the relationship between 'gender', as an analytical category, and feminist politics. On the whole, this anthology is still a timely contribution to remapping the gender and sexual histographies in East Asia, which are also linked to the global history especially in relation to struggles with modernisation and democratisation.

Citation: Lee, P.-H. (2020). [Review of the book *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies*, by Jieyu Liu and Junko Yamashita]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1), 21. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/2018/7925

This page intentionally left blank.

http://www.lectitopublishing.nl

JOURNALS lectito