From *Shakuntala* to *Sanitary Panels*: Women in Indian Graphic Narratives

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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.

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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

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[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* (Deviveni 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.

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