

Kali in Kalyug: The Rise of Women in Indian Comics and Graphic Novels

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"How important it is for us to recognise and celebrate our . . . she-roes"

Maya Angelou, African American Poet

The present paper will try to analyze the status of women in Indian comics. The journey of graphic narratives in India began in 1967 with the publication of the first issue of *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, with protagonists based on mythological tales. Since the birth of the comics in India, the male characters have been leading the stories. Women were given not much importance. *Amar Chitra Katha* comics was pioneered by Anant Pai, published by India Book House as an attempt to correct the colonial hegemony of western comics in India. This colonial-cultural hegemony can be experienced in the area of comic books within the branch of popular 'children's literature'. In 1967, *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) helped supply an impressionable Indian identity wedded to the prejudice of masculinity and patriarchal norms. ACK's writing and illustrative team (led by Pai as the primary "storyteller") constructed a legendary past for India by tying masculinity, Hinduism, fair skin, and high caste (dominant) to authority, excellence and virtue. The medium of comics until recently had been appropriated by patriarchal ideology. This ideology suppressed the voice of women and had to be problematized. This problematization unravels the feminist ideological stance in the light of cultural politics. The term subaltern has gained significance with Gramsci (1971) who describes subaltern as those excluded from playing a meaningful role in any regime of power and who are subjugated by hegemony or who are excluded, including women and peasants. No wonder that the representation of women in the male dominated world of comics is affected by dominant ideologies and naturally bear the burden of an "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1988). Therefore these representations of women to use Gramsci's words should never to be taken as 'natural or inevitable'. From the concept of discourse, an analysis of how women characters are addressed, described and constructed as a system of knowledge emphasizes that women representations does not exist as a single faceted and unchanging social reality to be reflected by discourse; rather it gets systematically constructed in these. Hence women who had hardly a chance for self-representation then, they have been mostly erased, side-lined or distorted in the mainstream discourse. The patriarchal ideology at work ensures the relegation of women to its inferior binary, which aids in the construction of itself as markedly superior. Women in Indian comics find themselves bestowed with an image over which they do not have power and are forced to accept the image as their own, which becomes metaphorically a dispossession of identity. Naturally the images tend to be in concord with the ideologically preferred images of the time. Like the damsel in distress image within a discourse of pity is intended to extol the benevolence of the hero. Like in the story of "Nala Damyanti", where Nala leaves Damyanti in the forest and disappears. The excuse that Nala gives is that he does not want Damyanti to spend her life with him in the forest. Nevertheless, Damyanti expects her hero Nala to rescue her from the danger of being left alone in the forest.

However, comic books have been bending if not breaking the rules of strict moral codes of normativity established by the restrictive authorities. This article portrays the history of graphic narration in India from a feminist perspective. Using deconstructionist approach my paper will analyze the subtle change of the role of women in Indian comic books (printed) from the 1960s to contemporary printed graphic novels as well as web comics. Such graphic novels as *Kari* and *Adi Parva* along with comics of Shakti (Raj Comics) will be taken up as primary texts.

Not only in my preliminary research on comic books but also in my experience with comic books themselves it was found that these perishable products of popular culture hold within them the possibilities of radically questioning standing norms of authoritative interpretations. This view has found support for my assumptions from such people as Roland Schmidt who in his article *Deconstructive Comics* (March 1992) has shown that since comics reading establishes a completely different kind of literacy the traditional custodians of literacy obviously are opposed to the same. William Brown in his essay *The Pre-Narrative Monstrosity of Images: How Images Demand Narrative* (2011) agrees to the view. What is true of the reading practices could also be true of the practices of interpretations. The radical interrogations of the authoritative (mis) representations of the orientations of the characters in the comic books could be done at an elemental level. It is usually assumed that one of the largest consumers of comic books are children and if the comic books can incorporate the ideas of questioning early in the psyche of the children then they just might be trained in the habit of questioning authority. However, it also possible that the opposite of the same occurs, i.e., through the misrepresentations and reductive stereotyping through the comic books the children could be indoctrinated in believing the queer to be aberrant. The paper will try to understand the politics and economics behind the representation/mis-representation and stereotyping of the queer in the comic books vis-a vis the religious narratives and mythologies. While negotiating our analysis of the texts we will also look at the other spectrums of representation where the normative becomes so exaggerated that it looks aberrant. The queer theory can interestingly be used to examine the non-queer. It has hitherto been so done that the normative has been used as a marker against which the non-normative could be judged but in the research effort I will try to take things from the opposite spectrum as well. The very texture and make of the comic books are inductive for the harbouring of the issues and themes of the queer since comics themselves have been regarded as something that defies categorizations. Comics is neither regarded as traditional literature since it contains pictures and nor has been assigned a place with painting since it contains written (typed) words. This flexibility parallels the undetermined status of the queer as well. This art form has hitherto been marginalised as low and the queer people have been marginalised as different. Perhaps a medium/form like comics could be a very convenient vehicle for the narratives of the queer. This paper will try to understand the ways in which superhero comic books have been doing that subtly. Comic books have been bending if not breaking the rules established by the restrictive authorities of strict moral codes of normativity. This paper will try to unite the theories of narratives and formalistic studies with queer/gender studies in order to analyse comics and their formats on one hand and the queer themes they resonate on another. A constant tool of analysis will be discourse analysis along with structuralism.

Hindu Queerness, the concept of Ardhanarishvara

The Ardhanarishwara is a composite of masculine and feminine qualities. They are combined to form an androgynous image which is sexually ambiguous. This deity is formed by the fusion

of Shiva and Parvati. In the Hindu mythology there are both gods and goddesses. The divine, Ardhanarishwar, is drawn as half male and half female. The right side is Shiva and the left side is Parvati. The purpose of drawing is to show that the divine consists of both male and a female side. Both are equally important. This can be seen as a starting point for equality between men and women. It is the union of male and female energies that is at the base of all creation. Therefore Shiva and Shakti together form this universe. The symbolic intent of the figure, according to most authorities, is to signify that the male female principles are inseparable.

Concept of Mohini (Goddess of Enchantment)

The blending of male and female gods is being presented repeatedly throughout Hindu teachings. For instance when the god Vishnu transformed into the female seductress Mohini. He tricked the demons into giving up the elixir of life. She is portrayed as a femme fatale (seductress), an enchantress, who maddens lovers, sometimes leading them to their doom.

Concept of Goddess Kali

Devi Mahamatyam is also known as the Durga Saptashati or Chandi Patha. The text contains 700 verses arranged into 13 chapters. Along with Devi-Bhargava Purana and Shakti Upanishads. It is one of the most important texts of Shaktism (goddess) tradition.

Kali is the Hindu goddess or devi. She is an avatar of Parvati who is often associated with death, time and doomsday, sexuality and violence. But she is also considered as a mother figure and is symbolic of motherly love.

Kali is born to kill the demons Chand-Mund as mentioned in the Durga Saptashati and later she was named as Chamunda by the divine mother Parvati. The name is a combination of Chand and Mund, two demons whom Chamunda killed.

In ACK we see Shumbha and Nishumbha as symbols of arrogance and pride which is ultimately overcome by Parvati's humility and wisdom. They were killed by devi Parvati. In Shashi Tharoor's satirical novel, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), the story of Shumbha and Nishumbha is used both as a warning against dangers of seduction and as a metaphor for the collapse of the relationship between the five Pandavas.

The image of Savita Bhabhi or Vellamma apparently augments the sexual objectification and over sexualisation of feminine bodies. However, on a 'closer' look what we might find is the fact that she takes the reins of sexuality in her own 'hands' (and other body parts!). She deconstructs the gender role of the women in India as meek housewives. She comes up both as a desired object and a subject with a very naughty mind of her own. She also projects the repressed sexual desires of women in India who are otherwise projected as angels in the house.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we might figure that much of the literature and discourse surrounding women are subjugated to the patriarchal discourses yet like the Derridian 'trace' we might find the latent 'her' stories behind the watered down or masculinised versions of the story. Under the patriarchal duress, these mythemes and stories have been muted or mutilated quite often. Yet through the resurgence of the comics, TV, and graphic novels these hidden and repressed desires are well brought out.

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