THE TRANSITION OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN INDIA.

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Abstract

Although women creators have long been a minority in the comic book industry, they have made a notable impact since its very beginning; and more and more female artists gain recognition along with the maturing medium. Women creators have worked every genre- from superhero works, romances, westerns, wars, crime stories, horrors etc. Their modes of expression and subjects of discussion have expanded as women's role in the society has changed. In the turn of the century, the medium graphic novel has explored a range of themes and motifs to express creatively this new found genre. Especially the shattering of gender stereotypes through the complex female characters is stemming out of the need to make their voice strongly heard in the contemporary world.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, graphic narratives, emergence of woman, superheroes,.

The term graphic novel was first coined in English in 1964 and was popularised by the American legend Will Eisner. In India, we welcomed the world of comics dawned through the Amar Chitra Katha in 1967.In the current scenario these novels are redefining the strategies to reach out their target audience by making use of the popular medium to address most pertinent and relevant issues which plague the society. The characters in these narratives do not have any extraordinary powers; they donot exude a strong personality, but they still fight the system, breaking gender stereotypes. It is the modern Indian graphic novel which is radically repositioning the comic medium and bringing it into the 21st century. Crucial to this development in any culture is to break free from the formulae of the genre fiction, if there exists one it would be retelling of both the epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana Epics. The ideas adapted from these Classics, have been copied by Campfire, Vimanika and Virgin/ Liquid/Graphic India.

It is the real world that offers so much scope for Graphic Novels across the globe. One recurring theme from the start is the socio-political concern and a desire to surface issues under reported in conventional news media. For example; Orjit Sen's *River of Stories*, has been made by making his several trips to the Narmada valley in Western India, whereas Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand depicts the ongoing plights of the untouchables in *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*.

Urban India is also a common setting for these books. The contemporary cities' fragmented realities and hidden lives and love are explored in corridor by Sarnath Banerjee through a *Delhi shopkeeper*, and in *Kari* by Patel through a lesbian community. A more sympathetic and inspiring incorporation of folk art traditions into this medium is seen in *Bhimyana*. Another trend is the anthologies showcasing a range of emerging and established talents such as the obiliterary journal, *Pao Dogs!and Twelve*. Of special mention is *This side That side: Restroying Partition*, which combines 48 authors and artists from different regions to address the consequences of the partition of former British India into independent states. Autobiography is another factor established in graphic novels, especially *Drawing the Line Indian Women Fight Back*, written by artists and newcomers, who tackle sexism, rape reportage, voyeurism and woman rights and identities.

Although traditionally women creators have long been a minority in the comic book industry, they have made a notable impact since its very beginning; more and more female artists gain recognition along with the maturing of the medium. Women creators have worked in every genre- from superhero works, romances, westerns, wars, crime stories, horrors etc. Their modes of expression and subjects of discussion have expanded as women's role in the society has changed.

The characters in these narratives do not have any superhuman qualities, do not possess extraordinary powers, they do not exude a strong personality, but still fight the system, breaking gender stereotypes. Graphic novels are redefining the strategies to reach out to their target audience by making use of the popular medium to address the most pertinent and relevant issue that which plague the society. These are narratives of change wherein art, reality and activism merge to facilitate justice and equality in society, thereby paving the way to becoming the new popular literature.

Confusions over comics and graphic novels still exist. According to some critics, comics are typically satirical in nature as the word itself suggests and appeared periodically for children. Christopher Murray in Encyclopedia suggests that Graphic Novel is a long comic narrative meant for a mature audience published in hard back with serious literary themes. However, these distinctions also appear vague as comics are found in various forms. According to Orjit Sen, Graphic Novel, to some people represents a new form of literature whereas comics were never literature. An important factor separating the two media is the emphasis on visual elemens rather than the textual counterpart. If we delve more into the Indian graphic scene, it was Orjit Sen's *River of Stories* is considered to be the pioneering work which dealt with the plight of the Adivasi communities' displacement due to the construction of a dam. In 2004, two major events spanned their growth in India. First one is a Bollywood movie *Hum Tum*, which had a cartoonist as its hero and the second one is the publication of *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee. Since then this genre has captured serious attention from the audience. By the year 2008 the Indian publishers realised its potential. Two of the most significant works were Tejas Modak's *Private Eye Anonymous from Westland* and Amruta Patil's *Kari*. It was around this time India's first novel collective The Pao was formed and it comprises of the works of Orjit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Parismita Singh and Amitabh Kumar.

The next three years saw the coming of age of graphic novels. It started with the *The Hotel at the End of the World* by Parismita Singh, which depicts multiple black and white graphic novellas and George Mathen aka Appupen's *Moonward* with strong visual language. The same year, Bharath Murthy started Comix India an online platform cum comics magazine offering print on demand facilities. It has six volumes to its credit till date. In 2010, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* spurred the mainstream media for its critical yet satirical portrayal of the emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. The visual narratives of these titles were highly developed conforming to international standards. They often drew complex themes apart from the clear line drawings of Amar Chithra Katha era. However, India's folk and traditional visual languages also started making their way into graphic novels. The centuries old painting visual narrative is featured in *I See The Promised Land* , portraying the life of Martin Luther King Jr , followed with *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* .The same year Navayana brought out an adaptation of Jyotiba Phule's *Gulamgiri* by Srividya Natarajan and artist Aparajita Ninan called *A Gardener in the Wasteland.*

The scene changed drastically from 2012. Gone were the days when a graphic novelist had to chase and look for a publisher. By then it became a norm of the industry to have at least a couple of graphic novels in the yearly catalogue of major publishers. Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* featured in Harper Collins List. Pao collective brought out its anthology from Penguin Books. The anthology featured many new creators along with established names and one among them is Vidyun Sabhaney who made her own imprint , published *Mice Will be Mice* by her along with the Japanese artist Shohei Emura. These novels often bring out new perspectives on history and society. In 2013 Vishwajyoti Ghosh wrote *This Side That Side: Restroying Partition* depicting the partition of India

The representation of women characters in these novels is another question. When one traces the growth of these novels, one can find mere representation of women characters in the earlier stages. Since the birth of comics in India, the male characters have been given the central positions. Mostly all the comics produced in the beginning were ruled by male protagonists. Women were given characters of little importance. All the dominant characters including the titular roles were assigned to men. The few women characters present in the comics were supporting characters and were used for the development of the plot. In the last decade of the 20th century a need was felt of bringing the women characters to the fore front. Presently we find many different and interesting portrayal of women characters and these changes in their portrayal can be seen on the basis of their profession, body type, outfit, poses, quotient etc. The focus on women in graphic novels is a newer phenomenon. It also took some time for women to break into the limelight of the field and get a chance to write their own stories. However it took a while for the voice of the women to find their way into the pages of a graphic novel. To change this cartoonist Sharma conducted a workshop around the country bringing the art of creating the graphic novels to women who lived in rural areas. Larissa Bertonasco, Ludmilla Barscht,and Priya Kurian held a workshop that lead to the creation of *Drawing the Line Indian Women Fight Back* an anthology of short mostly autobiographical comics by established artists and writers who talks about topics ranging from sexism, rape reportage, and voyeurism to women's rights and identities. Since then, several female writers and artists have begun exploring the medium and women began to finding voices in these books, with several artists creating memoirs featuring female protagonists, others writing about female superheroes, or strong women who revolt against patriarchy, or deal with personal or family-related issues.

One among them is *Kari* by Amruta Patil which depicts the life of Lesbian lovers Kari and Ruth. Another one is *Nirmala and Normala* by Sowmya Ranjendran and Nivedita Subramaniam which deals with the life of two girls, one nurtured by a wealthy family, and the other raised in an orphanage. Sowmya Ranjendran and Nivedita Subramaniam put together a series of humorous incidents that takes place in their lives, to show us the stark reality between movies and reality. Yet another one is *Sita : Daughter of the Earth* by Saraswati Nagpal, Manikandan. This novel tells us the story of Sita, the princess, who gets married to Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. The story is told from the perspective of Sita, and it is evident that she remains a pillar of strength through the toughest times of her life.

Priya's Shakti by Ram Devineni, Vikas Menon and Dan Goldman is yet another one where the protagonist starts fighting against patriarchy, misogyny and indifference towards gender-based sexual violence**.** *Hush* is probably one of the best graphic novels that the country has seen. It is a bold narrative about a young girl Maya, who is a victim of child sexual abuse and they tell us her story

is told in less than 20 pages. The book has no text, with the black-and-white illustrations doing all the talking. The lack of text is symbolic of the silence that surrounds Maya's abuse. The story is simple, as are the illustrations.

This is Suki! by Manjula Padmanabhan, the comic series called *Double Talk* published in the Sunday Observer, shows how Suki, a free-spirited urban Indian woman, first appeared before the Indians in 1982 **.**When Suki first came into existence, the country only knew political cartooning. This curly hair woman, who had an opinion on many things. She spoke about the absurdities of everyday life and many were taken aback to the extent that the editor received sixty indignant letters. The series was way ahead of its time, considering it spoke about a woman who may not necessarily settle down, and yet had fun. It is hilarious and witty, and relatable for women, both young and old.

Today there are comic characters like Shakti- a super heroine similar to Wonder Woman, Priya- an acid attack victim who becomes a vigilante champion of abused women and inflicts brutal punishment on abusive men and Devi- an Indian goddess who is reincarnated as a modern woman. The introduction of web – comics has also resulted in a slew of female cartoonists who use simple cartoons to impart messages of body positivity, pro-feminism, LGBTQ acceptance. This is a reflection of the increased demand for strong, empowered female characters, and is a strong hint of the direction in which the Indian comic industry is growing. With its unique voice, these novels are gradually carving a concrete niche for itself in the global realm. The popularity of the historical graphic narrative is not a passing fad; it is an emerging trend that has trenched deep into the domain of Indian writing in English.

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