Graphic Novel at the Cutting Edge of Indian Story-Telling Tradition: Reading Amrita Patil's *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* as an Indigenous Subtext of Indian Mythology

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to analyse the use of Indian mythology in Graphic Novel. As an emerging literary form, Graphic novel (also known as Graphic literature and Visual narratives) seeks to explore novel means of telling stories. Indian Graphic novels draw extensively from Indian Mythology to revisit, revise and retell the wonder tales of India, while addressing contemporary concerns like covid, pollution, gender discrimination and the like.

The paper is centred on Amrita Pati's Sauptik: Blood and Flowers, that addresses the gory reality behind the Kurukshetra battle, which is a ruthless infliction on lives and nature. Patil has framed her narrative to dwell on the damage rather than the honour attributed to wars in general, by the mainstream narratives like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. The papers shall unfold the means and methods Patil has used both in text and image to investigate human greed against nature and fellow humans, which are universal problems, irrespective of the time and space.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Visual Narratives, Revisionism

The Indian Story-telling tradition has had an enduring appeal across time, space, cultures and borders on the reading minds. Speculated to have had its beginning in the pre-historic times, story-telling in India has found its way through several mediums from the oral tradition, down to writing, comics, movies, tele-serials and graphic novels. Stories of the Indian soil share a strong bond with its mythology and its religious roots, featured in the rich fabric of Vedas, Ithihasas (epics) and the Puranas. Some of the stories were secular in nature; the collection of Wonder Tales known as the Amar Chithra Katha share their cultural roots and antiquity with the India epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. All the different versions of Indian Stories have evolved through the expansion and transformation in creative expression across all mediums: "the immensely popular comic-book series Amar Chithra Katha, 'immortal picture stories' offers adept renderings… And for adults, a ninety-four-episode TV version of the Mahabharata brought the nation to a stop each

week when originally screened in the 1990s and found an audience numbering in the hundreds of millions' (Rushdie 7)

The recent attempts at creative representations of Indian mythology in digital fiction and video games scale-up to disseminating Indian Stories in varied forms with the aid of technology. Graphic novel is yet another form that seeks to (re)present tales of India in a form that uses text and image to narrate stories from the collective of Indian fables and legends. Authors of graphic novels take an improvised standpoint in the (re)-telling of stories from Indian mythology. The fact that graphic novel as a blended medium has equal space for text and image, offers a bigger and more flexible canvas for the artist who attempts to retell the mythology from his/her vantage point. Graphic novels are usually produced by the efforts of two artists namely the writer and the illustrator, in some instances as is the case with Amrita Patil both writing and illustration is done by one person. The creative vision of writer-painter like Amrita Patil forgo the risk of 'loss in translation between the text-medium and the images, as is the case when the writer and illustrator are two different creators working on a single project.

One needs to reflect on how Graphic novel as a medium of creative expression aids the act of story-telling and how it differs from text-based mediums of writing, in order to understand how this new genre and Indian mythology intersect in extemporizing retellings of Indian Tales. Known by various terminologies as 'Graphic Novel', 'Graphic Literature', 'Visual Narratives', Graphic novel as a literary form made its first appearance in the 1970s, although some historians and critics date it back to the times of ancient cave paintings. Emerging critical inquiry distinctively distinguishes between comics and graphic novel, although some critics consider comics as the prototype of graphic novel, which later evolved in its own line. According to Alan Moore, graphic novel differs from comics in its "density, structure, size, scale, seriousness of theme, stuff like that" (Beatens 2). Moore's conception serves as a working definition of graphic novel, enabling further critical inquiry into the same. Comics on the other hand, although critically engaging, has moved closer to literary forms like science fiction and popular medium like films. Graphic novel, in spite of being associated with science fiction and the superhero narratives, as a literary form it has proven to be closer to the supposedly mainstream literature, than comics.

In the global scenario of graphic novel, the acceptance that the form has received is evident from the fact that it is shortlisted and selected by the jury of acclaimed literary awards and recognitions. Writers of graphic novel across the world have experimented with the form in its aesthetic, political, cultural and literary appeal. The outcry that there is nothing literary about the graphic novel is becoming a baseless accusation against the form.

Like comics, graphic novel in India, too, had an interesting start, with a lot of unique characteristics. Comics made their appearance first, in other words, comics evolved into graphic novel, although there was a fine line dividing comics and graphic novel. A notable characteristic of comics in India is that there is great variety in themes and characters, as Indian comics used Indian mythology and detective stories with local flavour. Since Indian comics was available in regional languages, there was an enormous readership dedicated to Indian comics.

Even though comics giants like DC and Marvel found their way into the Indian market, the young minds of India were captivated by characters brought to them by Diamond Comics, Tinkle, Raj Comics, Balarama, Amar Chitra Katha, and the like. These were available in more than one language. Most of these Indian comics studios deviated from the superhero tradition of the world, presenting its readers with detectives, mythological characters, children, and ordinary working-class people as central characters (Abhijit)

Raj Comics and Diamond Comics were in good business with comics from the 1960s and the 70s. These are published in the comic format in colour, retelling stories from Indian classics or history.

Published by India Book House, which acts itself as one of the dominant wholesale distributors to the Industry, they are found in bookshops, pavement stalls, railway stations, in the stock of itinerant book and magazine seller in trains-in brief, in every conceivable outlet throughout India. They appear in many Indian languages and in English, and sell lakhs of copies. Not exactly a book or a magazine, it is one of the most successful mass market reading materials in India. (Sen 462)

Graphic novel seems to have had a different start than comics in India. In the Indian literary scene, comics or graphic novel, stand out in their theme, structure of narrative; "When the genre of graphic novel became overpowered by superheroes and science fiction around the world, Indian graphic novel stood apart with its different themes that are especially regional. It tried out different approaches, often sharing its motif with mythology." (Abhijith) The first graphic novel in India was The River of Stories (1994) by Orijith Sen, based on a displaced community affected by the construction of a dam over Narmada River. Critically speaking, the novel was received considerably well, with limited readership though. The second graphic novel Corridor (2004) received a better readership than The River of Stories and paved way for a good kickstart to the many Indian graphic novels that followed.

Writer-painter Amrita Patil, the first female graphic novelist of India's is noted for her ecological concern, feminist bent of thought and revisionism featured in her works. Her vision as a graphic novelist seeks to play with colours, shapes as much as with words. Patil's first work Kari, published in 2008, depicts the life of a lesbian in the metropolis. Her later novels Adi Parva (2012) and Sauptik: Blood and Flowers (2016) are based on Indian mythology. Aranyaka published in 2019, written in collaboration with Devdutt Pattnaik, is a retelling of Vedic women characters. Patil's theory of writing is inseparable from images. Her works are noted for the narrative subject; she conceptualises the illustration and storyline according to who tells the story. In other words, how the story is told is determined by who tells the story. She chooses her narrators from the peripheral, liminal zone, whose voice and vision were either undermined or outpowered by the larger narratives. It seems a deliberate choice that all her narrators are 'outliers' - righteous, rebellious and reclusive. Patil gives the pen to those unsung heroes (some of them are women) to rewrite the tales of India. Aswathama, the "Sutradhaar" (the narrator) of Sauptik: Blood and Flowers, chooses to tell his story, differently, long after the end of the Kurukshetra war: "I'd have told this story differently three thousand years ago. The events were raw and I, so angry. Temperance in others can be a bore, temperance in oneself a chore. Angry heroes are easy to understand, that's why they gather such a following." (Sauptik 36). Patil calls such renderings "micro-subversions". Ashwathama takes it upon himself to wade through the missing links, ambivalent spaces and open ends, attempting to find answers to the most obvious yet daunting questions. He lets his audience - the pyre-keepers (Langda and Bhainga) at the cremation ground, to ask questions too, to rewrite the stories he is narrating, not to (mis)take them for the truth: "I am your sutradhaar, but I am still a product of my context and time, marked by attendant blindspots even though I try to be watchful. You aren't held by old narratives. Re-story the shabby stories." (Sauptik 116)

Unlike the epic narratives, Ashwathama's rendering barely glorifies the war or blood-shed; "I know we were just grains of sand blowing into the vortex of Kurukshetra. We weren't flowers being nurtured, we were arrowheads being sharpened." (Sauptik 65). The title of the novel 'Sauptik' means "war waged at night or killing someone who's asleep. The title takes a dig at the unfair means used by the powerful to meet their ends. Ashwathama questions the authority and integrity of Drona, his father and teacher, who had trained both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but continually favoured Arjun;

Duryodhan was braver than he [Arjun], Karn kinder, Bheem more humble. Why did father love Arjun most? Why did you? (Sauptik 236)

Had he [Arjun] not walked off with my father's heart so easily, had we been one generation apart or in different gurukuls, I could have admired Arjun openly, loved him even. I would have been spared the burn of being the rival he barely noticed. Unrequited resentment is far worse than unreturned love. (Sauptik 99)

Ashwathama Observes a Similar Bias with Karn's Guru Parshuram

Parshuram's mission had been to cull the world of as many rajanyas as he could. His rationale for making my father heir to the astras was simple: my brahmin father would be guru to rajanyas on both sides of a war. He would make deadly warriors of the princes; and these armed monkeys could be let loose to destroy each other. (Sauptik 108)

He outrightly critiques the unfair foul play by his father and Guru Drona against Karn and Ekalavya, laying bare, the injustice done to the ace archers, for the only reason that they were not the rajanyas. It is noteworthy that Ashwathama as a narrator, takes on the choric attribute of adding subtext to the action of the play. He draws an analogy between Drona and a gardener:

In what seems like impossible brutality, a knowing gardener can hack half a tree drown and ensure it grows back healthier next year. A gardener of idiot compassion sighs, 'Poor insect, poor weed' and ends up keeping neither bush nor vegetable plot alive. Can't handle culling? Be prepared for the grove to grow into a tangled impenetrable thicket. The culling will still happen, but on the forest's own terms. You will have outsourced brutality.

My father's methodology would find no favour in a free-particle favouring world. Too severe. Not egalitarian enough. Egalitarianism is a beautiful daydream. Show me an egalitarian jungle and I will show you a fox in a lion suit.

Contrary to the current narrative, Ekalavya wasn't punished for being a poor forest boy with super skills. He was punished for a serious error: laying claim to a lineage he had done no ground-time to earn, from a teacher who had explicitly rejected him. Was Dron's rejection unjust? Arguably, I cannot justify my father's actions. But I do know the gurukul was a private one, where students were being honed for a mission. It owed Ekalavya – or for that matter, Karn – nothing.

Karn and Ekalavya should've just rejected elitist lineages; declared themselves to be what they were – swayambhus, self-actualised ones. That would have taken some courage and audacity and courage. Ultimate cocking-a-stock at a system that kept them out. (Sauptik 115)

Sauptik unfolds the obscure layers of Indian mythology by making characters like Ashwathama and Yamuna (river) as the narrators. The non-linear narration, multi narratives, unreliable narration are all encompassed in the novel, adeptly reflecting the traditional techniques of story-telling in the Indian tradition. While dwelling on the uniqueness of Indian tales, Patil pays close attention to nature and women. Her depictions of Prakriti (nature) and women is loaded with an outcry on the centrality of woman in life and the legends of Indian culture, while the reality of the contemporary times is unfair and brutal to both nature and women.

Patil, like any graphic novelist, etches both the text and image to represent her philosophy. She barely uses geometric patterns for the images like lines or rectangles. The images are self-contained as well as suggestive, leaving space for the reader to make sense of the images. She conceives text and image as monozygotic twins (single fertilized egg split into two embryos), where, she acknowledges, that the image is bound to grab the attention of the reader: "Images are big bullies" (Patil)

The images run across pages just like shots/scenes in a movie. Every page is synonymous with every single frame in a motion picture. Her use of depth, colours and motifs in the novel, are all intended to make a visually-sound impact on the reader. Works like Sauptik:Blood and Flowers is an attempt to revisit the legends of Indian Story-telling tradition, explore the depth of its understanding of life, and read between the lines of its mystic representation of human life and all that lies around and beyond it.

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