Graphic Narratives of Change: Rearticulating Gender Roles and Reclaiming Agency in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 2

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:
Antony, Greeshma, and S. Sujaritha. "Graphic Narratives of Change: Rearticulating Gender Roles and Reclaiming Agency in Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S2, 2025, pp. 32–39.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15307834

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a critical issue in India, perpetuated by patriarchal forces that dehumanise and oppress women. In response, women activists have employed diverse methods to voice their resistance and inspire change. Among these, the graphic novel has emerged as a powerful medium for advocacy. This paper intends to analyse the graphic novel anthology Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back, edited by Priya Kurian, Ludmilla Bartscht, and Larissa Bertonasco, examining how gendered roles are challenged and rearticulated through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. It also explores how the graphic novel foregrounds gender issues within private, public, and institutional spaces, highlighting its effective role in sensitising gender equality.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Gender Performativity, Resistance, Graphic Novels.

The lived experiences and realities of women in India are deeply linked to various patriarchal ideals. Women are frequently caught in a web of gender inequity that curtails their agency and autonomy. This inequality exists in both public and private spheres, shaping access to education, healthcare and employment while denying women equal rights and access to opportunities. In 2015, the United Nations set up the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) focusing on the importance of gender equality and empowering women and girls. Despite these efforts, the *Global Gender Gap Report 2024* by the World Economic Forum, in its evaluation of gender equality across social, political and economic spheres, reveals significant disparities, ranking India 129th out of 146 countries ("Two steps back"). This relatively low ranking of India, calls for concerted efforts and policies to bridge the gap and foster gender equality.

The objective of gender sensitisation is to promote equality through awareness-raising and education about gender issues.

It counters the gendered stereotypes and assumptions that people hold perpetuating inequality. In Indian society, where traditional gender constructs are deeply embedded in the body politic, it is essential for sensitisation efforts to address discriminatory attitudes and practices. Sensitisation programs such as educational initiatives, curriculum revaluations, seminars, workshops, training programs, and campaigns (Kaur and Mittal) coordinate these efforts. They scrutinise gender biases, empower women and actively engage men in discussions, fostering empathy and mutual respect.

Gender and its prescribed roles are not innate in human nature but are socially constructed and imposed through social conventions and practices. Simone de Beauvoir underscores this idea, asserting, "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (qtd. in Butler, "Performative Acts" 519). This notion is reiterated by Judith Butler in her theory of gender performativity, stating that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (519). She states that gender is enforced through performative acts and repetitive behaviours. This system dictates fixed gender identities, shaping women's lives and perceptions.

The escalating violence against women in India, coupled with the harsh realities of their lives, emphasises the need to narrate their stories and confront oppressive systems. Literature seeks to represent social realities, amplifying the voices of the marginalised, challenging the status quo, and raising awareness. The graphic novel has emerged as a compelling and significant medium for articulating these stories.

The graphic novel is a distinctive medium that effectively blends visuals and text to convey its narrative. Its origins lie in the emergence of comic strips and comic books in the late 1800s. Through visual storytelling, graphic novels offer an immersive experience, actively engaging readers in the construction of meaning. Over the years, the medium has evolved to encompass a variety of genres, conveying complex stories and themes.

The origin of Indian graphic novels can be traced back to the immense popularity of comics such as *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tinkle* in the late 1960s and 1980s. Independent publishing houses such as Diamond Comics and Raj Comics brought serial comics into the mainstream. Later, in 1994, Orijit Sen's graphic novel *River of Stories* advanced the medium towards socio-political narratives. In the years that followed, writers started incorporating Indian mythology and folklore as part of their stories, while others focused on political and autobiographical themes. Prominent graphic novelists such as Amruta Patil, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, and Sarnath Banerjee have further enriched the medium, transforming it into "a highly politicized platform of discourse" (Monika).

Indian graphic novels have become increasingly popular since the new millennium, receiving significant reception among younger generations. These novels have been able to discuss social issues, contemporary concerns and critique gendered norms. The depiction of women's lives and realities in modern society has also become a focal point. Critics observe that "the visual portrayal of women and the female body in the post-millennial years has taken on new dimensions, a momentum powered by gendered violence that has been brought to light through a more established and varied media scene" (Varughese 252). Emphasising this shift, graphic novels have ventured into women's experiences, specifically focusing on gender issues and conflicts. These graphic novels employ their medium to inform readers and emerge as "narratives of change wherein art, reality, and activism merge to facilitate justice and equality in society" (Parvathy and Remadevi 4835).

Following the 2012 Delhi gang rape, concerns regarding women's safety in India reached a critical juncture. The incident sparked conversations and protests throughout the country and urged for a systemic change. In response to this issue, Zubaan, an independent feminist publishing house, and the Goethe Institute of Germany organised a workshop uniting women artists and activists.

The workshop facilitated discussions on women's lived experiences, sexual violence and trauma, aiming to draw awareness through creative writing. This initiative resulted in the publication of *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*, a 2015 anthology consisting of fourteen graphic stories by women artists. The stories in the collection examine the plight of women in India, shedding light on patriarchal barriers, gendered violence, and the struggle for justice.

This study focuses on seven short stories from the anthology: Harini Kannan's "That's Not Fair," Samidha Gunjal's "Someday," Reshu Singh's "The Photo," Soumya Menon's "An Ideal Girl," Neelima P. Aryan's "The Prey," Kaveri Gopalakrishnan's "Basic Space," and Angela Ferrao's "Ladies Please Excuse." Each of these narratives offers a nuanced portrayal of women's resistance, illustrating the multifaceted ways patriarchy exerts control over their lives. Through symbolic acts of resistance, the protagonists assert their agency, confronting dominant structures that seek to silence them.

The anthology's opening sketch, "That's Not Fair," portrays a dark skinned pregnant woman who feels pressured by society to lighten the skin tone of her unborn daughter. Meanwhile, the unborn child is shown defying these unjust expectations. The following story, "Someday," tells the tale of a girl who transforms into Kali to ward off men who taunt and harass her because of her attire. In keeping with the theme of defiance, "The Photo" presents a young woman expressing her desire for freedom and happiness while defying social expectations to get married. A similar viewpoint can be seen in "An Ideal Girl," where a girl chooses to leave her home because she is unable to conform to society's constructs of being an ideal girl. In a more symbolic form of representation, "The Prey" tells the story of a girl who hunts and kills an eagle, which also symbolises a predatory man she has encountered. This becomes a daring act of autonomy and strength, representing her win over threat. "Basic Space" is an exploration of bodily autonomy as well, engaging with the variety of boundaries women draw around themselves to feel safe. The story imagines a society free from discrimination and where women can live freely. In the final story of the discussion, "Ladies Please Excuse," a young woman deals with gender bias while looking for a job, as interviewers doubt her abilities solely because of her gender.

The paper intends to analyse selected stories from the graphic novel anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*, edited by Priya Kurian, Ludmilla Bartscht, and Larissa Bertonasco.It examines the gendered roles imposed on women, analysing how these roles are challenged and rearticulated in resistance to patriarchal forces by relying on Butler's theory of gender performativity as an analytical lens. It also explores how the graphic novel foregrounds gender issues within private, public, and institutional spaces and emphasises its effective role in challenging traditional gender norms and sensitising gender equality.

The notion of performing gender is effectively presented in "That's Not Fair," wherein the mother carries out various performative acts after finding out that her unborn baby is a girl. The mother attempts to lighten her baby's skin tone assuming that fairer complexion will ease the financial burden of an enormous dowry. Such acts, like applying fairness cream on her stomach, amplify Butler's conception that gender is not an inherent quality but is enforced through repetitive actions. The story thus reveals how the social and cultural norms, such as fair skin and the dowry system, interlink with gender performativity and constrain women.

The gender identity of the baby is shaped even before she is born. Relatives who visit the pregnant woman caution her about the gender expectations for a girl—the dos and don'ts—emphasising the behaviours and roles she has to adhere to. The story is narrated from the unborn baby's perspective and portrays the baby actively listening to and responding to the conversations. The baby challenges the deep rooted gendered expectations and demands that her parents save up money for education instead of dowry. Through this act of symbolic resistance, the baby seeks to dismantle the performative cycle of gender prior to her birth.

The sketch "Someday" portrays a young woman who is catcalled and harassed in public, targeted by the male gaze. Laura Mulvey conceptualises the male gaze, asserting that "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 11). The men from the sketch stalk the young woman and eventually turn into large, monstrous creatures, representing the patriarchal forces and dehumanising male gaze that reduces her into a mere object of male desire. It also denies her individuality and strips her of autonomy. Fiona Vera-Gray observes that women experience an "unsafety of femininity... a sense of unsafety entangled with the female body itself" (Vera-Gray and Kelly 270), highlighting how this vulnerability manifests through the constant surveillance of women's bodies. The girl is thus rendered powerless and deprived of autonomy under the threat of the dominating forces.

Butler emphasises that performative acts can be rearticulated to subvert gender roles. This is reflected in the woman's transformation into the goddess Kali, embodying fierce resistance and strength. Kali is hailed as a protector and represents feminine power and rage against oppression and injustice. Through her transformation, she redefines her gender performance and subverts the norms that hold women docile and submissive. Mulvey argues that in visual media, a woman is a "bearer of meaning, not a maker of meaning" (Mulvey 7). Through her shift into Kali, she asserts herself as an active agent and defies the patriarchal forces that objectify and control her. This transformation is powerfully illustrated in the narrative through a sudden flash of light, which symbolises her resistance to the oppressive gendered gaze.

"The Photo" discusses the obligation on women to fulfil their gender roles. The woman in the narrative is limited to her role of motherhood despite her educational qualifications. She sacrifices her ambitions for the benefit of her family asserting that she is happy and internalising what is demanded of her. She embodies the ideal of the perfect mother through her constant engagement in household chores and tending to the family's needs.

When her daughter, Bena, questions her choices, saying that she is not like her, she responds, "What makes you think I am not happy? I have plenty of things to do too, you know. Rather than just plans. Anyways, I like being the boss here. Papa can't do anything without me" (Kurian et al. 41). Her mother affirms that she is content, conforming to gender expectations of self sacrifice and urges Bena to follow in her footsteps. However, Bena resists the pressure to marry, rejecting performative roles that identify women solely through marriage and motherhood. As Butler argues, "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 15). Women are confined as helpless and passive beings by the institution of marriage and its repetitive rituals. Bena challenges the idea that women must limit themselves to their roles as mothers and wives by telling her mother that she has many plans for the future. As a result, she expresses her goals and puts her happiness first, defying gender norms and choosing independence over conformity.

In "The Ideal Girl," the protagonist—a young girl—is trapped in the narrow roles assigned to her by a patriarchal society. She is conditioned to follow a rigid set of gendered duties and obligations, which reflects the repetitive performance of gender. She is encouraged to learn hobbies, not for their art or skill, but to obtain a dowry. She is also to excel at her studies while restrained to domestic life. She is forbidden from complaining or expressing dissatisfaction with her circumstances and is instructed to remain silent. She is conditioned to be the "ideal girl" by these impositions, which also limit her agency and autonomy. As a result, her identity is governed and maintained through social norms.

Upon marriage, the girl is expected to juggle her job and household duties without expecting help from her husband. Arlie Hochschild underlines this dual responsibility as the "second shift"

— "Just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a leisure gap between them at home. Most women work one shift in the office or factory and a second shift at home" (Hochschild). Likewise, the woman is forced to manage domestic labour alongside her profession in the story. The story critiques the unequal demand for labour as the girl questions her husband's hesitance to help her with the household chores. She refuses to remain submissive and meek by speaking out against the unfair second shift. She eventually leaves home, exhausted from being bound by the role of the ideal girl and defying the expectations placed upon her. As a result, she reclaims her identity and asserts her autonomy by challenging the performative roles that controlled her. This further reflects Butler's conception of how performative acts may be rearticulated as resistance to critique conventional gender roles.

The story "The Prey" centres on a young girl and her act of revenge in order to expose the subversion of gender norms. On her way to school one day the girl encounters a man and feels threatened by his presence. She is subject to the man's predatory gaze and is reduced to an object of scrutiny. The man's predatory nature is paralleled by an eagle that steals the girl's chicks, which drives her to lay a trap and kill it—a symbolic act of rebellion against both the man and the eagle.

Patriarchal structures view women's bodies as objects in need of supervision and control. The girl's attitude and behaviour are direct responses to these impositions that attempts to scrutinise, and objectify her body. In an act of boldness, she traps and kills the eagle instead of being passive and resists the male gaze. This revenge becomes a symbolic triumph as it undoes the threat imposed by the predatory man and opposes gender norms that devalue women as meek and vulnerable. In doing so, the girl reasserts her agency and power, rejecting the performative acts that enforce her identity as a submissive object of the male gaze. Her mother is taken aback by her conduct and states, "Oh, girls these days" (Kurian et al. 76), suggesting that the girl is not conforming to expectations of gender roles, like surrendering to men's wrongdoings. The girl's actions categorised as rebellious, challenges prevailing norms and empowers her.

"Basic Space" follows a series of interviews which describe the ways women struggle to ensure their safety. Women are continuously monitored and policed in public settings under the male gaze, and the continual threat of violence diminishes the value of their lives. In response to this objectifying male gaze, the women in the interviews with the author narrate the different measures they take, like maintaining a battle stance, placing bags over their chests, and assuming a tough and serious demeanour. They also keep pins within their bangles and wear dupattas to protect themselves from the predatory gaze of men. One sketch even describes a women's website suggesting that girls cover themselves with a garbage bag to mark their boundaries. All these strategies highlight the "safety work" women engage in as a form of self-defence. Liz Kelly defines "safety work" as the efforts women undertake to prevent violence before it even occurs (Vera-Gray and Kelly 269). The predatory and hostile space created by the male gaze forces women to adopt such strategies, concealing their bodies to remain safe and secure.

The women in the narrative draw invisible lines around themselves, marking boundaries as they navigate through a society shaped by dehumanising patriarchal forces. As Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag argue in their essay "Controlling the Body: Media Representations, Body Size, and Self-Discipline" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, "Self-discipline and control through time and space reflect subjectivities thoroughly infused with patriarchy, where women's bodies confer a status in a hierarchy not of their own making; this hierarchy requires constant body surveillance and maintenance, often taking form in self-disciplining practices" (Giovanelli and Ostertag 289). These forces control and curb their freedom and movement, forcing them to be vigilant and aware of their surroundings. It also requires women to follow modest dress codes and be compliant. The author imagines a world without any judgments, where the interviewees express their desire

to "walk out without dressing up like a mad woman, wear nothing but flowers to accessorise, run without hunching, lie down in Lodhi gardens in the grass….scratch in public anywhere and play Holi with everyone without worrying about my white clothes" (Kurian et al. 138-139). Their answers depict how social expectations and limitations frame gender performativity. They envision a world where women can freely express themselves without any constraints. In a space unbounded by performative roles, femininity is rearticulated in a way that frees itself from conventional gender constraints.

In "Ladies, Please Excuse," gendered norms hinder the protagonist, Jenny's search for a job. Even in professional settings, women are quite often victims of discriminatory practices that deprive them of equal opportunities and wages. During her job interviews, Jenny is repeatedly asked questions about her marital life, such as whether she plans to marry and if she would quit the job once she does. She is also questioned about her abilities to handle pressure and work late hours. These questions reveal how patriarchal forces narrowly stereotype women, doubt their competence and expect them to conform to traditional gender roles, even within institutional spaces. The repetitive nature and pattern of these interview questions framed as, "Can you, Do you, Will you" (Kurian et al.155) reflect how women are judged and limited by their performative roles.

Jenny's qualifications and abilities are undermined based on several gendered assumptions. The interviews and questions do not assess her skills or merit. Jenny sarcastically asks if she is "interviewing for a job or a marriage bureau ?" (Kurian et al. 154), highlighting the deep-rooted gender biases that guide these evaluations. Women are often expected to adhere to their traditional roles as homemakers and are considered inept and unfit for office jobs. Even if they enter the workspace, they are expected to manage their household chores and duties alongside their jobs. They are thus forced to undertake this "second shift." This pressure is portrayed in the story through a sketch in which Jenny observes women street vendors balancing work while carrying babies on their hips as they sell their produce, all without access to basic facilities.

Jenny's friend also describes another difficult experience: she was required to go for an interview in an office where there was no washroom for women. The lack of basic facilities, such as washrooms, for women emphasises the issue with workplace design. Doreen Massey, in her work *Space, Place, and Gender*, argues that spaces are essentially "gendered," stating, "From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood" (Maasey 179). Thus, the absence of amenities for women highlights how workspaces are designed to cater to men, ignoring women's needs. When Jenny's brother asks her if demanding for washrooms is "taking it too far" (Kurian et al.158), she responds that having access to basic facilities makes a difference in her comfort, health, and safety, none of which are valued by these workspaces.

The story thus critiques the gendered norms and practices that permeate workspaces, revealing how they discriminate against and objectify women, restricting their agency. Professional environments and workspaces evaluate women based on their conformity to performative gender roles and expectations. Jenny hopes to set up an office of her own, a space which would be considerate in prioritising women's needs. She envisions a workspace where women would not be restricted or deprived of career advancement opportunities due to gendered expectations. In such a space, she rejects performative ideals and roles that regulate women's behaviour in institutional and professional settings.

The selected stories for analysis delve into the intricacies of gendered norms that dictate and constrain women's lives, systematically oppressing them. These narratives critique societal

expectations that position women primarily as homemakers and caregivers, sacrificing their aspirations. The characters resist such deep-rooted gendered roles, thereby confronting societal biases and reclaiming their agency. The narrative also looks at how women are frequently conditioned to endure oppression and violence by remaining silent, submissive, and passive. The women in the narrative actively resist sexual violence and oppose patriarchal structures that restrict their mobility, agency, and space in institutional, public, and private settings. Thus, the stories under study demonstrate how women disrupt the cycle of performativity and empower themselves through symbolic acts of resistance.

Through their complex narratives blending visuals and text, these graphic novels effectively underline the complexities of gender constructs, presenting them in a manner that is accessible and engaging for younger audiences. By portraying women resisting and challenging societal norms, these works help foster awareness and inspire readers to engage with gender issues critically. The visually compelling narratives resonate with younger readers, who find the medium particularly appealing. These narratives voice women who defy stereotypes and challenge dominating systems, urging readers to question the deep-rooted gender biases. By delving into the constraints women face within private and public spaces, these stories highlight the pervasive effects of patriarchal forces. Thus, the graphic novel plays a significant role in sensitising gender issues to readers, encouraging them to foster empathy, critically reflect on gender equality, and promote social justice. Among such works, *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* marks a seminal contribution to Indian graphic literature, amplifying women's voices and envisioning a more equitable society.

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