Unconventional Voices and Alternate Spaces: Redefining Popular Narratives through Kari, Nasreen and Priya

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ABSTRACT

The term graphic novel was first coined in English in 1964 and popularised by American legend Will Eisner and can be understood simply as a 'fat comic' in book form which is also aimed at adult readers. In India, we welcomed the world of comics through Amar Chitra Katha in 1967. In the turn of the century, the medium graphic novel explored a range of themes and motifs to express creatively this 'new found' genre. One significant step was to break free from the endless retellings of the popular mythological stories in comics. This paper attempts to explore the psyche of female protagonists shattering gender stereotypes through the complex female characters in graphic novels like 'Kari' by Amruta Patil, 'Priya's Shakti' by Ram Diveneni and 'Bloody Nasreen' by Shahan Zaidi. The focus is on characters arising out of regions known for strong gender conflict and cultural complexities. It studies their appearance, character traits, behavioural patterns, occupational choices, all stemming out of the need to make their voice strongly heard in the contemporary world.

Keywords: graphic novels, gender stereotypes, gender and cultural conflict

Popular Literature is literature which has shown continued and wide acceptance; is measured by sales and is subject to frequent imitation and adaptation and are generally commercial successes. The objective of this paper is to break the myth of the 'popular' and identify unconventional voices and alternate spaces of the twenty-first century world which demands attention. This paper aims to understand how these 'not-so-popular' narratives are using the popular mediums of communication to reach out to the masses, to affect change.

Literature has been significantly impacted with the advent of the internet. Since the 1990s, authors have been experimenting with different forms of digital illustrations to support story narration. The advances in the world of technology have given rise to new modes of expression. Book twitter, book blogs, book tube etc has made it easier for people to discuss books and literature on the social media. Graphic novelists have capitalised on this digital epoch to reach out and break the gender stereotyping in the minds of the readers. The overarching benefit of the modern day graphic novel is its vast reach and visibility in the minds of the readers. Graphic novelists like Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman etc initiated e-lending system in the libraries thereby giving it acceptance and accessibility. Digital pioneers are developing apps,

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writers are introducing enhanced and interactive e-books and publishers are showing a progressive attitude towards distribution and marketing. With the help of the digital world, writers are experimenting with new methods to reach out to the audience.

One significant approach was the creation of an augmented reality framework wherein the venue for release of books is morphed into walk-in book booths, where audiences can unlock special animation, real-life stories, and other interactive elements via Blippar, a mobile visual discovery platform. With e-book lending phenomenon replacing the traditional library, digital vendors are increasing in number and making borrowing more convenient and cost effective. The digital impact of graphic novels is paving the way for a wider audience and greater circulation thereby giving these new age authors and illustrators a scope to fight the traditional norm of what constitutes the 'popular'.

Interestingly, the graphic novels which emerged from regions predominantly controlled by societal structures and cultural conflict are breaking new paths. Three seminal works from the eastern world creating a storm in the digital graphic world are *Kari, Bloody Nasreen and Priya's Shakti*. The characters in these novels, arising out of regions known for strong gender conflicts, defy the commonly accepted sketched portrayal of women and try to change the current gender status quo.

India's first woman graphic novelist, Amruta Patil, busted the myth of 'straight' stories with full force with the release of the first lesbian story *'Kari'*. '*Kari'* is the story of a dark, tenacious, forlorn lesbian who struggles in an ad agency and battles the complexities of her estranged love life with Ruth during the day, but she transforms into Danger Chorri–a vigilante– at night. The complex character is disillusioned and frustrated thereby capturing the true state of the modern man. The symbolism used reminds one of Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. The author skilfully represents the contradicting aspects of her personality reflective of the 21st century woman. The world of urban dichotomy is skilfully represented in the black and white images, thereby addressing the gender queer and identity crisis in the modern smog cities. The few coloured fantasies expose the commoditisation of women in society who are caught up in the frenzy of urbanisation. The story is a vivid exploration of a women's psyche and her sexuality. Amruta Patil explores the life of the urban society where people are lonely and alienated from each other. Patil employs irony when she sets Kari in an advertising firm, where the 'ideal woman' is created. Advertisements create gender specific roles and women in society are expected to emulate and construct their identities around this 'ideal woman'. Kari's inability to define her own gender in an advertising world which defines gender roles remains paradoxical. Kari paints the picture of a suffocating metropolitan culture disseminated with images of heterosexual normalcy. The identity crisis she undergoes exemplifies the problems faced by sexual minorities in a heterosexual milieu. Kari's alter ego role of a boatman, clad in a PVC suit, trying to clean the sewers symbolises the need for purgation and liberation in the modern world. Kari thereby stands out as an agent for change and the hope for acceptance of an alternate identity in this complicated and fragmented world.

Karachi based graphic novel, *Bloody Nasreen,* is Pakistan's first unveiled heroine. A truly path breaking graphic novel by Pakistani graphic artist Shahan Zaidi, Nasreen breaks all conventional stereotyping. A ruthless crime fighter, Nasreen is a modern cult figure, inspired by

the real-life character from India, Phoolan Devi. Zaidi draws an extremely rugged image of her, with gun clutched in one hand, dishevelled hair, skull printed salwar kameez, smeared kohl around her eyes, a burning cigarette hanging from her lips, and a pair of dirty sneakers – all portraying a typical 'hysterical woman'. She fights injustice and does not deem necessary to justify her actions. She shatters the image of the docile, girl next door, as well as the image of a super woman. She is just a normal person who picked up the skills along the way, who decided to fight the world in her own right, who swears prolifically and who battles conventional ideologies in her conservative world. She fights against the discrimination meted out to women in Pakistan, the denial of visibility of women in public spaces, the subjugation of women and subsequent human trafficking. The popularity that Nasreen has garnered in the minds of the readers is evident from the fact that The Crew Films Company has landed a deal with Zaidi to transform Nasreen into a full-fledged movie. The reason Nasreen has captured the sensibilities of the modern reader is because Zaidi does not conform to the conventional. Nasreen represents an internal struggle against oppression (jihad) and through her violence suggests that when enough harm is done, an uncontrollable rage can take over. In a twist on the objectification of women in the media, Nasreen, rejects the orientalist imagery so often associated with women from the East and instead projects a loud feminist agenda that includes her right to uncover, use her body as a weapon and act in her own interests. And it is the reach of the digital world that has enabled Zaidi to create this impact in the minds of the reader.

Another ordinary woman who decided to become an agent of change is Priya, in Priya's Shakti, the character created by a New York based filmmaker, Ram Devineni. Born into a traditional patriarchal society, she was gang-raped by the men in her village because they felt that her midriff showing ghagra choli was too revealing. Her family too believes that she has shamed them. Priya is left with no support and calls out to Goddess Parvati to help her. Parvati incarnates herself in Priya's body and together they fight injustice, misogyny and indifference. Priya's Shakti was written in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape of Nirbhaya and since Priya's Shakti has gone viral, it has generated debate globally on how society treats rape survivors and perpetuates stigma. Priya's revenge is not only personal but a fight against all gender biased violence. What has struck a chord in the minds of people is that it strongly references Hindu mythology. In Hindu mythology, Goddess Parvati is portrayed as one who challenges Shiva, other Gods and humans to be sensitive to the needs of others. Parvati's influence over Priya is tremendous and the image of Priya mounted on the tiger is truly a symbol of transformation and empowerment. Priya's story is that of an ordinary girl exhibiting courage and power in the face of adversity. Priya with her dusky, common place looks, and ordinary everyday clothes has left an indelible mark in the minds of readers who identify with her cause of fighting gender discrimination and domination.

The characters in these narratives do not have any superhuman qualities, do not possess extraordinary powers, do not exude a strong personality, but still fight the system, breaking gender stereotypes. Graphic novelists are redefining the strategies to reach out to their target audience by making use of the popular medium to address most pertinent and relevant issues which plague 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'.

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