



Issue of Gender and Violence in Graphic Fiction: Raj Comics Universe and the Depiction of Female Characters and Violence

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Abstract: *Comics and graphic fiction in India have treaded on a fluctuating journey of sorts. The decade of the 90's was definitely a golden decade for comics and graphic fiction in India. Raj Comics as a torchbearer of sorts in graphic fiction in India can be studied to ascertain the issues with gender and violence in graphic fiction. The Raj Comics universe with its ensembled superhero universe is a big sample space for scholarly study in the finer aspects of graphic fiction. The study can also be vital in terms of psychographics and demographics of the Hindi heartland as the Raj Comics found its true footing in Hindi speaking states. The influence of Amar chitra katha can be seen on many comics of the era as the graphic artists often hopped from one project to other, simultaneously illustrating several works of graphic fiction at a time. An interesting observation is the depiction of female gender in graphic fiction in India. To add to it the visual depiction of violence within the realm of visual aesthetics of violence is also a worthy study in the direction of scholarly study of the comics and graphic fiction narrative in India.*

Keywords: *Gender, Narrative, Graphic fiction, Comics, Aesthetics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Graphic fiction and comics in India have an illustrious history. The graphic art is hugely inspired by the various art movements in India, most notably the miniature art school. Graphic fiction can well be a part of Graphic novels or comic books . Graphic novels contain complete narratives, whether or not they are part of a larger series. Comic books contain excerpts of serialized narratives. The Indian graphic fiction industry is itself an important area of study within media economics. It is important to study the Indian contexts within graphic fiction and comics art as the cultural aspects and mass media consumption is different from the european, Japanese manga and american narratives. There can be a silent whisper of how Indian graphic fiction in the form of comics and the issues of degree of influence in character and subject development being heavily borrowed from the western counterparts. The Raj comics with its market reach and efficient distribution system in a way penetrated into north indian homes like



no other before it. These works of graphic fiction were in forms of periodical comics and special issues often telling a complex narrative in parts or series. The depiction of female characters in Raj comics is an interesting case study in the broader area of representation of gender in media.

Gender representation of mother and sisters

The mothers and sisters have been portrayed within the specific cultural milieu. The graphical representation in fiction of such characters is devoid of any layering. They play a mere supporting part in the progression of the larger narrative. The narrative would not delve into any “Oedipus complex” or “Electra complex” in the story plot.

The outfits and makeup art of female characters

The outfits and makeup art of female characters is synonymous with tight fitting body suits and venetian masks. Shakti the lone female superheroine in Raj comics is a different case study with a getup reminiscent of any ascetic or hermit of the mountains. Though her customers are also revealing in a way and giving boost to male sexual appetite fuelled with a degree of voyeurism. Apart from costumes and getup another factor are the dialogues which are often in an action reaction mode, sans any meaningful conversation. The study of female representation within the context of Raj Comics is important as it has in a way defined the graphic fiction and comics space in a mass mediated space of the Hindi heartland. The aspect of male fetishization of females is often incorporated in a subtle subliminal manner in the graphic art representation of female gender.

Aesthetics of violence in Indian graphic art

The aesthetics of violence in graphic fiction has its genesis in cinema. The hand drawn graphic sequences of fights rely heavily on wrestling traditions of the subcontinent and popular culture. The kung fu martial arts and free style fighting is also used to depict the fighting prowess of certain characters. Violence is an essential harbinger of sorts as a definite means to bring peace. Almost all the superheroes are well versed in one or the other fighting art tradition. Nagraj in snake fighting, kung fu and martial arts. Super commando Dhruv in commando fighting techniques. The hugely popular Doga is a superhero with a certain reflection of an antihero. The birth of Doga(Alter ego of bodybuilder Suraj) is due to the violence and its aftermath in a society where power and money rules the roost. Doga in his crusade to end the organized crime often uses violent means of torture and combat. He is a skilled marksman, boxer, and is apt in the finer details of martial art and wrestling. The Lion Gym where he trains and also is a trainer is where he learned the all round combat skills. Doga can be a cold blooded assassin and also can be a crusader against crime. Super commando Dhruv often relies on his mental acumen and cognitive skills to combat the enemies. Nagraj on the other hand is a lethal killing machine with supernatural powers and fighting skills. The character of Nagraj saw a reboot of a kind after almost 10 years of his launch as the writing and illustration team behind the character got changed. The visual narrative style also saw a complete overhaul with Nagraj also relying on intellect and cognitive powers to end crime, violence taking a backseat or needed only when the situation can be subsided with other skills of communication. Violence is an essential ingredient in Indian graphic novels/ comics where climax and conflict in the narrative structure is incomplete without the selling proposition of violence.



Male gaze an important tool to sell graphic fiction

Male gaze has been an important aspect when visual narratives are conceptualized. The dames in distress and femme fatales often find their way in visual narratives of graphic fiction to easily objectify the female characters in these narratives. Even the female superheroes in some of the graphic art fiction are modelled on the lines of femme fatales. Their costumes are always ready to reveal a certain body contour to the reader who does a role reversal by shifting between the dual roles of reader and viewer. A kind of male fascination with mammary glands is readily addressed with depiction of the female torso in graphical fiction over the years. The notions of manufactured beauty also get represented in a certain sexist gender representation in graphic fiction. The stringent censorship laws in India in mass media and a niche market for mass mediated graphic fiction which finds its existence in public space makes it difficult to copy the western or Japanese standards which are often laden with sexual violence and rape depictions.

Depiction of female body parts in graphic fiction in India over the years.

The depiction of body parts of female characters with an emphasis on cleavage and torso has been an integral style to represent the female characters particularly the female superheroes. The placement in the panels of graphic fiction medium (comics/novel) is also done to maximize the male gaze to its full impact. The issue needs discussion as the graphic fiction in its genre caters to a certain age group where young minds can have an everlasting impression and perceptions on the female body and its deeply unidirectional representation. Sharp facial features coupled with slender waist and low waist garment makes the female characters species of objectification and sexual gratification of a kind. The graphical representations have fuller lips and long necks to cement a certain body type of these females. The graphical representation of female characters is similar in Amar chitra katha and other popular comics houses of the time. The queens and princesses are shown to be exhibiting enormous beauty with highly sexualized body types representations. Raj comics fantasy realm laced with mythological aspects is clearly visible in a superhero 'Bhokal' (Bhokal is a fictional superhero appearing in Raj Comics. Most stories are based on dark fantasy with blood and gore. He is a legendary winged warrior prince of a fictional fabled Pari Lok (fairyland). He descended to earth to take part in a fighting tournament and landed in Vikasnagar, becoming a zealous defender of the people of Vikasnagar) where the female characters are often 'blondes' (Turin-Turin: aka Rajkumari Sofia (princess Sofia). Turin is a princess from another planet. First love interest of Bhokal and later became his wife. Turin left Bhokal after Saloni and Rupsi became pregnant with Bhokal's child. Later on it was found that Maya controlled Bhokal's mind to destroy his reputation and his relationship with Turin)

Sexist Nomenclature of female characters in graphic fiction

Names like Chandika, Natasha, Miss Killer, Nagina when portraying the fierce female characters whereas names like sweta, saudangi, Monika (Lomdi (Vixen in a loose translation)), Visarpi, Nagrani, Bharti, Richa (Black Cat), Jane (Common love interest of Kobi Bhediya in Raj Comics), Mamta Pathak (alter ego Paralayanka), Kshipra, Sheena are other love interests of Parmanu (Inspector Vinay) in Raj Comics's Parmanu. The names are often deeply coated in sexism. The nomenclature is a grim copy of deep sexism that goes with the naming of the Bond girls in the recurring James bond film series.



About the Author

Haris Hasan is an Assistant Professor at the Delhi School of Journalism, University of Delhi. His interest areas include Cinema Studies, Representation of Gender in media, Cultural studies, Comics and graphic art in mass media and journalism. He has contributed in several research articles on gender and media with an aim to bring such areas of study into mainstream recognition and public discourse. Representation of gender in sports, cinema, literature, comics are some of the core areas where he tries to bring meaningful conversations within the broader area of media studies.