DRAWING THE DANGEROUS: INCREASING VISUAL AND TEXTUAL LITERACY

Ms. Ruchi Sharma

Lecturer

St. Xavier's College, Jaipur

Abstract

Traveling to a comic convention, writings today have evolved to create a unique Pop Culture. The present paper focuses on how the need to expand this much restricted pop culture of the country has given birth to graphic novels. These graphic novels have moved beyond the strips that appeared in the Sunday newspaper to the mobile app BLIPPER that makes a literary text in the present day world. It becomes interesting to note the contribution and direction in which different kinds of graphic novels change the image of superheroes. The paper shall look at the literary value of the format, locating it in various libraries in times to come. The most creative work in publishing today, therefore anticipates a road map of Indian writings ahead that are becoming contenders in circulation statistics, exploring cultural depth.

The paper discusses inspiring 'Priya's Shakti' which hangs on to a larger audience with its depiction of significant social events through multicultural lens. It is a story about self-discovery and respect to be given to women showcasing the protagonist's journey of becoming a survivor of rape instead of a victim. Besides inspiring minds, the reading aims to improve visual and textual literacy of young readers. Consequently, this paper shall also look at opinions of educators and scholars towards providing an intensive section of graphic novels to cataloguers of various libraries.

World literature today has a significant need towards increasing the visual and textual literacy. Keeping this goal in mind various interesting teaching courses are now offered in university curriculum that engage students in reading literature with a better understanding of its conventions. All ESL students can be benefited with fascinating equation of image-text learning offered by the writer's writerly text. The genre of the graphic novel can be seen significantly in Eddie Campbell's phrase as a platform where 'word, picture, and typography interact' producing graphic literature. Today the potential to draw reluctant readers through this form of writing is gaining popularity amidst teachers and scholars. As a future educator, I would like to look at how this genre can be used in English Language classrooms bridging the gap between a generation of avid readers and a generation living in advanced visual world television and video games.

Various articles and research papers discuss and demarcate the difference between a comic book and a graphic

novel. Andrew Arnild's "Comix Poetics" provides grounding arguments that present graphic novel is an art form. The critical abilities of the readers of all ages involve creator's content and subject matter which often is similar for comics and graphic novel. Most Indian libraries think of comics not being the real books as no individual with intellectual sense reads them anyway. Some cataloguers, however, have easily shifted *Maus* to adult collection seeming other works to be too strange for public consumption. One of the significant books that came was *Comics Librarianship: A Handbook*, by archivist Randall Scott and public library cataloger Sandy Berman. The book concerns with cataloging comic books. Eventually, D. Aviva Rothschild, published *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics* which offered collection developers critical annotations for graphic novels and comic books that connect readers. It was in 2002 that a preconference was sponsored by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), including a session on "Getting Graphic @ your library". The session of preconference at the American Library Association's Annual Conference discussed and debated upon reading habits and classification schemes that create libraryland in any country.

Scholars have asserted that comics have descended from cave art. Some, however, claim it all to have begun from the Bayeux Tapestry, painted by European master painters in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries who developed caricatures. Followed by these were, communicating both feelings and allegorical message, William Hogarth's satiric lithographs including *The Election* (1754), recounting activities in Parliament in a narrative sequential art form. By the early nineteenth century, caricaturist's art invited official censorship. Much known illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* by John Tenniel (1820–1914) also lead to political and social commentary in the periodical *Punch* (1841–1992). The need for formal art education of the replaced caricatures with cartoons was soon realized.

In 1837, Swiss cartoonist Rudolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) created a book *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck.* Images by then had begun to provide substantial information which was missing from text while the cartoon strip introduced a new way of storytelling. The outgrowth of the popularity of newspaper comic strips leads to the invention of the comic book which is an American invention. Since the comic books were printed cheaply, publishers hired talent that produced particular character for higher billing during 1920's and 1930's. Creators and publishers produced the superhero fantasies, anthropomorphic animals, romance, and detective fictions. Cartoonists in Europe and Asia created book-length serial adventures like *Tintin* (1929) which was first conceived by Hergé. Reflecting upon Japanese techniques and World War II wartime experiences Osamu Tezuka developed a form which after thirteen years led to Japanese *manga*, which presents the larger medium of comics today.

Each issue was distributed for a limited time being the first and only edition which was withdrawn from public availability when the next issue was published. Dr. Frederic Wertham (1895–1981), a German psychiatrist

published *Seduction of the Innocent* which introduced self-censorship to the next era of comic publishing under the Comics Code Authority. Francisca Goldsmith in her work "Graphic Novels Now" says:

With themes that include drugs, sex, and rock and roll, underground comics are not just about being crude; they are about the life experiences and aesthetics of the immediate postwar and early baby boom generation. By presenting style and humor that echo a place, a time, and a popular cultural identity, comics gave young adults (and older ones who had an interest in modern artistic experiments) material that met them where they were, emerging from college campuses rather than from junior high schools…. It is literature told through sequential art bound to sequential narrative and intended to be complete within the book's covers.

Art Spiegelman (1948–) used comics format to create Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* in 1992. The packaged sequential art in the book made it available for critical, literary reference after it was included in secondary school and college curricula. It was from the late eighties and through nineties that publishers had begun to market graphic novels, making its journey from art departments to archives of popular culture to libraries.

Today readers of graphic novels are consumers of image-based communications which makes it a format instead of a genre. Stephen Weiner's essay "Bold Books for Innovative Teaching: Show Don't Tell: Graphic Novels In the Classroom" discusses the importance of graphic novels, which have to be read with an objective inquiry. To resonate interest of the students of our country in our culture market graphic novels include a list of books like *Priya's Shakti*, King Martin Luther, Sunderkand etc. These books elicit a dialogue through Will Eisner's coined term 'sequential art' formats with a range of media like cartoons, with a narrative following Aristotle's convention of a beginning, a middle, and an end that is published in a book format. These books could be fictive or factual. The present paper focuses on a fictive graphic novel, *Priya's Shakti* which is a collection of short stories. Targeting an intergenerational and other mixed-group of the project's audience, the style of publicity chosen by the creators Ram Devineni, Lina Srivastava, Dan Goldman is augmented reality. By scanning the comic book or street murals with the popular augmented reality APP – Blippar, one can view the animation, real-life stories, and other interactive elements pop-out of the pages. In an interview he said –"Priya's Shakti" is one of the first comic books to use augmented reality in India, and can help define the new frontiers of integrating books, exhibitions, and public art with augmented reality." This project is run by Rattapallax which is a registered Not-for-Profit body in the United States producing films and literary books focused on issues of globalization and contemporary social issues. The organization has been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, and the Open Society.

Having the same responsibility that of the creator of the graphic novel, this comic book has the active web presence for its availability. In addition to the similarities drawn between the comic books and graphic novel, this paper reviews the work as written in the format of graphic novels for the targeted audiences and readers.

Reading being a subversive activity frequently attracts attention towards what is perceived as a mainstream comic on some newsstands might well be identified as a graphic novel. With a diversity of expressions it plays a significant role in promoting literacy, art, and critical thinking. The image and text refer back and forth to each other where the presentation of images mimics the way we experience the sensual data unlike comics that mimic the mental process. The narrative of the text is dynamic where the action happens outside the image depictions. This differs from films as the medium depends on the depiction of movement. The text incorporates this change or movement through plot development or character development.

To be visually and textually literate the reader has to unpack the meaning of images by further decoding the text. Just like the textual conventions are absorbed by readers of the printed word through practice and repetition, graphic novel reader gradually develops format-specific vocabulary. Young fans of this graphic novel or comic series celebrate this unique format that has shown a far-reaching effect in literature classrooms. The pedagogical sources have listed the work during the Jaipur Literature Festival 2015 featuring the comic book hero Priya.

Priya's Shakti has artwork by Dan Goldman and story by Vikas. K. Menon and Ram Devineni which accomplishes coming of age. Ram Devineni is a filmmaker, poet, and founder of "Rattapallax" magazine. His first feature documentary was "The Human Tower," which was shot in India, Chile, and Spain. Dan Goldman is a writer and illustrator of comics who rose to acclaim with his Eisner-nominated work on the webcomic, "Shooting War." His current series of "haunted real estate" graphic novels, Red Light Properties, which is available from IDW Publishing and digitally via Comixology. Vikas K. Menon is a poet, playwright, and songwriter. He is a board member of Kundiman, the first organization of its kind dedicated to supporting Asian-American poetry.
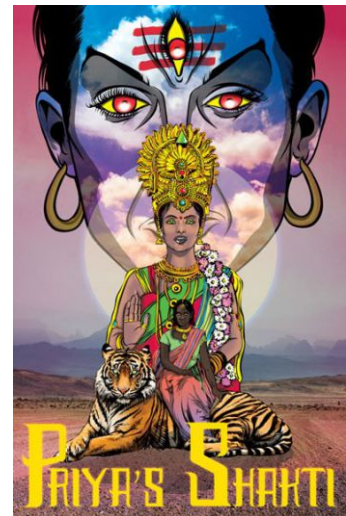
The aim was towards developing a hero precisely in order to deconstruct the very idea of hero. It features characters that are fallible where the protagonist Priya lived as though she was merely human until the precipitating event caused her to make use of the extra—and fate changing gift given by Goddess Parvati. The characters present the problems being a cultural one rather than it being a former legal issue. With an aim to bring in cultural shift towards women placed in modern society the book-talk centers on Priya, a mortal woman and survivor of rape. Priya becomes a superhero since the political and moral powers given to her character are something which are understandable to an audience who are familiar with the parameters of such a fantasy.

The text encourages us to reflect upon its significance from various angles with various human and superhuman characters. Her character tells us who we are and what we stand for through a sense of who we are not and what we are against.

The work showcases how interpretation can work to stabilize and change the content of the graphic novel at the same time because of the characters peopling the pages of *Priya's Shakti* books – Shiva, Parvati, Vishnu, Bhrama—bearing names that seem to be drawing visual and cultural references both from mythology and literature. A group of idealized images of the Gods makes an ideal hero concentrated on giving a superhuman form. The text, therefore, offers an area of study to scholars interested in linguistic and cultural translations. The culture specific visual cues discuss the concerns of the nation with a specific to general orientation. The lessening of the centrality of the logos in graphic novels further makes it an interesting & complex genre. Picture books like these are often seen as simple because their complexity is not immediately obvious. In fact, they are capable of negotiating some of the complexities that human existence routinely has to offer they are often anarchic and challenge all orders.

The shared images and narrative content has been carefully chosen in the text with attributes like plot, protagonist, theme, authority, and authorship. The meaning of almost every word, image, panel, and page are multiple which displace and subvert first reading of the work. One of the ways in which it subverts is by privileging pictures without which words are not relevant. The artful words, bringing the stunning realization that Priya herself is Parvati reorients our reading changing meaning of the text. Rereading this uncanny text in the Derridean sense where he provocatively says "there is nothing but text" makes it reflective focusing on fundamentals of reading. Being a part of a series of deliberately *realist* reprisals *Priya's Shakti* uses powerful deconstructive strategies which involves accepting the worldview and then eventually collapsing it. Iain Thomson in the chapter entitled "Deconstructing the Hero" calls this strategy *hypertrophic deconstruction*. The text deconstructs the hero by developing Priya's character into extending traditional hero fantasies beyond the limit. It is extended to a point where the reader overcomes the deepest fear that Priya is merely a projection of the concealed horror. From being powerless to live up to our ideals the reader notes psychological traumas that lead her to become a hero. She rises above normal human beings by saving them from the wrath of Lord Shiva. Unapologetically, her ability to shoulder the responsibility of saving the world from the curse of not being able to procreate puts her above mankind. The text tellingly not only opens but closes where closing precisely 'opens' readers to a perspective of the de-auratized Gods in a halo-free world where Priya says, 'I am not divine, no more than you. But all of us are part of the divine.'

The work ties together issues of gender-based sexual violence and gender equality. With an aim to win public acceptance, the work provides an opportunity to educate those who cannot afford alternative published source material. The digital and printed copies were released at the Mumbai Film and Comic Convention in

December 2014. The project is supported by the Tribeca Film Institute's New Media Fund and the Ford Foundation & incubated at the 'Made in NY' Media Center by IFP named "Gender Equality Champion" by UN

Women. The Jerome Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, New York Community Trust, and Asian Women's Giving Circle supported by Ms. Foundation for Women. It book can easily be downloaded from – http://www.priyashakti.com /comic/.

The national media has been revealing cases of injustice done to women. Seldom does a day pass when newspapers, blogs and articles are not discussing dowry issues, rapes and subsequent burning of women or acid attacks that put them battling with both life and death. The highly controversial Nirbhaya rape case of Delhi called for drastic legal measures for thousands of undocumented cases of violence against women where they are often denied medical assistance. The ruling democratic set up continues to play a significant role in redefining ambivalent attitude towards issues of women's security. English writings provide a unique opportunity to seize upon this political issue in classroom discussions. The world of literature discusses intricately woven social, political and economic issues which can be traced in the writings that the present historical reality of women of all ages. Drawing connection of the lived experiences of literary readers and their worlds, this graphic novel serves as a discourse of dialogue that disintegrates the notion of ardhnarishwar. Assumptions presented in the cultural narrative are grounded, deeply in the belief that shame is the only thing that the victim has to live with.

Among a sea of possible realities where women have stood stronger to the test of time, *Priya's Shakti* ignites dialogue that is often shunned— "Humans must learn again that the divine lies within women and men equally". The text poses questions to the ideologies of community building through inquiries and the intervention of mythological characters. It reflects upon the popularity of graphic novel that is evolving as an engaging literary resource. Rather than a simplistic venture, the reading is done towards attaining an intended goal of bringing cultural change. As such, the graphic novel itself should not be ignored as a medium that can open debates on crucial and serious social, moral & political issues.

The text involves the myth of Kali, Shiva and Bhrama to make the reader a more knowledgeable consumer of ideas and information. Setting up inroads to literacy in areas where affording formal education is not possible, the characters and issues argued reach readers at multiple reading levels. Education being one of the salient features continues to pervade women who eventually energize the political debates in society. Focusing on the fissures and silences of the marginalized second sex, the reader uncovers counterproductive understanding of

how women must claim plurality of meanings produced within the cultural framework. Their resistance to a singular localized context raises more productive question of critical literacy of readers. The realm of images opens countless expressions and meanings with a surrealist vision. The diversity of issues discussed presenting characters with adventurous spirit breaks the conventional representation of women in a facile narrative.

Despite the setbacks and obstacles faced by Priya, whose image was modelled on famous Bollywood actress Rekha, takes a trip back to recreate a new home in the village. By using a black female protagonist, the representation of character presents a stark contrast to the trend of popularizing white beauty. The archetypal character depicts blatant classicism from a feminist lens where the situation mirrors current perceptions of people in India in which issues of dress worn commonly influences negative attitude towards women. Considering that the majority of women are subject to similar restrictions and ridicule, the text presents a conspicuous contribution towards understanding a woman's experience.

The distinct drawing of Shiva's Shakti at the center of this narrative, denotes the associations of power women have and what Shiva would be without his Shakti or power. Some scenes conjure images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses disposing the ethnic blend of mythology with the culture of progressive India. In order to live lives worth living, the book celebrates Priya as Parvati, abandoning our world in order to create her world. In the pictorial narrative, we find an ideal feminist narrative where the central character overcomes shame and redefines her sense of self. The illustrative move harmonizes with the concept of identity assimilating with native culture where narrative deals with the issue of acceptance. *Priya's Shakti* examines how popular culture functions as a socially constructed artifact addressing issues and challenges of the current times. With the noble goal of informing and educating individuals this book is a viable genre that English language teachers could use as a provocative resource for engaging students in discussions and developing their critical literacy skills. Providing a subject to discuss uncomfortable truths, putting them into less rasping form the book expands pedagogy of multiliteracies in classrooms. From these explorations some new writers could benefit by looking at the possible options for arriving at their own understanding of the format.

Priya's Shakti has received various awards, including one from UN Women, which names it 2014 Gender Equality Champion. The Ford Foundation and several other organizations also recognized the work for its contribution being a book for social change workshops. With an increase in the number of awards relevant to the graphic novel, publishing the areas of creative expression is exploring new readers. Some of the awards include names, categories like *Eisner Awards* (1988–present) for Best Graphic Album—New and Best Graphic Album—Reprint to recognize Best Writer/Artist, *Harvey Awards* (1988–present) for Best Graphic Album of Original Work and Best Graphic Album of Previously Published Work, *Lulu Awards* (1997–present), focusing on promoting woman cartoonists working in graphic novel format. Awards for

graphic novels are also attributed internationally with honors presented at the Firecracker Alternative Book Award and the International Horror Critics' Guild Award for Best Graphic Novel. Special recognition has been given on occasions by the Pulitzer Prize Committee, the Hugo Awards, and Parents' Choice. In times to come the writers of our country could win some of these titles for graphic novels, indicating increasing interest in specific aesthetic or pedagogical criteria.

The articulation of the issues that focus on aspects of intellectual culture to be handed down to the current generation includes layout methods to access history, imagination and contemporary culture. *Priya's Shakti* is a response to the perceived threats to regain the edge over average citizens who neither want to debate nor want to know of outright forms of intervention in making a harmless society. For them as readers accepting the ends will somehow justify the means of the creators of the graphic novel. The library is being both concrete and virtual storehouse today and therefore resolves and reconsiders the changing user groups. It is time for us to look at the treatment of graphic novels in our institutes as a new form with even newer recognition given by libraries.

WORKS CITED

1. Angelotti, Michael. "Graphic Lit". *World Literature Today*, Vol. 81, No. 5 (Sep. - Oct., 2007), p. 4 Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma Stable. Web. *JSTOR*. 04/07/2013

2. Bakhtin,Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print.

3. Carter, James Bucky. "Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving toward Our "Optimus Prime". *The English Journal*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (Nov., 2007), pp. 49-53. Published by: National Council of Teachers of English. Web. JSTOR. 04/07/2013.

4. Celayo, Armando and David Shook. "Comics Adaptations of Literary Classics". *World Literature Today*, Vol. 81, No. 2, Graphic Literature (Mar. - Apr., 2007), p.33 Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma *JSTOR*. Web. 04/07/2013

5. Devineni, Ram. "Stand with Priya-- a survivor of rape and first comic book hero to fight sexual violence". *Indiegogo*. New York, United States. 2015. Web. 21 Dec 2015.

6. ---, Vikas. K. Menon. writer. and Dan Goldman. artist. *Priya's Shakti*. India: Rattapallax, 2014. Print.

7. Gallo, Don, and Stephen Weiner. "Bold Books for Innovative Teaching: Show, Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom." *The English Journal* 94.2 (2004):114-17, Print.

8. Goldsmith, Francisca. *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Graphic Novels*. United States of America: American Library Association, 2010. Print.

9. ---. *Graphic Novels Now: Building, Managing and Marketing a Dynamic Collection*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2005. Print.

10. Hall, Stuart, ed. Representation*: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London and New Delhi: SAGE, 1997. Print.

11. McLaughlin, Jeff. ed. *Comics as Philosophy*. United States of America: University Press of Mississippi. 2005. Print.

12. "Priya's Shakti Eliminating Gender Based Violence in India with Comics, Technology, and Community". *Imagining Equality*. Global Fund for Women: International Museum of Women.

13. Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction of Visual Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.