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Women as Comic Art Icons: Mapping Goddesses, Deities and Queens through the Narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha*

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Abstract:

The stereotyping of female images in different genres of representation has rendered women as either epitome of virtues and ideals or has neatly labelled them with pejorative terms. As a result, women have been reduced to passive objects for display and appropriation and signifiers of broader notion of culture, tradition and nation. My paper attempts to trace the trajectory of women icons in the form of images in the comic series titled *Amar Chitra Katha*. The truncated and clipped narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha* deviates from great tradition in context of emerging new realities and thereby creates its own little tradition. The dominant cultural/national imaginary as represented in epics and tales often gets subverted in the graphic narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha*, thereby continuing and expanding the horizons of cultural/national imaginary or cultural consciousness.

Keywords: *Amar Chitra Katha*, cultural/national icons, gendered stereotype, mass-proliferation

The proliferation of feminine images in the modern mass-media and the ideological typecasting of such imagery have increasingly drawn critical attention. Both feminist and media studies recognize the hegemonic grip of such visual representation of women on social attitudes and aspirations and their insidious role in legitimizing existing patterns of domination. The all-pervasiveness of the woman's image in advertisement, billboards, packages, hoardings or films- the heightened visibility of women in the pictures that surround us at home and on the streets- is itself seen to be problematic. For the very process by which women are deified and rendered central objects of attention in popular representation also involves "the commoditization of women and the troping of the feminine". (Thakurata, 91). This results in the reduction of women both to passive objects for display and appropriation and to signifiers of certain broader notions of 'culture', 'tradition' and 'nation'. The images like these concepts and allusions to which they refer, stand firmly entrenched within a dominant patriarchal discourse that has, since the late 19th century continuously asserted itself in the name of Indian nationalism.

The present research paper examines how women as cultural icons/symbols in the context of India are represented, disseminated and consumed through the modes of visual/graphic/prose narratives in the comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*. The mixing-up of two mediums (verbalised and visual) opens up another dimension of narrativity which is different from the primary narratives like that of the *Mahabharata* and canonized history textbooks by recreating the story as visual representation in context of contemporary India. *Amar Chitra Katha* (commonly referred as *ACK*) started its career in 1967, when different fractions of religion and nationalism dominated the post-independent India. *Amar Chitra Katha* is a series of comic books, which retells and reconstructs classical, traditional folk tales, religious stories, biographies and moments in history and for the most part these can be gleaned from different cultural, religious and historical perspectives. Marketed to parents as educational tools, the audience of the series is primarily children of the middle class in India and the

diaspora. *Amar Chitra Katha* which translates as “Immortal Illustrated Story” was begun by Anant Pai.

Comics are distinctly sequential art, a hybrid form of art and literature, which emphasize the pictorial representation of a narrative for inexpensive mass consumption. Comics are invariably a complex, integrated whole of words and images, where the pictures do not just depict a story but are a vital part of a story telling process. In comics, the creators transmit message through arrangement and juxtaposition of either pictures alone, or word(s) and picture(s), to build a popular narrative. The term ‘comic’, usually associated with humorous themes due to its massive early use to convey comic or ‘funny’ themes, came to be applied to all uses of this medium including those which are far from comic during the twentieth century. It is the sequential nature of the pictures and the predominance of pictures over words, which distinguish comics from picture books, although there is some overlap between the two mediums. Most comics combine words with images, often indicating speech in the form of word balloons, but pantomime strips, in which the expression and gesture of the drawing alone suffice to convey the message are not uncommon.

In various modes and genres of representation and production women have been virtually missing from the arena of action or very little effort is accorded to their significant representation. On the other hand, in many genres of representation women have been zealously made object of veneration and admiration which often leads to stereotyping of women roles in social and cultural sphere of life. The issue naturally gets metamorphed into one that of authentic representation or of the socially constraining nature of the stereotypical imagery or of the relationship between women’s subjectivity and objectivity. *Amar Chitra Katha* is ambiguous in its depiction of women from its very outset. Patricio Uberoi opines that

The ‘objectification’ of women in those genres where they are the prominent objects of attention is read as something problematic in itself, in particular as an indication that women have become objects or things to be appropriated, possessed and exchanged in the social relations of cooperation and competition among men. (Uberoi, WS 41)

The representation of women in ACK celebrates the ideal, feminine values like purity and chastity but at the same time does not uphold the monogamous model of marriage as is evident in the narrative of Draupadi. The women in ACK are ultimately ambivalent signs—they exude an aura of sensuousness as much as purity. In other words they are a complex mass who have not lost touch with her feminine aspect.

The composite picture of Draupadi is essentially one of a woman negotiating the public and private spaces in society between kingship and exile, duty and assertion, loyalty and rejection. In our long literary history, Draupadi remains unparalleled in personifying womanhood in its wholesomeness and uniqueness with all its glory, horror, retaliation and resilience. Her complex and contradictory nature makes her versatile, and hence a character who has been long debated. By overcoming self-pity and degeneration of woman, Draupadi justifies not only her rage but also dominated the patriarchal narrative by the “liberation discourse”, which was so far unheard of in case of women. Critics like Lakshmi Bandlamudi have always felt unease about Draupadi character as she states:

Reflecting on Draupadi’s character is not an easy task; it is like entering a hall of mirrors, where she is the mirror capturing the reflection of other mirrors. When we enter this hall of mirrors, we see ourselves seeing ourselves. Innumerable are the

reflection in this play of mirrors, and in the reflecting reflection we see both the mirror and the subject- Draupadi and womanhood-inseparable in our journey from the immediate present to the remote past. This flight, however illusory, is at once delightful and dreadful: delightful, because we are amazed to see our nested reflections, and dreadful because we cannot grasp it as we go farther and farther (Bandlamudi, 111).

ACK presents Draupadi, as a confident woman who sets the terms for her Swayamvar so that her chosen prince may win her, and in her one also sees the shrewd woman who invoked caste to dismiss the candidacy of Karna, another equally competent suitor. The incident in her life adds to the contradictions in her persona. Is she the voiceless woman appropriated by five brothers, or a dutiful daughter-in-law who abides by the unintentional slip of the tongue of her mother-in-law? Is her marital status a divine plan or a fulfillment of a boon that she sought in the form of five qualities in a husband from Lord Shiva or simply put is Draupadi the first known woman of an epic exercising polyandry out of her own free will. Despite all the grey areas and complexities, Draupadi joined the ranks with other devoted wives like Sita, Savitri and Mandodhari and hence is revered, and yet as a common wife to five men, she is berated as a harlot both in the epic and in literary history.

Draupadi's rejection of Karna and deliberate humiliation compels the reader to reinterpret the feminist heroine. Her calling Karna as "one of the suta caste" (ACK, Draupadi, 7) is with a shift in the accent. The hidden polemics of Draupadi's action can be interpreted from Bathtin analogy which operates in parodistic discourse:

In a hidden polemic the author's discourse is directed towards its own referential object, as is any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referred meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object. A word, directed towards its referential object, clashes with another's words within the very object itself. (qtd in Bandlamudi, 174).

The hidden polemics in Draupadi's action produces dialogic tension and propels her to move through various zones in the text. At every moment there is a "double voice" to her narrative. She emerges as a complex character who is simultaneously a mythical, social and political figure. As a character, her traits are not fixed, but they keep changing according to the context, both within the story and outside the story. Although it sound logical that Draupadi married the one with whom she was secretly in love and disapproved the candidacy of Karna as that of a suitor belonging to a low caste. ACK does not intent to draw much of attention towards this episode, yet this episode becomes a black blur in Karna life. ACK approaches this episode in subtle terms and the violence of emotions is underplayed. Karna who wanted to prove his mettle in the swamyamvara replied "You should not have humiliated me so, Draupadi" (ACK, Draupadi, 7) would never forget this insult and would settle the scores for this insult in the game of rigged dice.

Interestingly many women would aspire to walk in the line of Sita, yet somewhere the quintessential Indian woman is still trailing in the shadows of Draupadi. The patriarchal idea of ideal, chaste wife like Sita might be a redundant concept in twenty first century yet the agonies and tribulations of Draupadi very much concern an average Indian woman.

The legend of Padmini of Chittor is a foundational myth which can be easily contrasted against the narrative of Urvashi who is a celestial nymph. The female form in ACK, especially in the titles dealing with mythology or classical stories are eroticized. The women

are depicted with curvaceous bodies invited a voyeuristic gaze. Urvashi is a courtesan and exudes seduction through her body language which is not entirely preposterous. The image of Urvashi reflects the centrality of 'male gaze' in defining the feminine image. Though absent from the pictorial frame, the male gaze forms a pivotal point of reference, his gaze transfixes Urvashi into 'desired' images, casting them as lyrical and sensual ideals.

Padmini, on the other hand, stands for the ideal virtues of womanhood with:

Her elaborately kohled eyes, embellished cholis and curvaceous waist invite the gaze, and it would not be wrong to say that the reader participates in Khilji's fascination with her... Her sexuality, subject to voyeuristic fascination, is also written into the politics of caste and nation. The obvious/recognizable upper casteness of her body fragments the gaze, makes her inaccessible even as she is eroticised, and renders Khilji's desire for her 'illegitimate'. (Sreenivas, 77)

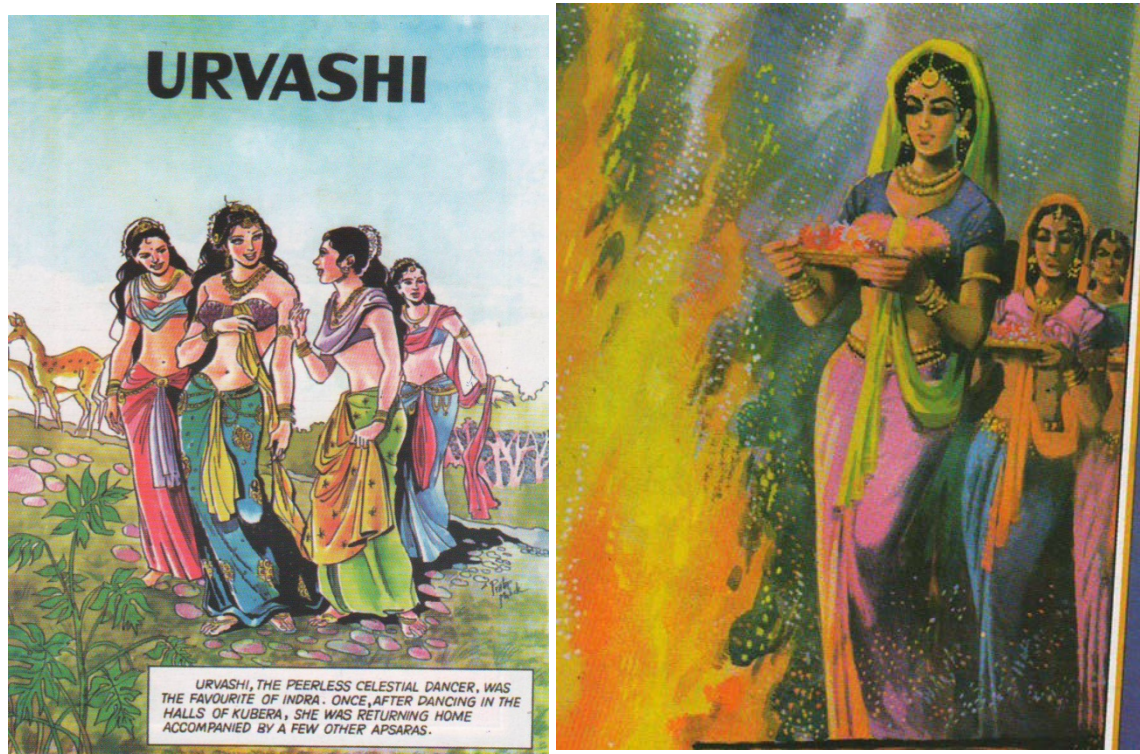


Fig. 1. Images from the titles "Urvashi" and "Padmini" from *Amar Chitra Katha*, Vol 612 and 605 respectively.

In ACK, Padmini of Chittor has to self immolate herself in order to safeguard her virtue from the intruding 'other' who happens to be the Sultan of Delhi, Ala-ud-din-Khilji. He is the 'outsider' who threatens the values cherished by Padmini, whose story also stands as an allegory of the post-colonial times, clearly aligning the binary divisions between the 'self' and the 'other'. The narrative of Padmini has heavily borrowed from Colonel Tod's *Annals and Antiquities* and other colonial sources which often have turned the oppressor into a Muslim figure and placed the burden of anti-imperialism on the shoulders of Hindu women.

According to Stuart Hall "we need difference because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'other' ". (Hall, 235). Therefore it is this 'difference' which has turned the outsider/intruder into 'other' who will forever stand outside the realm of virtues and upright conduct. It is his status as an outsider which prevented him from comprehending

the real meaning and significance of 'jauhar' as Ala-ud-din-Khilji in the final panel is depicted baffled and failed to understand the sacrifice by Padmini.

There is a world that separates the sexuality of Urvashi, Sita and Padmini and that of the deviant female figure in ACK—Shoorpanakha or the hoard of nameless women surrounding the debauched Alad-ud-din-Khilji.

The reinterpretation of historic legend of Rani Laxmi Bai has been one of the most significant themes of post-independence India. Today Lakshimbai continues to be reinterpreted in new modalities. Since her death the legend of the Rani has had a history and dynamism of its own, apart from the life and death of the historic Rani. In the depiction of Rani Laxmi Bai, the artists of ACK have inculcated a kind of dynamism that infuses epics, ballads and folklores and therefore renders an indelible imprint on the collective memory of a nation. The vitality of the Rani legend bespeaks its multiple sources in nearly all traditional Hindu definitions of the feminine as revealed in the Hindu pantheon and cosmology. The collective image of Rani Laxmi Bai that emerges from the reading is rooted in the prehistoric Mother, the primal Shakti, and the female avenger, the Durga, Chandi and Bhavani. Deeply influenced by the broad spectrum of traditional sources, ACK rewrites the legend of Rani Laxmi Bai as a legend of female heroism, with multiple psychological and oneiric nuances. Apart from the spontaneous growth of the Rani legend through the popular, folk and fine arts, the legend of Rani grew through political reinterpretation and served the interests of the nationalist movement. In the first three decades of the twentieth century the Rani's image was particularly useful as a metaphor for resistance to the British, which could not be voiced openly.



Fig.2. Cover Page of the title “Rani of Jhansi: The Flame of freedom” from *Amar Chitra Katha*, Vol: 539.

The poster-like cover illustration is an important means through which ACK centers the individual. The charisma/heroism of the protagonist structures together the narrative within the cover pages as a binding agent. The cover page of the title Rani Laxmi Bai of ACK depicts a battle scene where Rani Laxmi Bai is astride a galloping horse holding a sword in one hand and with the other pulling the reins with red-coated British soldiers descending from all directions. The calamitous scene brings to the fore unusual courage displayed by the first female warrior in Indian history. In fact many historians believed that Rani Laxmi Bai encouraged women to become a fighting force. The striking aspect of the Rani's career and

legend was her knightly semblances as leader of warriors in battle. In war she was described as brave to the point of fearlessness, infusing courage and faith in her followers. She rejected female attire for a martial presence and emerged from purdah to fight. Many critics have noted a great level of similarity between the legend of Rani Laxmi Bai and Joan of Arc. The image of Rani in male dress, armed and riding into battle on horseback, is a powerful idiom. This martial aspect also suggests that the male facet in her at critical times took precedence over the female. In this respect her legend partakes of the androgynous archetype. The male battle regalia is related to the theme of the Hindu deity as androgyny, a theme that has resonance for the Rani legend as well. The androgyny in Hinduism is a significant religious model, connoting wholeness rather than the decadence as suggested in some western traditions.

ACK describes the story of the Rani of Jhansi as that of a young woman raised not as a quintessential Brahmin girl but among the boys at the court of the last Peshwa at Bittur. She learned not the domestic and feminine arts but riding, swordsmanship, and literacy in Persian. The first glimpse of Rani's childhood is that of a girl born in an era where learning and practicing of martial arts were a man's domains. Relegated to the domestic sphere and household duties, a woman's existence chiefly surrounded her husband sphere of duty, authority and control. Born to one of the courtiers, Moropant, the Rani of Jhansi was named Manikarnika and was dotingly called Manu. Manu not only learned Vedas and Puranas but was a skilled rider. There are many stories about the Rani equestrian skills. Her playmates were not other Brahmin girls but boys, some of whom grew into rebel leaders like Nana Sahib, Tatyasaheb Tope and Rao Sahib. Through this extraordinary childhood she was groomed for the exceptional political and military role she played following the death of her Maharaja husband. Her spirited protest of the resumption of Jhansi state is a matter of record and there is no disputing the heroism of her death in battle or her struggle to maintain Newalkar rule in Jhansi.

ACK lays deep emphasis on her role in elevating the status of women and motivating women from all walks of life to rise in revolt against the British, in which she earned the respect and support of the people and led a major rebellion in central India. She established the right to act free. Fig 1 illustrates how Rani Laxmi Bai consolidated the women forces and acted with united strength against the British assault. Apart from being a skilled warrior, Rani was a great leader who was able to unite the dissident voices in the kingdom to fight against the British. Undoubtedly for the artists of ACK, Rani stands as a symbol of unity for all classes and communities. While it might be argued that her legend appealed to the peasant masses primarily through oral and visual arts, in its nationalist evocation the legend had a potent impact on the educated elite as well. Her depiction as a warrior astride a horse, marching on the battleground with unabated fear became a national entity. ACK in its detailing the story of Rani Laxmi Bai makes her a potent symbol and a model for revolutionary nationalists.

ACK supports the view that her widowhood liberated her in many ways. A sad legacy of child marriage, Rani Laxmi Bai is presented as acting with courage and convictions while taking decisions related to administration but never lamenting her fate. In spite of the fact that she was a widow from an orthodox Brahmin family, she did not shave her head nor cover it with the traditional eighteen yard sari.

The female iconic figure that has emerged in ACK whether as the compassionate goddess, mythical heroine or as the ideal chaste woman was "rendered 'iconic' through some ritualized gestures and roles, and through overlapping layers of religious, aesthetic, social or

nationalistic evaluations. The process has been termed as one of ‘resacralisation’, where the rise of modernity, instead of separating the secular from sacred, draws the two into a new synthesis” (Thakurata, 96). The rampant proliferation of these images has led to the formation of an ideal vehicle for allegorical references: for conveying meaning far beyond its immediate presence. The social reconstruction of these images has reinforced the classical canon and although these women are presented in a comic format yet they endorse high values, like motherhood, fidelity, self-sacrifice or religiosity.

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