Graphic Literature and their Efficacy in Realizing the Objectives of New Education Policy: A Case Study of *Priya Shakti* Series

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Abstract

"Study serves for delight, for ornament and for ability" (para. 1), through these words Francis Bacon anticipates the role of studies and impact of different subjects on human personality in his essay, "Of Studies". Literature as an academic subject serves both the aspects of human sensibilities: aesthetics and pragmatics, yet, its pragmatic aspect has not been fully realized for bringing in desirable affirmative changes in society, especially in the Indian context. The present article attempts to reinforce the contemporary relevance of literature in realizing the goals enshrined in India's New Education Policy, 2020. The article deals with the emergence of graphic narratives as a potential vehicle of training, imparting, and orienting the young inquisitive minds with the notions of 'complex seeing' and pragmaticism through rational outlook. Attempts have been made to discuss multiple facets of the genre on the reception process of reader/viewer and the manner in which the inquisitive young minds could be unfettered with multiple biases and conditioning.

Keywords: New Education Policy, graphic narratives, complex seeing, pragmaticism, *Priya Shakti* comics series

Education is a dynamic concept and keeps on evolving for the betterment of humanity. The only thing that we can, perhaps with all conviction agree about education is that it liberates and unfetters the inquisitive minds to think rationally and be critically aware of the subjectivity and be equipped to offer a rational response to the challenges thrown at

her/him. The National Education Policy adopted by the Government of India in the year 2020 precisely aspires to achieve this goal:

> Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable... The National Education Policy lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities…but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions. (NEP 2020, p. 3)

Insofar as delivering the desirable objectives of NEP, 2020, at ground level, literature, undoubtedly, has immense potential to change the academic landscape particularly in developing a critical mindset and interpretive skills in furtherance of scientific temperament. As the celebrated essayist Francis Bacon, the pioneering proponent of scientific temperament, puts it unambiguously in his essay, "Of Studies", "Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider" (para. 2). Through its potential and embedded essence, literature seeks to encapsulate the subtle and finer nuances of human life in all its complexities and forms, both thematically and structurally. It encourages the ability of "complex seeing" among students. Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright defines the term "complex seeing" in context of his play as, "… thinking above the flow of the play which is more important than thinking within the flow of the play" (Williams, p. 320). Modern education which is aimed at rationality and scientific temperament among students cannot afford to dispense with these ideas.

Though literature represents the world in codes of universally accepted (or at least widely accepted) abstract signs in the form of words (language), popularized as the *signifier* and the *signified* (de Saussure, 1966), the access, production, and canonization of a piece of literature are not immune to socioeconomic and political influences. As Deborah Philips observes, "...curriculum has always been subject to intervention in school and university departments, while politicians regularly invoke the English literary tradition for their own political agendas, and literary references are frequently employed in the promotion of political values" (Phillips, 2013, p. 1) In past decades, the emergence of non-bourgeois literature has brought to light the concerns of people who, for one reason or another, are put on the margins of society. Some notable

genres that have emerged are subaltern studies, postcolonial studies, holocaust literature, disability studies, trauma literature, queer studies, dalit literature, etc., and the list is by no means complete. Therefore, literature becomes a site of intense contest and appropriation. What these movements did for the world of literature or to the realm of arts in general was to provide them with a sense of utilitarian purpose that was quite distinct from the traditional understanding of literature and art as tools to imitate, entertain, and express. Instead, it became a tool to mobilize the masses. This utilitarian aspect of literature quickly rose to prominence further with pragmatism that proposed "Art for Life's Sake" (Rajarao & Srinivas, 2015, p. 46).

As a result, literature was one of the first and most widely used tools for instilling not only language skills but also moral and social consciousness in young minds. Stephen Mulhall observes this historical trend and asserts, "Proponents of moral perfectionism see literary techniques as indispensable in achieving their desired relation to their readers." (Mulhall, 2002, p. 1). The widely used phrase "moral of the story" echoes the most common teaching outcome that is expected of a literature class. Keeping in mind the on-going developments in cognitive psychology that, through substantial evidence, prove the role of visual and learner-based content in long-term learning, the New Education Policy, 2020, by the Government of India strongly focuses on the application of multimodal genres, especially "art-integrated methods", in the teaching-learning process. The learning becomes even more effective when the learners partake in the meaning-making of the text rather than being spoon-fed the contents of the course. This has been well established in a wide range of academic works that "each time teachers conduct a class activity or give a homework assignment or assessment focusing on a learner-centered environment, student understanding increases regarding the importance of building life-long learning skills" (Bishop et al., 2014, p. 50).

With the publication of the raw, uncensored, and primitive form of human nature in form of narratives, the linear mode of language started to feel deficient in comparison to the dynamic and complex nature of human experiences. What was needed to be done urgently to ensure that reading the essential voices of people at the margins becomes an activity that the masses, irrespective of education level, age, gender, personal beliefs, and occupation, actually enjoy, was to bridge the gap between critical information and popular entertainment. Thus, in

a parallel movement, experiments were being done with the form of literature rather than its content.

The idea of text has now outgrown its conventional understanding, especially with reference to the limitations pertaining to physical form and medium. It is now "a (any) coherent set of signs that transmits some kind of informative message" (Lotman, 1977, p. 56). From its humble origins as newspaper entertainment pieces in late 19th and early 20th Century, infamous for being primarily a choice for the young and the uneducated (McCloud, 1993) the genre of comic narratives quickly broadened its public reach and critical dimensions as scholars realized that "neither the tools of visual arts or linguistics alone are enough to analyze visual language" (Horn, 1999, p. 18). Expanding from single panel simple illustration to multi-panel comic strips to dedicated booklets and finally to fully-fledged graphic novels dealing with complex and layered narratives, this hybrid form of communication quickly became a popular tool to access a variety of problems and synthesize solutions posed by linear, unimodal narratives (Herrera, 2013).

A comic strip not only describes or reports what happened; it also shows what it looked like when that happened: a pictorial representation that allows the audience to "see" the injustice. This pictorial representation serves two purposes: it adds the aspect of caricature-like pictures (or cartoons) that allows the content to be relatable while simultaneously being entertaining. Using both text and sequential art to tell what are often serious, non-fiction narratives, many graphic novels use intelligence and humour to explore sensitive issues of race, social justice, global conflict and war (Christensen, 2007). When these strips are put in a sequenced form, running across several pages, it forms a movie-like phenomenon, except in this case the reader/audience puts together the words, images, expressions, and pauses (represented by spatial gaps) and participates in the process of creation rather than being just the receiver.

Another aspect of the comic strip that contributes to its meaning is that it allows for multiple and layered interpretations of the situation rather than being definitive. The novice reader of a graphic novel or a comic strip will focus on the entertainment value of the cartoons, actions, and words alone. However, a practised or a more observant person will note the intricacies of facial expression, colours, patterns, and other non-verbal cues more effectively. Unlike conventional novels, the graphic novel is polysemic, requiring readers to recognize the notions

of time, intertextuality, visual literacy, and hypertextuality (Cromer & Clark, 2012). This process scaffolds the readers' understanding of the layered understanding of trauma, discrimination, and other submerged and embedded concerns. To know and practise how to read a hybrid medium of expression is to prepare oneself to practise this art more effectively in day-to-day life.

Graphic novel, like any conventional novel, encapsulates the existence of hero or protagonist and the plot pivots around him/her. However, the characterization and depiction of such larger-than-life characters gets amply elevated in graphic novels owing to the pictorial reception by the reader/viewer. The origin of most superhero characters is quite archetypal. The superhero is typically an upper-class male, has had a troublesome early life where "he" at some point had been a victim of injustice, encounters some out-of-this-world intervention, hard work of unparalleled scales renders him superpowers, and volumes of adventures follow. The superhero typically hides his identity while carrying out the feats to maintain his anonymity and personal life. Batman, a young boy whose parents are murdered in front of him, seeks vengeance and fights evil in the guise of a bat-like personality, is one such example. Others include Spiderman, a poor orphan, who gets special powers after being bitten by a radioactive spider; and Captain America, who is a rejected US Army aspirant, and serves his nation in disguise after drinking a secret elixir.

Priya, the superhero of *Priya Shakti* comics, is inspired by Nirbhaya, the victim of the infamous 2012 Delhi gang-rape and murder (*Indian Comic Creates Female Superhero to Tackle Rape*, 2014). The extent of taboo and shame surrounding a rape victim in India is unparalleled. Unlike traumas like rejection and orphanhood, where victims are seen as passive, receivers of injustice like rape, especially in South-Asian countries, carry inherent shame and stigma. The rape victim is doomed to conceal her existence, and any agency or individuality is uncharacteristic of her. This is where Priya breaks the mould. The tabooed tragedy of rape is brought to par with other life-changing tragedies, with the parallel implication that, just like others, it is possible to have a life after rape, even an extraordinary one.

Priya's origin is the main plot of the first book of the series: *Priya's Shakti* (Goldman & Menon, 2014), followed by *Priya's Mirror* (Devineni & Vohra, 2016) and *Priya and the Lost Girls* (Devineni & Mehta, 2019).

Apart from reclaiming the right to a dignified life post-rape, the text also posits relevant issues like female illiteracy, corruption of the judiciary, and the right of a woman to speak for herself in matters pertaining to gendered violence. The theme of female agency and women harnessing it is extremely prominent through the course of the comic series. This is reflected in both the text and the imagery. The traditional narrative of a male saviour is not just overturned by the female protagonist Priya but also by the abundance of female characters who voice, choose, and act for themselves. This trope is abundantly used in all three books, albeit more prominently in the latter two, as they deal with the collective trauma of a group rather than the personalization of trauma through an individual.

Apart from providing a counter-narrative to women as victims, this trope also serves another critical function—extending the narrative of injustices. Typically, depictions of violence, abuse, or any form of injustice, particularly against women, are limited to incidents and their aftermaths. It is uncommon to find a resolution to the incident, and if one is provided, it is usually in the form of accepting one's fate. Additionally, what is often overlooked is that the acceptance of an incident is different from returning to normalcy. *Priya's Mirror* (Devineni & Vohra, 2016), the plot of which is based on acid attacks on Indian women, also delineates the resilience of female protagonists fighting the fear of facing society post-attack, physical insecurities, and self-isolation (personified by Ahankar), at the same time it emphasizes on their efforts to reclaim their place in society by moving on with their careers and personal lives. Apart from depicting the horrors of acid attacks, human trafficking, and societal bias towards its victims, the narrative warns one against the temptations of succumbing to victimhood and the desire to be saved, albeit at the price of arrested self-growth. Resettlement of survivors of violence reassert the power of undaunting resilience in the face of tragedy. This resettlement forces one to see the trauma being defined not by the magnitude of the attacker's villainy but by the survivor's resilience, a priceless lesson for students of all levels of education.

Additionally, the graphic narrative in the form of present comic series offers a comprehensive look into the mindset of the "demon", who after being unjustly bullied and tortured, turns his trauma and fear of injustice into a literal and figurative cage. Not only does Ahankar ensnare the acid-attack victims in that cage of fear and insecurity, but he is himself

trapped into it. The situation can be ameliorated by the courage gained through introspection and self-discovery.

Colorism is another social evil that Indian society struggles with to quite an extent. Though there has been a recognizable amount of work in this area, especially from the late 90s onwards, there still remains a lacuna. The aforementioned void is one of normalization of dark skin in Indian women. Most works in Indian literature or Indian comic literature depict a fair protagonist and depicts other female characters as fair as well; they fail to address the fact that dark skin is quite common in Indian women and is an inherent aspect of Indian female identity. In *Priya Shakti* series, the readers come face-to-face with a plethora of strong, dark-skinned female characters that aren't defined by their skin and are leading voices for social justice pertaining to sexual violence, human trafficking (*Priya and the Lost Girls*), prostitution and acid attacks (*Priya's Mirror*). What adds to this empowerment is the depiction of the divine goddess Parvati as a dark-skinned woman. Learners are subconsciously conditioned with a counter perspective to accept and, more importantly, "normalize" dark-skinned Indian females from the worldly to the heavenly realm. Thus, the rampant association of fairness with "purity" and darkness with "impurity" is broken.

A part of the first book (as shown in Figure 1) employs a combination of narrative placement strategy to create a layered meta-narrative with astounding feat. As Goddess Parvati looks at the experiences of an ailing Priya, she becomes aware of her promising childhood. The images show a curious young Priya looking at her reflection in water while the text describes her interest in the universe, and a slightly older Priya laboriously studying in the fire lamp. Both these images are superimposed on Parvati's face, exactly where her eyes are. In the next panel covering Parvati's nose, it is revealed that she is prohibited from going to school. What is left of Parvati's face is her mouth, through which she voices her disappointment at the plight of her devotees. The larger frame that holds together the smaller frame on the page is called a hyper-frame. It usually serves as a blank canvas on which different aspects of the larger hyper-frame play out. Apart from the theme of females being forced out of school, the pictorial juxtaposition serves as an illustrative replica of the complex layering of parallel ironies, a goddess being worshipped and her incarnation being rendered powerless.

Again, on the very next page, the image-panel design is flipped. One

sees the eyes of Parvati looking down with her face figuratively covered with the ugliness of the world, and Priya screams of agony quite near Parvati's mouth. In the first glance, it would seem like an innocent and random panel placed over a hyper-panel, until the complex layering of the background image becomes apparent. The imposition of Parvati's face divided into corresponding half-images is denotative of the interwoven relationship between the divine and the mortal world. The goddess speaks in the face of injustice but is also rendered speechless by it. This technique of juxtaposing fragmented mortals with an underlying immortal is used multiple times, both in disheartening and heart-warming settings. The idea of the overarching presence of the divine (representing order and justice) over every mortal action isn't mentioned in textual form but is contextualized through strategic panel placement. This prods readers to think in a non-linear semantic consideration and at the same time cater to their creativity and invite them to take an unorthodox approach to the construction of meaning. Multiple narratives placed in this manner allow readers to grow with the text and consequently enable them to discover the importance of viewing things from multiple perspectives in a polyphonic ambience.

Figure 1: *Merging the divine and the mortal (**Priya Shakti**)*

Furthermore, while depicting the sub-plots that have a positive undertone, the image of the divine in the hyper-frame is exchanged with other images depicting harmony and hope, implying the impact of human actions. The impact created by such juxtaposition is either promptly acted upon through the course of the plot, or passively sets the mood of the story through implied presence of 'Order and Justice'.

The panels, though fragmented, are mostly fluid and ease the process of reading by providing a calming, lucid experience (as shown in Figure 2) which supplement the positivity of the content in contrast to its negative counterparts.

Figure 2: *The positive reinforcement of panels (**Priya's Shakti**)*
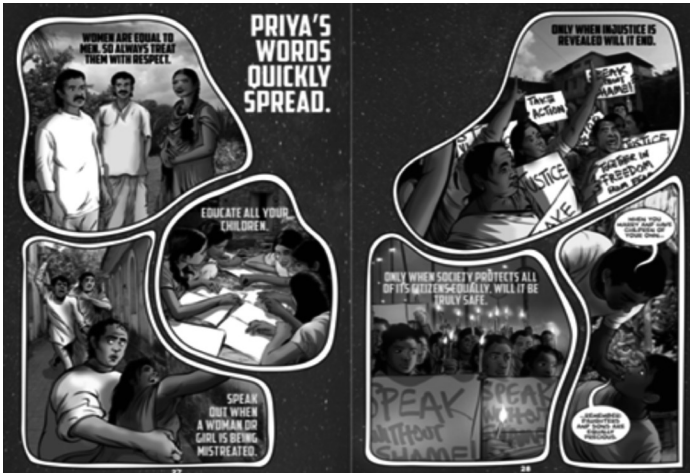
Similarly, the way this graphic narrative adds to the effect of trauma is through sharp, irregular, almost fractured panel placement and angles, without any backdrop to induce a jarring effect. This stylistic feature is, among many incidents, evident in the depiction of Priya's rape and the family humiliation that followed. This renders uneasiness while reading bits and pieces of incomplete scenes, creating a fragmented effect (as seen in Figure 3) in the reader that echoes the protagonist's mental, emotional, and physical state.

Figure 3: *Fragmentation of panels to create jarring effect (**Priya's Shakti**)*

The same jarring energy is applied further, though to a much less talked-about topic- female agency and sisterhood. As Shiva insists on seeking vengeance on behalf of Parvati and Priya when Parvati is violated after she incarnates herself in Priya's body, Goddess Kali comes to Parvati's aid, helping her stop Shiva and instructing him to let Parvati decide her course of revenge. The fragmentation of the panel in this act is on par with the one shown above, bringing the forces of male and female aggression into balance.

Figure 4: *The Wrath of Kali (**Priya's Shakti**)*

An expansive and multimodal genre of graphic literature allows its readers to explore beyond the primary narrative of the text. As the narrative in a graphic literature is embedded in several layers of critical understanding, it simultaneously caters to learners of various mental levels, with each exploring the text at his/her pace, thus not being too difficult for some students or being under-stimulating for gifted learners.

In the light of foregoing assessment of Graphic Literature, it may be averred that the traditional forms of education inhibit the flow of critical learning primarily for two reasons: their seemingly lacklustre unimodal approach, which doesn't appeal to a larger population, especially the younger generation who are constantly on a lookout for engaging

content, especially owing to the boom in attention economy; and the absence of hybrid communication techniques aimed at creating a layered understanding. The critical knowledge released should find a way to reach the widest possible audience and pique their interest. To achieve this, knowledge should be meaningfully and deftly enveloped in the form of entertaining and engaging content. The more entertaining, involving, and easy to access and comprehend the knowledge is, the wider its audience would be. To reach across to the students, critical awareness of raging sociocultural issues would have to be made accessible and entertaining at the same involving discursive regimen among students. This can only be done by the inclusion of quality information in the curriculum that sparks the curiosity of learners of all ages about matters pertaining to social justice and "aims at producing engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by our Constitution" (NEP 2020, p. 5).

A socio-culturally empowering graphic literature like the *Priya Shakti* series effectively caters to these medium and content-oriented demands of holistic education, fostering inquisitive, creative, and morally responsible learners by "offer(ing) an alternative way of interacting with print-based text so as to help prepare students for the multiple texts they will encounter in their personal and professional lives" (Rycroft, 2014, para. 8).

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