

Visual Alchemy: A Re-reading of Amruta Patil's 'The Parva' Duology

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ABSTRACT

The fusion of verbal and visual narration in a single work makes the content of graphic narrative more involving to the readers. This article attempts to read and analyse the Parva Duology by Amruta Patil as a retelling of the Mahabharata in graphic narrative form. Re-telling mythology through graphic narratives is an innovative approach to preserve ancient tales in new form. This analysis employs the theoretical concepts propounded by Hillary Chute and Marianne Dekoven in order to tease out the nuances of storytelling through visual images. Amruta Patil's Parva duology comprises Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean (2012) and Sauptik: Blood and Flower (2016), both published by Harper Collins. Through an in-depth textual and visual analysis of the narratives, the article tries to subvert the common notion of graphic narratives as an anti-elitist form. The study also explores how far the author allowed the narrative to exhibit the content extraordinarily. A systematic reading of the primary texts is done in order to unlock the complementing nature of the visual and the written content. The study brings to light how visual and verbal elements and the intersection of mythology and modern retelling are intertwined.

Keywords: Graphic Narratives, Retelling, Visual Narration, Mythology, Parva duology

INTRODUCTION

Graphic novels, an emerging genre or format, has now become a part of an ever-growing literary field. The idea of graphic novel started off as the writer Will Eisner published his work *A Contract with God* in 1978 and the term is said to have been coined by Richard Kyle back in 1964 in an essay he wrote for the magazine "Capa-Alpha". To define graphic novel in simple words would be "a fictional story that is presented in comic-strip format and published as a book" (Merriam Webster). The visual representation of a story obviously generates new meanings to the text and it directs a reader to think beyond its visible content. There are common assumptions that graphic novels limit the reader's imagination to a large extent. But this notion cannot be generalised, since each graphic novel deals with diverse topics and areas, it needs different style of presentation to exert influence upon the psyche of a reader.

Amruta Patil, the first woman graphic novelist in India, has written four graphic novels till date, dealing with diverse themes. *Kari*, Patil's debut graphic novel that deals with the question of sexuality

is a seminal work in the contemporary graphic novel genre. Following this Patil has authored *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* and *Sauptik: Blood and Flower*, which together form 'The Parva' duology. Composed as the retelling of the *Mahabharata*, The Parva duology offers the readers a fresh perspective of existing mythological tales. Patil uses both traditional narrative techniques and modern artistic styles to recreate the greatest epic from the Indian tradition. Published in the year 2012, *Adi Parva* gives the readers the cosmic experience of the creation of the universe, and the following events. *Sauptik*, published as a sequel to the former in the year 2016, focused on the devastating aftermath of the Kurukshetra war and the reflections of those who survived the war. Both *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik*, are notable for their richness in the visual depiction of the story of the *Mahabharata*. The use of symbolic imagery, bold colours and the blending of traditional and modern art together makes this duology a masterpiece by Patil. Since the duology can be seen as an artistic innovation by the author/painter, combining art, mythology and literature, it offers rich cultural and literary dimensions. The growing acceptance of graphic narratives as a literary genre makes it more relevant for exploring the particular works as graphic literature. The aim of this article is to study 'The Parva' duology of Amruta Patil, with the insights provided by prominent theoreticians of graphic narration like Hillary Chute, Marianne DeKoven and Scott McCloud. The article will address the questions like, how do mythological graphic narratives utilize visual elements to enhance storytelling? ; how these visual elements contribute to the overall narrative experience? ; how far the insights from the theoreticians contribute to our understanding of the genre?

As Hillary Chute and Marianne Dekoven mention in the essay "Introduction: Graphic Narrative", "graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language—the language of comics—that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page" (767). The verbal and visual elements aid together in the creation of meanings in graphic novels. To use the term 'graphic novel' instead of 'graphic narrative' or vice-versa often makes sense to the readers presumably. But on academic grounds, the distinction between these terms should be clear and comprehensible. Both graphic novels and graphic narratives are apparently the same as Hillary Chute has mentioned in her essay titled, "Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narratives":

Graphic novel is a much more common and recognizable term than graphic narrative. Graphic novel--which took shape as a marketing term--has a specific history in the second half of the twentieth century. (453)

But since we find different categories of graphic books in the field which includes memoirs, history, autobiographies, mythology and so on, it is preferable to use the term Graphic 'narrative' instead of 'novel'. Chute writes,

In graphic narrative, the substantial length implied by novel remains intact, but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction. A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics. (453)

The medium of comics is considered to be a “low-brow” entertainment in the initial phase which paved the way for the present “high-brow” literature as we can see it today. The transition from a “low-brow” to the “high-brow” was not at all an easy task to the comics creators. It invited the readers’ attention to every nuanced aspect, which ultimately gained the narrative the status of serious literature. The sophistication and complexity of the narrative is rather visible in high-serious subject that it deals with, unlike the comic strips.

Being a relatively new genre in the Indian literary scenario, the graphic narratives need to be analysed comprehensively as part of academic advancement. The duology by Patil lacks rigorous academic deliberations since its publication in 2012. Since the subject that Patil deals with is Indian mythology, the modern readers might expect it to be a rendition of the age-old mythological narration where patriarchy, violence, caste, conservatism, etc. play pivotal role. On the contrary, Patil’s duology is a combination of classic story-telling with magnificent art work, dealing with progressive and dynamic ideologies on Indian culture and tradition. Hence there is more room for discussion in the works, as it is less explored by academicians and researchers. “Reading a Retelling: Mahabharata in the Graphic Novel Form” by Varsha Jha (Singh) and Mini Chandran is an article which explores the literary and extra-literary modes of reading the graphic novel *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* by (via) Amruta Patil. The article attempts to read the work on the basis of theories by Scott McCloud and Neil Cohn, and it also discusses the work as a form of ‘Retelling’. In the article titled “Pioneering Women in Amruta Patil’s *Adi Parva* and Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Aranyaka* Through the lens of Radical and Postmodern Feminism”, Jennifer Almeida focuses on the women characters of *Adiparva* and *Aranyaka*, their unexplored identities and their evolution as powerful characters. For this, the author uses the ideologies of radical feminists to analyse the text. Chinmay Sharma’s book chapter “Expanding World of Indian English Fiction: The *Mahabharata* re-told in Krishna Udayasankar’s *The Aryavārtha Chronicles* and Amruta Patil’s *Adiparva* is a comprehensive analysis of two works of different genres and how these works retell Hindu myths strategically. This work discusses how Amruta Patil recovered marginalized characters and stories from the mainstream narration of the epic *Mahabharata*. The previous studies done on Amruta Patil were strictly centred on the first book of the duology, ie: *Adi parva: Churning of the Ocean*. The sequel *Sauptik: Blood and Flower* has not been explored so far by other researchers. *Adi Parva* has been studied comprehensively on the basis of the theoretical framework of Scott McCloud, who is considered as the first theoretician on graphic novels and published his theories before the millennium. the present study proposes to analyse the duology on the basis of Hillary Chute’s essay published in 2008 and Chute and Marianne DeKoven’s essay

published in 2006, along with Scott McCloud. Moreover, the current studies done on the graphic novel have explored the feministic and political dimensions of the work to a large extent. Amidst all this research, this article focuses on the interplay between the visual and verbal elements in the graphic narratives and the narrative techniques it used to unravel mythology by using the theories of prominent theoreticians and thereby subverts the notion of graphic narratives as an anti-elitist form.

As recently published graphic narratives which inculcate deep insights and ideologies, Amruta Patil's works, *Adi parva: Churning of the Ocean* and *Sauptik: Blood and Flower* can be considered as an apt choice to discuss graphic narratives in general. The two narratives form a duology which retell Indian mythology in a very distinctive and interesting style. She considers her work "as the epic about every human preoccupation under the sun" (Bahuguna, 2012). Being a painter, graphic novelist and writer, Patil narrated the mythical story of the *Mahabharata* in a sleek and engaging manner. Her style of composing the graphic novels /narratives is unique and innovative compared to that of other contemporary graphic novelists.

The aim of this article is to analyse whether the selected duology by Amruta Patil, as graphic narratives, appropriately fits into the description of the genre provided by theoreticians. Most of the studies on graphic narratives have been done using western graphic narratives and manga, which is considered to be more popular within the literary field. Coming to Indian scene, we find that the studies done on graphic format is limited to history, biographies and other contemporary writings by the Indian authors. The importance of mythical stories in contemporary scene cannot be ignored as it has much to perform in the current situation. The idea of mythology as a tool for instruction was an age-old notion. To revive the mythology in contemporary format not only renovates that particular notion but it also enhances the effect of these stories among the new generation readers. Patil, in an Interview, says: "None of the philosophical-mythological stuff holds much relevance if it doesn't resonate in the fears and compulsions of humans. So, I look at humans. Social media has been one of my most potent research laboratories". (Das, 2016)

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed article is an in-depth analysis of the Parva duology by Amruta Patil. Hillary Chute's essay "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative", Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven's "Introduction: Graphic Narrative" and Scott McCloud's work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* are used as the theoretical lenses to read the primary texts in a scholarly perspective. Through her essay "Comics as Literature: Reading Graphic Narrative", Chute tries to legitimize graphic novels as a prominent literary form. Similarly, Chute and Marianne DeKoven, in their combined essay "Introduction Graphic Narrative", argues for the recognition of graphic novels as a sophisticated literary form. Both the essays provide genuine theoretical ideas which can be used to analyse the

visual and verbal elements of 'The Parva' duology. With the aid of these theoretical concepts, the article attempts to prove that the graphic narratives under study conform to the idea of an ideal graphic narrative and also attempts to unravel the complexities inherent in the graphic narration of mythologies.

DISCUSSION

The relevance of graphic narratives is noteworthy in this high-tech world. The proposed readers that each author directs at, are newfangled and those who spend time predominantly in digital spaces is quite high. To make such readers attentive and involved in any book, an author has to present her/his work similar to the screen spaces. The way Patil presents her version of the *Mahabharata* breaks the conventions of mythical narration. Conventional narration of mythological stories often follows a pattern where the composer or the narrator of the story tells it in an omniscient point of view. In contrast to the traditional pattern of narration, the author here invents a new style of presenting the epic story before the readers – graphic format – engaging the readers through their minds as well as eyes. Obviously, the duology “via Amruta Patil” (as she says in her work) is a visual treat to the readers in contrast to the conventional renderings. What made Patil create such a new rendering of mythological story? The answer is given within her note in the text itself, where she says that mythology always appears as an instance of ‘opening a sealed vault’ (*Adiparva*,260). Patil writes:

The abundance of our epoch keeps us from noticing an extraordinary truth: Access to information, something we assume is rightfully ours, was never intended to be this easy. And it was not meant to be open-source. For the greatest part of our collective history, esoteric knowledge was the exclusive preserve of the elite - royalty, noblesse, priests- and its transfer from person to person was highly selective and ritualized. The fortress of sacred text and the written word was even more impregnable. What sages and priests were privy to, not even the king of the land could access. This was how things remained until as recently as hundred years ago. (*Adi Parva*,260)

The access to the mythological stories from comics (like *Amar Chitra Katha*) and other forms can be seen only as a diluted form of the original story. Even now people are ignorant about our mythology and traditions in spite of many abridged and easy-to-read texts readily available to them. In the author's note in *Adi Parva*, Patil reveals her concern for the need of retelling stories – especially “cosmic tales” as she refers, “are like fish tanks in their need for continuous aeration” (*Adi Parva*, 259). As far as Patil is concerned, these tales are “dead habitat” without retelling. Patil writes thus:

A story passed down through ages via oral storytellers cannot help but alter. A good storyteller, like a good teacher, speaks in the language of the hour. Her only allegiance is to the essence of the tale; the essence safeguarded; she is free to

improvise the narrative to reflect the time. There are very many stories, and each is an individual thread. The storyteller who wields and unfurls these myriad threads is traditionally known as the *sutradhaar*, threadbearer. (*Adi Parva*, 259)

What makes Patil's narration different from other graphic narratives is the incorporation of ideas from the Sanskrit tradition of drama – *Sutradhaar*, who bears the thread of the story. As she pointed out, she never loses the 'essence of the tale' in her narration but to improvise the tale, she incorporates multiple traditions and mediums in a single work. The *sutradhaars* in the duology are Ganga, the river in human form and Ashwatthama, the immortal survivor from the tale of the *Mahabharata*. The narrative structure of the duology is entirely based on the *Sutradhaars*. The dialogue, development of the plot, symbolism, characters and the general motifs of the duology is presented through both the *Sutradhaars*. *Adi Parva* opens with a prologue-like introduction to the narrative structure that the duology is going to follow further. "A caution, a key: trust the humble storyteller who knows how to unravel thread. Beware the braggart who embellishes and confuses. Stay with the story, even when it passes from threadbearer to threadbearer. Stay with the story." (*Adi Parva*, 4). Here, Patil gives the readers a cue to the subsequent change of the *Sutradhaar* in the sequel. Towards the end of *Adi Parva*, Ganga, the prime *Sutradhaar* introduces the second one, Ashwatthaama, the narrator of *Sauptik*. Ganga says; "It is time for me to leave the skein in the hands of the next *sutradhaar*." (*Adi Parva*, 257). "Steady now, find your bearings. Reconsider everything you know. If you don't recognize the landscape, keep your hand on the thread of the story. You will be lead." (*Adi Parva*, 257). In *Sauptik*, Ashwatthaama continues to bear the 'thread' of the epic which is narrated in non-linear format. The mythological tale that Ashwatthaama narrates first is of Shiv, Sati and Daksh, whereas Ganga ended *Adi Parva* with Kunti's decision to leave for Hastinapur along with her sons. Chute and DeKoven, in their essay "Introduction: Graphic Narrative", examine the use of non-linear narrative and fragmented storytelling in graphic novels. According to them, this kind of narrative structure reflects the complexity of memory and experience in the graphic narratives.

The diegetical horizon of each page, made up of what are essentially boxes of time, offers graphic narrative a representational mode capable of addressing complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness. The graphic narrative, too, differs from the only proximate medium of film-- also a visual, sequential art form—because it is created from start to finish by a single author, and it releases its readers from the strictures of experiencing a work in time. (Chute & DeKoven, 769,770)

The idea of 'diegetical horizon' refers to the boundary between the narrative world and the reality of the readers. The ability of the graphic narrative to exhibit political, historical or, in this context, mythological stories, through non-linear or fragmented narratives is remarkable. Patil, the 'single

author' is creating a filmlike 'sequential art form' through the Parva duology. The ultimate aim of the duology is to present the moral and complex philosophical inquiry of the grand narrative.

In the essay "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" Hillary Chute writes, "Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially" (452). What one can witness in Patil's composition is the movement of the epic story in non-linear form but the temporal and spatial elements fuse together with careful narration. Patil's method of choosing distinctive art techniques in the narration keeps the whole narrative appealing to the readers. Being a highly serious subject, the *Mahabharata*, as narrated through *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik* is philosophical in its rendering. The language used in the narration denotes the philosophical nature of the subject it deals with. In *Adi Parva* we see the origin of the world in a compact form, yet in a larger canvas we also witness the infinity of the universe. This part is titled "Beginning" and it extends to ten pages where we find Patil's creativity at its best. She begins by saying "To know your story, the beginning is as good a place to start as any other. One beginning among countless beginnings. One world among countless others" (*Adi Parva*, 15). Immediately, the narration shifts to the visual depiction of the subject. Like that of cinematic shots, Patil first divides the pages into three panels of long shots of the universe or world. The blue and green colours used by the artist signify the earth and the ocean surrounding it. The following pages are not panelised, since they reveal the infiniteness of the ocean, Lord Vishnu and the serpent Anant. The larger panels indicate the moments which last for a longer period. There is no consistent panel division for *Adi Parva*, as it delves into the deeper ideas of cyclical creation and destruction. The subsequent page is an even bigger frame where we see the close-up of Lord Vishnu's navel from where "rises a perfect lotus" (*Adi Parva*, 19). What the picture speaks to us is the eternal truth of 'Swayambhu'. In the heart of the lotus there is Brahma – the creator. The four successive pages then give the reader a precise description of the four *yugas* – *Krita Yug*, *Treta Yug*, *Dwapar Yug* and *Kali Yug*. Each *Yug* is given colours as per its qualities like Golden, Silver, Bronze and rusty Iron, respectively. Each page has a dice and a hand which indicates the inseparable relation of the two. Patil's depiction of each *Yug* corresponding to the characteristics of that particular age is noteworthy, especially the portrayal of *Kali Yug*. The collage made of torn papers in dusty red colour and the butterfly wings that are pulled apart clearly indicate the so-called fragmentation and disillusionment of the current era. To 'register temporality spatially', the author here portrays the *yugs* as it denotes the cyclical nature of time in Hindu cosmology. The different epochs of time, the process of creation, and the cosmic geography as per Hindu mythology get registered temporally and spatially through these pages. The visual narration of the creation of the universe and *yug* are highly artistic. Dealing with a high-brow subject like mythology, *Adi Parva* showcases complex and nuanced issues of humanity and thus proves not to be an anti-elitist form of narration. In *Sauptik*, the sutradhaar Ashwatthama is narrating the events of post-war *Mahabharata*, in an omniscient point of view. After narrating the story related to Draupadi

and Drishtadyumn's birth, another section begins with the heading 'Let the Phenomena Play' (37). In page number 41, the reader's attention is shifted to the flashback or memory of the churning of the ocean. "During a periodic tug-of-war to restore balance in *mrityulok*, devas and asuras manifested as the princes of Hastinapur and their allies; Vishnu as the avatar Krishna; Earth, Wind, Fire and Water as the elemental Pandavas. Shree and Bhoo manifested as Draupadi- wife of the Pandavas" (*Sauptik*, 41). Unlike the depiction of the churning of the ocean in *Adi Parva*, *Sauptik* portrays only the ocean, the mountain, the serpent's body and a woman. The colour used for the ocean is a mixture of blue and purple, whereas in *Adi Parva* it is blue. The different colour palette used in *Sauptik*, also makes it clear that the narrative is going back in time, thus 'registering temporality spatially'. As Chute and Marianne DeKoven say, "graphic narrative offers an intricately layered narrative language—the language of comics—that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page." (Introduction: Graphic Narrative, 767). As mentioned earlier, the narrator or *sutradhar* of the narrative *Adi Parva*, Ganga, in human form, narrates the entire story of the *Mahabharata* to her listeners. The origin of the river Ganga from the sky and the manner in which her force is borne by Shiv is detailed in cinematic shots. Moreover, the transcript exquisitely denotes the love of Ganga for Shiv when she says "He tempered my fury. Only then he let me down to the ground. I learnt what it means to love a hermit" (*Adi Parva*,38-39

As Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (*Understanding Comics*, 9). In a graphic narrative, juxtaposition of images is obvious since it deals with long narration of incidents. If juxtaposing images in the narrative creates visual relationships and conveys meaning to the narration, Patil's graphic narratives cannot be exempted from this kind of interpretation. Amruta Patil's second work in the duology *Sauptik: Blood and Flower* turns out to be a unique visual storytelling that unravels the narration of the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of a marginalized character. The *sutradhaar* of this particular narration is Ashwatthama, one of the seven survivors of the Kurukshetra war, who was cursed to be immortal for three thousand years on the earth. The section titled 'Outliers', begins with the depiction of the two narrators of the duology in a single panel, giving the reader a glimpse of contrasting images. The visual narration for the present day using charcoal art can be seen as a subversion of conventional idea of creating images. The portrayal of Ganga in white clean clothes with tied hair, is in stark contrast with the image of Ashwatthama, who is clothed in dirty rags with dreadlocks. The juxtaposition of both *sutradhaars* in the same panel makes it even more thought-provoking as the society always welcomes the good-looking rather than the horrid. In Ashwatthama's words, "I smell of stale blood and unwashed rags. Ganga was cool, silvery. People were struck by her. She storied their lives but spoke in abstractions few understood the urgency of. When she left, she named me *sutradhaar*" (*Sauptik*, 9). As the words describe, the image which the artist has given to Ganga is contrasting to the image of Ashwatthama.

The revulsion and fear that a reader feels when the sutradhaar is changed, becomes the mood of the narrative in general. Moreover, the duology itself is juxtaposed with each other. If *Adi Parva* is presented as a blue book which is narrated from the perspective of Ganga, who is cool and silvery, *Sauptik* is a book of fire and blood, which denotes the complexity of human relationships. The *Sutradhaar* of the narrative, Ashwatthama, is certainly an example of extreme unpleasantness when compared to Ganga, the *Sutradhaar* of *Adi Parva*.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Parva duology by Amruta Patil proves to be a rich and versatile work that retells Indian mythology. Indian mythology often gives an impression of magnificence and glory, which is also visible through the artistic expressions by Patil. The use of vibrant colours in the visual depiction makes it even more expressive than words. The juxtaposition of images found in the narrative certainly makes the work an elite form of mythological rendering. Apart from that, the hybrid-word and image form, with the touch of philosophical undertone also contribute to the visual elements that enhance storytelling to the next level of interpretation. Through a thorough exploration with the backing of theories by Chute, DeKoven and McCloud, this article showcases Patil's duology as a part of academic discourse, rather than mere entertainment. By incorporating 'diegetical horizon', temporal and spatial elements, this article is an insightful exploration of the Parva duology. Through its detailed and compact analysis, the article proves that the duology is a sophisticated and legitimate artform to reflect the complexity of the contemporary world, while simultaneously reflecting upon the traditional mythological story-line. The story of the *Mahabharata*, through the Parva duology transcends the whole narrative from its earlier position to a new legitimate form of cultural expression. Patil is an excellent visual artist who has blended different styles of painting into one single book which is yet to be discovered. Patil's duology is impregnated with innumerable meanings and calls for more nuanced interpretations which can be considered as a scope for future study. This study is limited to the theories of western theoreticians of graphic novels and there is further scope for studying the duology on the basis of Indian theoreticians and Indian aesthetics. The intersection of mythology and graphic storytelling, examined through the lens of the graphic theoreticians, underscores the significance of this medium, contributing to a broader understanding of cultural narratives through artistic expression.

Conflict of interests

The authors claim that there are no conflicting interests.

Author's contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the analysis, interpretation, and writing of the manuscript.

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