

Patua *Ramayana*: Sita's Telling

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Abstract

Myths are ubiquitous in Indian cultures. Evolving through narratives transmitted in various forms (oral, written, visual, and combinations of these), myths have persisted in our cultural traditions and permeated our popular imagination. Various art-forms have drawn on myths and cast them in interesting new moulds relevant to contemporary social and political contexts. When transmitted through diverse forms and media, the mythological narratives undergo both intermedial and intramedial translations, thus acquiring “parallel lives” (Ramanujan, “Tell It to the Walls” 465) in different Indian traditions. For instance, well-known episodes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have transmuted into different stories as they are incorporated and disseminated into diverse traditions in South Asia and South-East Asia. These plural living traditions foreground multiple interpretations as envisioned by the translator-creator and their audiences. The present article attempts to explore how mythical tales have been adapted into the graphic novel form, how they constitute alternative tellings, and how these intermedial interactions pose new questions and propose new meanings.

Keywords: folk art; Indian graphic narratives; mythology; Patua art; *Ramayana*; retelling; Sita

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traditions and permeated our popular imagination. Various art-forms have drawn on myths and cast them in interesting new moulds relevant to contemporary social and political contexts. When transmitted through diverse forms and media, the mythological narratives undergo both intermedial and intramedial translations, thus acquiring “parallel lives” (Ramanujan, “Tell It to the Walls” 465) in different Indian traditions. For instance, well-known episodes from the epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have transmuted into different stories as they are incorporated and disseminated into diverse traditions in South Asia and Sout-East Asia. These plural living traditions foreground multiple interpretations as envisioned by the translator-creator and their audiences. The present article attempts to explore how mythical tales have been adapted into the graphic novel form, how they constitute alternative tellings, and how these intermedial interactions pose new questions and propose new meanings.

In India, pictorial story-telling emerged as a popular medium to entertain and instruct from the middle of the twentieth century. *Chandamama*, *Diamond Comics*, *Raj Comics*, *Nandan*, *Champak*, and so on, were popular among children and young adults. The *Amar Chitra Katha* (“Immortal Picture Story”) was marketed as “the route to your roots” (inner cover page). The *Amar Chitra Katha* comics series has been widely acknowledged and studied as an iconic cultural artefact, as quintessence of Indian culture and tradition, as a requisite sourcebook of Indian mythology, history, legend, and folklore for children, and as a compelling force in modern Indian history. Deploying a comic format catering to children and young readers primarily, *Amar Chitra Katha*’s illustrations played a critical role in serving its aim of educating and entertaining while retaining its image as the repository of India’s golden past. *Amar Chitra Katha* drew upon stories from mythology – the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas*; history, folktales and fables – the *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas*; visionaries – saints, scientists, and so on.

Hillary Chute says in “Comics as literature”:

“Graphic novel has echoed and expanded on the formal inventions of fiction, from modernist social and aesthetic attitudes and practices to the postmodern shift toward the democracy of popular forms. In graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention.” (462)

Innovatively adapting the style of comic strips and cartoons, the more recent comics or graphic novels have evolved the medium of pictorial storytelling to comment on issues pertinent in contemporary Indian society. The last decade has witnessed an upsurge in the production and consumption of graphic novels in India. These books have explored diverse subjects concerning history, politics, identity, mythology, culture, and so on. There is, however, a relatively recent trend in which some authors, to borrow Hillary Chute's phrase, "echo and expand on" ("Comics as literature?" [462]) the contemporaneous "inventions" of the comic form in India by employing folk art forms (Patachitra, Gond, etc.) as their tools, aiming at a novel cohabitation of image and text which they deem best suited to re-tell mythological stories. The present article examines this visual vocabulary and how it settles (and unsettles) into the graphic novel medium to re-tell well-known mythological stories. The article looks at how a folk art-form with a narrative tradition, carrying communitarian values and connotations of a purer, simpler, more intuitive, and a more authentic past, is adapted into the postmodern graphic novel to present another telling of the *Ramkatha*. The study deliberates upon whether, in this process, it gets divested of its value and becomes an impersonal thing whose value is allocated through the market alone and what nuances do the folk art-form and the graphic novel acquire in this journey. In an attempt to engage with these questions, the article analyses the Patua artwork employed in the *Sita's Ramayana* (2016), illustrated by Moyna Chitrakar and written by Samhita Arni, to re-tell the *Ramkatha* from the perspective of Sita and the "bit part players" in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The article attempts to foreground how a celebrated account is adapted in a new medium to challenge the hegemonic narrative in creative and radical ways. The article also explores the bearing this adaptation has on the folk art of the Patuas.

Sita's Ramayana, illustrated by Moyna Chitrakar and written by Samhita Arni, is not a conventional comic book as regards its visual vocabulary. The pictorial representation in *Sita's Ramayana* is quite distinct from that in the *Amar Chitra Katha* in its technique, representation, and production. *Sita's Ramayana*, to borrow Chute's phrase, "echo[es] and expand[s] on" the contemporaneous "inventions" of the comic form in India, in which the authors deploy a folk art-form, with its own historical and sociological contexts, as their tool, aiming at a cohabitation of image and text which they deem best suited to re-tell the *Ramkatha* from Sita's perspective.

Sita's Ramayana deploys folk *pata* (also Patua, Chitrakar) art from West Bengal, in which scroll paintings are traditionally used alongside oral narrations to enact stories from the *Ramayana* in front of an audience. Scroll painting (*patachitra*) is produced in cultural

traditions in many regions of India, especially in parts of eastern India such as West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha. In the Bengal region, this folk art is practised by the Chitrakar (artisan) caste. The Patuas were traditionally a community of itinerant painters and storytellers who displayed their scrolls as illustrations to accompany their storytelling. Conventionally, the songs the Patua sang were about local goddesses and gods, or well-known events from the epics. As Kavita Singh has pointed out in her article “Changing the Tune,” these texts carried messages that bore repetition; they fulfilled emotional needs, or affirmed vital beliefs and values of their audiences. Now, of course, as we had seen earlier, the Patuas are also narrating contemporary global and local events such as 9/11 or the Tsunami, and so on.

The *pata* paintings are inspired by the many myths, legends, and epics of India, which, in turn, are transformed as they are rendered in distinct regional art forms (Bose, “*Ramayana* in Bengali Folk Paintings” 20-21). The Patuas draw on selected episodes from the *Ramayana*, especially from Krttivasa’s version (15th century). The Patuas manoeuvre the plot to recite a coherent story, based largely on the sequence of events in Krttivasa’s rendition. Furthermore, the show-and-tell performances by artists from different regions reflect their distinct stylistic representations of the same myth (Bose, “*Ramayana* in Bengali Folk Paintings” 24).

In *Sita’s Ramayana* Moyna Chitrakar has drawn upon the Valmiki *Ramayana*, while Samhita Arni’s text has been inspired by the *Ramayana* of Candravati, a late sixteenth-century woman poet from eastern Bengal. Candravati’s work has both influenced and been influenced by the folk songs of women in rural Bengal. Her work is a verse narrative of 700 couplets that recounts in brief the story of Rama and Sita. Candravati compacts the battle scenes on the one hand, and expands, on the other hand, all episodes dealing with women’s experience. Mandakranta Bose has pointed out that Candravati turns it into “a sustained account of the suffering inherent in being a woman” (*Ramayana Revisited* 110); the work looks at the events of the Rama legend from a woman’s perspective – including those of Dasaratha’s queens, Mandodari, and Sita. In doing so Candravati’s narrative goes beyond the usual domestic or local ambit of folk narratives to comment on the destruction brought upon Lanka by the war and the misfortune that befalls Ayodhya once Sita is banished to the forest by Rama. Bose points out that although Candravati “reproduces the substance of the traditional story, her narrative choices, such as compacting the battle scenes, on the one hand, and expanding, on the other hand, all episodes dealing with women’s experiences, turns it into a sustained account of the suffering inherent in being a woman” (*Ramayana Revisited* 110). Candravati, says

Dineschandra Sen, “traverses the field of the whole Ramayanic legend in the shortest possible space, but does not appear to be a summary or catechism” (Sen 321).

Turning to the medium of graphic novel, it is interesting to look at how a folk art-form and folk songs are adapted into a postmodern medium of graphic novel that uses text and image instead to portray the authors' revisitations of well-known mythic episodes; how its historical and sociological contexts get transformed (or eschewed); and whether this new hybrid form – of the graphic novel – is able to reach out to an audience who is not familiar with the conventional Patua performance. Paula Richman has pointed out that within the *Ramayana* tradition, Valmiki's *Ramayana* has earned greater prestige, influence, and authority than other renditions of the story and it is venerated by devotees as the primordial story. It tends to affirm the values of the social order of his day (most scholars date its compilation to ca. 500 BCE to 250 CE), thus helping to uphold institutionalized power. Folk tellings of the *Ramkatha*, on the other hand, are more fluid and more open to improvisations than the “authoritative” tellings of the epic with fixed narrative and characters. They can be customised according to the performer or preferences of the diverse listeners; and they may vary from place to place. As such they contribute to the diversity within the *Ramayana* tradition. Moyna Chitrakar and Samhita Arni have not called their work “Sitayana” but “Sita's *Ramayana*,” which not only presupposes a familiarity with the *Ramkatha* but also underscores that their endeavour is a revisiting and revisioning. It is in Sita's voice; it is her gaze that guides the readers; and it is her perspective that sheds light on selected episodes from the *Ramayana*. The graphic novel opens with Sita, pregnant, dressed in fine silks and ornaments, with tears streaming down her eyes. “The world of men has banished me,” says Sita (9) as she “begs” the Dandaka forest to give her refuge. She then goes forth to tell her story. In most of the frames Sita is either in tears or pensive. She not only recounts her story but also presents perspective on characters such as Trijatha, Tara, Mandodari, Indrajit, and Kumbhakarna. The opening panels portray a woman who has suffered in the world of men and whose story has not been heard. Sita's narrative particularly re-tells the ambivalent episodes in the *Ramayana* – Lakshmana impulsively cutting Surpanaka's nose off and Rama not stopping him from doing so; Sita stepping out of the Lakshmana *rekha* because she was spellbound by the music of the drum played by Ravana disguised as a minstrel; Hanuman burning down the magnificent city of Lanka; Rama treacherously killing Vali, and Tara being aghast at having been “made a widow [by the killing of Vali] and then asked to be [Sugriva's] bride in the course of a single day” (Arni and Chitrakar 47); Lakshmana killing Indrajit when he was praying by the sacrificial fire; Rama subjecting Sita to ordeals and eventually banishing her when she was with child;

and Trijatha and Sita lamenting the sheer futility and destruction brought upon by war and asserting that injustice breeds injustice. The vivid colours and bold strokes of the Patua art along with close-ups and fragmented panels of the graphic novel urge the reader to meditate on these scenes further.

Although the graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* skips the description of Lanka's grandeur and the dazzling beauty of the Rakshasa women present in Candravati's *Ramayana*, it voices their side of the story – Trijatha, Vibhishana's daughter, is presented as kind and compassionate. Even when Hanuman burns down her beloved city Lanka, she believes that what Ravana has done with Sita is wrong; Trijatha also laments the treacherous killing of Indrajit by Lakshmana. She says, "What is this war, pitting brother against brother? Which kills sons when fathers live? There is no honour in this fighting, no heroes---only deceit and death" (Arni and Chitrakar 91)! When the battle is over, Sita says that although she should have been happy and overjoyed, she was not. She hears the screams of Ravana's queens rent the air as they run to the battlefield, tears streaming down their faces. "For one man's unlawful desire," says Sita, "men had been killed, widowed, and children orphaned. It was such a high price to pay" (Arni and Chitrakar 113). Additionally, as Mandakranta Bose asserts regarding Candravati's *Ramayana*, "the issue here is not whether the poem is an indictment of patriarchy; rather, it is that the poem filters the events of the Rama legend through female eyes, whether they be those of Dasaratha's queens, or Mandodari, or Sita, or even Sita's evil sister-in-law Kukuya, whose envious machinations lead to Sita's downfall...What was traditionally a celebration of manliness is thus turned into a depiction of women's inescapably tragic lives" (Bose "Ramayana Revisited" 110). It offers women's perception of the events in the Valmiki *Ramayana*.

Geeta Kapur says in *When was Modernism* that "even the very act of handling tradition is in a sense political: it involves personification/mediation/representation of material that is seen to have been hitherto buried" (269). Kapoor is writing in the context of the early twentieth century that witnessed the emergence of a practice to consolidate myths and legends reminiscent of a glorious, pre-colonial past, and resulted in the discovery and mobilisation of a tradition in the course of a struggle against colonial rule.

Kapur further points out:

“Although every aspect of the artistic tradition may be pressed into use in the affirmative urge of nationalism it is often the popular that comes in most handy. The popular will include fragmented (or sometimes bartered) aspects of the classical, as it will urbanised versions of the folk and the tribal. Although the popular is a catchall category it can be reasonably well defined in art history as an urban, eclectic impulse accompanying social change. Eclecticism in this motivated context conveys an artistic wit and nerve to construe a hybrid form that is at least potentially iconoclastic.” (Kapur 234)

Sita's Ramayana is a contemporary rendition of tradition, with multiple layers of subversion. It adapts women's ballads about a woman's *Ramayana* into a popular medium crafted by women (Chitrakar and Arni) and make it accessible to an audience much more diverse than the rural women of Mymensingh where Candravati's ballads were traditionally sung on wedding occasions (Sen 317). What Kapur has formulated in the context of the transitional decades of the modern as “alternating strategies to recoup and critique traditions” (235) is true of the postmodern, hybrid medium of the graphic novel and can be understood as the popular form's subversion of hegemonic discourses and validation of multiple contextualizations, each as pertinent as the other.

The collective consciousness embodied in folk art and a sense of being bounded by a community or territory, at the same time, paradoxically, bestows a quality of timelessness on it. The same ritualistic performances performed by generations of folk artists do not appear to be grounded in historical specificity. Linda Hutcheon says in the *Theory of Adaptation* in the context of “transculturation” or “indigenization” across cultures, languages, and history that radical change can happen “when an adapted text migrates from its context of creation to the adaptation's context of reception. Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories” (Hutcheon xvi). As the Patua's art migrates from its original performative medium to image-text medium of the graphic novel, it not only undergoes stylistic changes, but it also becomes a product that is going to be sold in the market. And it's going to be owned by its buyers, eschewing the distance between the audience and the performer implicated in a ritualistic performance. *Sita's Ramayana* seeks that the readers understand and empathise with Sita's story and that of the other characters she talks about. On the other hand, paradoxically, while a ritualistic performance entails a certain detachment, it also embodies a collective consciousness, with these ritualistic performances being made by generations of folk artists. When adapted into the graphic novel, it perhaps loses its traditional communitarian

characteristics in a way as it gains a more subjective identification with work. Thus, the work becomes more “writerly” in that sense. Looking at it from the publisher’s perspective, production cost, “target audience” or readership, and marketing become important. While it is true that the graphic novel has reached out to a wider audience than rural Bengal –for instance, I got interested in this tradition after reading the graphic book – but we need to know whether a product such as a graphic book is catering to a niche audience. Nonetheless, this also reveals how a literary event can continue to live on, centuries after its original composition, in a literary culture, made possible by the crossing over of literary traditions from one language/region/form/genre/convention to the other. And as it lives on, what nuances it acquires, what narratives it eschews, and what conventions and conceptions it adheres to or challenges can provide us with crucial insights into how myths transform themselves in different ideological fields. As mythical narratives travel across media and audiences, they are told from multiple locations and positions and articulated in new voices, often subverting the dominant voice and worldview. The retellings of myths imbue the characters in the stories with multidimensionality, thus problematising the preeminence of a singular perception of any character. In the case of the Indian graphic novel, such “adaptation,” “translation,” “transliteration,” and/or “transculturation” enriches the genres and cultures with eclecticism, open-endedness, and creative possibilities.

Conclusions

The present article has attempted to explore the diverse possible trajectories for mythological narratives as they are translated and adapted into myriad mediums across time and space. While the myths transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, they are, paradoxically, often deployed to comment on relevant issues within specific temporal and spatial contexts. The article has attempted to examine the graphic novel *Sita’s Ramayana* as a contemporary rendition of a tradition with multiple layers of subversion. The novel deploys the *pata* folk art in a graphic novel medium to revisit the classic *Ramkatha*. It sheds light on some well-known episodes from the Valmiki’s *Ramayana* from Sita’s perspective. In her voice. Sita’s retelling imparts the characters in the story with multidimensionality, thus

problematising the preeminence of a singular perception of any character or narrative. The hybrid medium of the graphic novel, with its creative possibilities, sustains the subversive strain of Sita's narrative while consistently highlighting its fragmentariness.

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