

Graphic Fiction in India: When Images Think and Narratives See

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ABSTRACT

Graphic fiction is not merely a genre of literature in India; it is a civilizational echo—a revival of a sense of aestheticity, a re-awakening of a sense of locality, which never uttered a word, but always offered pictures, symbols, and silence. In this regard, the present research paper interrogates its history as the site of communication between tradition and modernity, by trailing the genesis of graphic fiction through the indigenous visual culture such as the Pattachitra, Madhubani, and Warli up to the contemporary graphic tales. The paper tries to scrutinize how this cloth-based medium of scroll painting and visual storytelling hailing from Odisha, Bengal, Bihar, and Maharashtra, respectively, turns into a medium of thought instead of a medium of storytelling, where images do not illustrate what is real, but form it. The study is guided by the cultural theory of Arjun Appadurai, an Indian-American anthropologist, and is implemented using a qualitative and interpretive method in its attempt to demonstrate how globalization, media flows, and the hybrid identities remake the form of narratives. The analysis of the works, especially of *River of Stories* (1994), *Corridor* (2004), and *Kari* (2008), allows seeing the way graphic fiction breaks the linearity to reveal the dissonances of the development process, the loneliness of metropolitan life, and the fluidity of identity. The query claims that the graphic fiction, in India, has not only gone beyond the roots in pedagogy and entertainment but has also been transformed into a visual epistemology, a form of perceptiveness which is never closed but ever embraces fragmentation, comprising participation. Overall, the paper proclaims that Graphic fiction, as a fiction, does not depict the world—it disciplines the eye to perceive what reality hides.

Keywords: *Graphic Fiction, Visual Narrative, Indian Comics, Cultural Memory, Visual Epistemology, Cultural Hybridity, Pattachitra, Madhubani, Warli.*

Graphic Fiction: The Ancient Pulse of Visual Storytelling and the Birth of a Modern Medium

One civilization writes about itself, and another civilization reads it. India is a part of the latter. Before the print word was used to restrain imagination into a linear form, the Indian mind was free to wander among images, symbols, and sacred geometries. Narratives had no limits of sentences; they were cut into temple walls, engraved on the mountain's caves, painted onto scrolls, sang into life, and acted out in gestures that broke the barrage existing between the

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visual and the verbal sphere. Indian graphic fiction of the contemporary world is not a foreign literary experiment—it is the resurgence of an unremembered civilizational instinct, a revival of the old convention of perceiving narrative in the eye, ear, and body all together. In this respect, the key to comprehending graphic fiction in India is to start not with the comic book but with the scroll, not with the panel but with the mural. The pattachitra painting from Odisha and Bengal, Madhubani from Bihar and Warli from Maharashtra are such traditions that display a rich narrative practicality as a part and parcel of visual art. At Patachitra, to take an example, the artist does not paint, but unravels the story, panel by panel, in a performance that transforms the spectators into participants. The scroll is brought into motion, and the storytelling is turned into a time telling. Not a single image is inert but full of narrative energy, averting the grammar of modern graphic fiction way before the emergence of the print culture. Nonetheless, history never remains the same. It evolves, evolves with the change of time. The colonial experience interrupted this continuation of visual storytelling by organic means because it brought new technologies and new orders of knowledge. The standardization of the forms of narratives began with the print culture, in which text was privileged over image and linearity over simultaneity because of the mechanical reproducibility.

However, this intrusion also led to a chance which no one had imagined prior to the advent of Indian comics. There was also an experimentation of the illustrated periodicals. Indian artists and illustrators started to find a negotiation between Western comic effects and local narrative demands. This experimentation was not just westernizing of satire but nationalization in all aspects. The cartoonists like R. K. Laxman indigenized it, and they needed to develop a visual language that could convey the absurdity of postcolonial life with the outrage that it merited. His cartoon, *The Common Man* (initiated in 1951), was not merely a character, but a witness of the action of the dharma of Indian democracy, the contradiction of invisibility and visibility, and the identity of the modern citizens. Simultaneously, other authors such as Pran Kumar Sharma changed the mainstream comics by transporting such characters that were based on the reality of situation in India. His characters of Chacha Chowdhury, Shrimataji, Pinki, Billoo, Raman, and Channi Chachi were a small yet significant shift: the merits of the story substituted the brute heroism by the cleverness, humour, and cultural acquaintance. The comic was now not a fantasy, but a picture of the society with its numerous dreams, contradictions and unexpressed powers.

The post-independence era, however, enabled the bonding of the two—graphic storytelling and nationality. Graphic fiction became a potent pedagogical instrument within a new free nation,

which tried to find a stable cultural discourse. In this journey, the factor of conclusive outlining was the imprinting of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK Comics) by the vibes and eyes of the writer Anant Pai, also known as Uncle Pai. His comics were not a mere retelling of myths and histories; they were a kind of cultural memory on which forever rest the rays of the present and future. They also had complicated traditions which were redesigned into picturesque ones in a manner that they can be comprehended. In these comics, the mythologies had not been carried in the hearts of millions of Indian children in vast scrolls but by painted panels, which were vividly brimming with such gods and heroes and other legends that were not abstract concepts but breathing possessions with their particularities. However, the process of translation of culture was not devoid of tensions. The selection of some stories and the omission of others were the contribution of Amar Chitra Katha to the establishment of a national imagination, plurality-denying, to the virtue of coherence. It asks a question forever when by doing so one pictures history, whether one lightens it or whether one remakes it to the present.

The Tinkle magazine published from Mumbai expanded the horizons of Indian graphic storytelling. With the emphasis laid on the current times instead of the mythical past, it gave a new orientation to the graphic fictions being written in India. Its characters, especially Suppandi, Shikar Shambhu, Tantri the Mantri, and Kalia the Crow, were working in a familiar yet modern world of ethical concerns, environmental concerns, and absurdity of life. This shift of the sacred to the secular and of epic to prosaic, marked a radical change of the role of graphic fiction in the country. It ceased to be an instrument of cultural preservation; it now was an instrument of cultural reflection.

Simultaneously, as the *Raj Comics* (1984), presented collaboratively by Raj Kumar Gupta, Manoj Gupta, and Sanjay Gupta from Delhi, came into existence, another element of Indian graphic fiction appeared: the superhero. However, they did not imitate the Western iconography; they were Indian in blood and breathe, influenced by the local mythology, ethical philosophy, and socio-political actualities. The heroes such as Nagraj and Doga symbolized a type of heroism that was entwined with the idea of dharma in which justice was not a law but a duty of the universe. With the initiation of these tales, the superhero was no longer an isolated character, but an ethically acting agent, operating in a larger cultural and moral context. Therefore, Indian graphic fiction had gone through an impressive journey towards the end of the 20th century. It had passed through ancient visual traditions of visual colonialism, to popular entertainment, to nation-building pedagogy. But, behind this development, there was an unanswered question—whether graphic fiction could rise beyond its connection with

childhood and entertainment to become a solemn vehicle of artistic and intellectual investigation. The answer to this question would appear at the beginning of the 21st century, when graphic fiction would lose its naivety and address the issues of the modern life with a deeper insight than ever before.

Research Methodology

To explore the evolution and cultural relevance of the graphic fiction in India, the current research paper follows a qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary research methodology. The study is profoundly based on the textual and visual analysis and it addresses the primary graphic narratives, including *River of Stories* (1994), *Corridor* (2004), and *Kari* (2008), in terms of their narrative patterns and visual representations. In this facet, the texts may be regarded as multimodal texts, which blend image and language in creating meaning in addition to being interpreted as literary artifacts. The theoretical and cultural paradigms, particularly the theory of global cultural flows as proposed by Arjun Appadurai, also contribute to informing the study in the context of comprehending the effects of globalization, media flows, and hybrid identities on modern graphic fiction in India. The medium is placed within the frames of broader socio-cultural and postcolonial discourses through the secondary sources which include scholarly articles, critical essays, and historical descriptions of Indian visual traditions. In addition, it incorporates the comparative approach in the methodology that is trailed after the conversion of the traditional visual storytelling practice to the contemporary and digital graphic narratives. This study aims to provide an in-depth and multi-layered perspective of what is actually meant by graphic fiction in the sense of being a multi-layered medium that mirrors and re-invents the Indian cultural realities.

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Where Panels Breathe and Boundaries Break: Defining the Form, Mapping the Pulse, and Confronting the Limits of Graphic Fiction

Graphic fiction is one of the most radical typologies of narrative of contemporary literary culture in which the image and the text intersect to create a meaning that the text modalities cannot create by themselves. Attempting to explain it in simple terms, a graphic novel can be considered as a self-contained, book-length, graphic work of sequential art, narrated through a well-organized combination of panels, dialogue, captions, and visual symbolism. Such a definition cannot be considered exhaustive, either, since the graphic fiction is not easy to

categorize. It is not illustrative writing, but a separate semiotic system where visuality is given an equal footing with language. The meaning is formed, not only by what is written but also by how it is perceived, by framing, point of view, and space. Thus, graphic fiction reinforces the very notion of narrative and transforms the reading process into the process of simultaneous perception and interpretation.

The cohesive element of graphic fiction is its seriality, its participatory nature. The panels discontinuously divide time in visual moments, and the gutter, the space between them, the silent space, leaves the reader to provide the imaginative input to complete the narrative. This interaction becomes a co-creative relationship between the text and the reader, and meaning is made by inference as well as by representation. The word and the image are utterly reciprocally dependent and neither is an appendix of the other. Additionally, graphic fiction is multimodal, i.e. it employs the resources of cinema, painting, and literature to form multi-layered and immersive experiences. It also has a wide thematic scope and is able to embrace complex elements of human circumstances: history, trauma, identity, and politics in a way that can be more immediate than a standard prose. As a medium of expression in the visual narrative in the nineteenth century and the codification of graphic fiction as an academic subject in the late twentieth century, graphic fiction has continued to be a fluid and boundary-less medium.

The fluidity of this kind, however, causes one to realize the boundaries and hardness of the form. Even the concept of a graphic novel itself has been derided as a commercial or cultural category, commonly employed to give certain works a greater superiority in any perceived insignificance of comics. These peculiarities, as most artists would point to, are less cultural than formal. Theoretically, too, graphic fiction possesses its own limits: since it requires a visual expression, it may limit the interpretive openness by solidifying some meaning that would otherwise be an ambiguity in prose. Its taxing artistic and storytelling talent can also restrict its accessibility to authors, and its hybrid nature is likely to push it to the periphery of the literary and artistic world. However, in these confrontations, the graphic fiction can be powerful. It is in a state of provisionality, of subverting norms, of dismantling hierarchies, of introducing the narrative beginnings in which panels are not merely an archive of stories but a life into new constructions of perception and knowledge.

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When the Frame Breaks—Graphic Fiction as Resistance, Identity, and Existential Inquiry in India

The present position of graphic fiction in India is founded on the issue of whether it can even be possible to narrate stories, in which the earlier stage of Indian graphic fiction was based on telling stories. The genteel facade of the past start to wear away and so does the illusion of a continuous and consistent reality. The imposition of the graphic novel in India is not just a formal dislocation but an epistemological dislocation, a moment where narrative is no longer reassuring, at which it begins to vex and bother. This alteration is best exemplified in *River of Stories* (1994) by Orijit Sen, which is often considered the first graphic fiction to be created in India because it does not adhere to the linearity and closure of earlier comics. Rather, it emerges as a disjointed carpet of voices, images, and silences, and gets to the intricacies of the Narmada Valley dispute which gained momentum in 1985. In this case, development is not a success story of progress and development, but rather an uneven territory in which the ecological destruction, displacement, and resistance come into conflict. The work by Sen does not provide solutions, but it provides a sound witnessing. It compels the reader to deal with the embarrassing reality that all accounts of progress are accompanied by accounts of loss.

When Sen goes to the peripheries of the country, Sarnath Banerjee goes to its city center, Connaught Place and Calcutta. *Corridor: A Graphic Novel* (2004) by Sarnath Banerjee turns out to be the jungle of transient experiences and fragmented identities. The story does not make sense, and it is the reflection of the state of the contemporary world where people lose their sense of direction and wander around without being part of a specific place. The passage turns into a metaphor of existence itself a temporary passage in which the meaning is always postponed. This exploration is further elaborated, not in his second work titled as *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) but in his third work, *The Harappa Files* (2011), which breaks down time and places ancient history in opposition to the contemporary fears and anxieties of the world. By doing so, he implies that history is neither a dead archive nor a present retrieve but a dynamic, disputed oral account, which frames and is framed by the present for the approaching future.

The issue of identity, though, is most meticulously and radically expressed in the works of Amruta Patil, the first an Indian female graphic novelist. With her debut graphic fiction *Kari* (2008), she soundly explored the themes of sexuality, friendship, and death. The love, loss, and self-discovery of the main character of Kari are transformed into philosophy on how identity can be transitory in the world where there are alleged rigid definitions. The visual aesthetic of Patil is quite contrasting and suggestive imagery, which captivates the emotional tempest of a person who is torn into pieces with a feeling of belonging and alienation. In this case, it is in

graphic fiction that marginalized identities cannot just be depicted but re-enacted, to the point of deconstructing the dominant discourses that attempt to confine them.

The world of graphic fiction in India is multifaceted. Besides entertaining the children, it makes the readers of each and every span of life meditative. It puts before them such burning topic of the present-day India that affects their mundane life essentially. For consideration, where the graphic fictions of Orijit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee, and Amruta Patil generally deal with urban and country life, there the graphic novels of Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Samhita Arni, Moyna Chitrakar, Prateek Thomas, Rajive Eipe, Srividya Natrajan, S. Anand, Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam and the others deal with political, educational, and economic condition of the Indian republic. In their panels, they demonstrate the themes of frightful partition, horrible terrorism, pensive feminism, terrible Emergency, the sensitive issue of child sexual abuse and Dalit ideals. *Delhi Calm* (2010) by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, *Hush* (2010) by Prateek Thomas and Rajiv Eipe, *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar, and *Bhimayana* (2011) by Srividya Natrajan, S. Anand, Durgabai Vyam, and Subhash Vyam, respectively illustrate them in their panels well.

What unites these works of different natures dealing with different themes and thoughts is that the scholars—whether who wrote it or who read it—do not consider the graphic fiction to be a thing of mere entertainment. Instead, they take it into a way of critical questioning, which can respond to issues of caste, gender, class, and history with unparalleled sensitivity. This visuality allows articulating the trauma and memory in a manner that they cannot accomplish through words, with the help of silence, fragmentation, and juxtaposition. There is an expression of the disillusionment of the lives in the stories that concern Partition, e.g., the disjoining of the panels is a disjoining of the lives, and it is an emotional experience beyond the old stories and the rest.

However, this transformation can be viewed in the theoretical framework of Arjun Appadurai, and his idea of the global cultural flows illuminates the hybridity of contemporary Indian graphic fiction. The identity has ceased to be unitary and fixed in a world that is characterized by migration, media and transnational contacts. This fluidity has been present in graphic fiction, in which characters have been free to travel in and out of different cultural realities, in the strains and possibilities of globalization. In the meantime, aesthetic innovations of modern graphic fiction challenge the traditional concept of narrative structure. The time chains and the visual metaphors are applied instead of the linear flow, and panels are disappearing. The reader is not a passive punter anymore, he/she is an active participant, who has to make his/her way

through mazes of the story and create meaning out of fragments. This participatory element transforms the reading process into an interpretive and participatory process whereby the barriers between writer and reader are becoming more permeable. In this case, modern Indian graphic fiction is not a passive and imitative reflection of reality, but rather an active process of re-inventing and re-making it, an active image-text process. It unveils the cracks which are lurking behind the world of everyday life and conflicts, paradoxes, and contradictions which are peculiar to modern life in India. By playing its way through the space of uncertainty, disconnection, and ambiguity, the graphic fiction establishes its language of narration. On this controversial basis, it claims itself to be one of the strongest and the most transforming forms of artistic protest in contemporary India.

(IV)

The Digital Imagination and the Future of Seeing

As the tradition of graphic fiction in India finds its origin in its past and its present in the critical analysis, its future is in the transformation, a transformation that will be brought about by the influence of digital technology and new means of distribution, as well as by an ever-expanding visual culture. The process from page to screen is not just a technological change, it is an ontological change. It does not only transform the way stories are told but also the experience of stories. The Comix India (2010), a magazine of Indian Comics anthology by Bharath Murthy and Kailash Iyer, Navayana Publishing House (2003) by S. Anand and D. Ravikumar, and The Pao Collective (2008) jointly initiated by Orijit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Parismita Singh, and Amitabh Kumar have also democratized the manufacture and distribution of graphic fiction and have witnessed artists bypass the channels of conventional publishers to reach audiences of the world. This democratization has given birth to a new breed of creators that bring variety of thinking and experiences to the medium. There are a number of the bright scholars who can be taken as the bright examples of the changes that are so personal and socially resonant simultaneously.

Digital technology has also facilitated the proliferation of formal possibilities of graphic fiction. The panel surface is brought to life in terms of animation, sound, and interactivity and the barriers between literature, cinema, and playing are removed. The readers are no longer left on pagination mode; they scroll, click, and become a devoted part of the running story. It is this experience and immersion of storytelling that is re-established by this interactivity. For now, the emergence of social media has turned graphic fiction into a means of mass action and

popular participation. Visual storytelling is disseminating at a very fast pace, and it responds to political occurrences, social movements, and cultural discussions in real-time. Graphic storytelling is utilized by artists such as Gitanjali Rao and collectives such as Manta Ray Collective to disturb the existing narratives and give them a voice to the underserved in society and begin a critical discourse.

However, there is no growth minus challenges. Censorship has remained a limitation to the freedom of creative expression where the expression that defies political or cultural conventions is met with opposition. The scandals of Sarnath Banerjee works demonstrate the unstable state of the artists who work in an environment of growing criticism. Meanwhile, the graphic fiction market in India is still infantile, and the cost of producing it is very high, as well as the readership level. The issue with the perception of the graphic fiction may be the most troublesome, perhaps, though. It has yet to be recognized as the lesser of the two evils, with a more entrenched bias in the favor of text as opposed to image. This eminence, though, is becoming not tenable in a world dominated by visual culture. Graphic fiction does not take away literature, it adds to it, and new ways of thinking, seeing, and understanding humanity. When one takes a peep at the future, the future of graphic fiction in India is colossal and unpredictable. More recent technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) or artificial intelligence (AI), will render the medium itself more immersive in the sense of narrative space and destabilize the concept of narrative as a form of storytelling. Meanwhile, the implication of such social, political, and cultural concerns that has been made possible is that graphic fiction will continue to be an important subject of critical study.

(V)

Conclusion: When Images Begin to Think and Narratives Learn to See

With the history of the development of graphic fiction in India, and with the noting of the spectrum of the fluidity of visuality of Indian tradition to the fractured and fragmented appearance of the modern graphic novels, this work has not only uncovered a change in a literary form, but also a change, in a broader sense, of culture. What initially appears to be a type of narration, and which is part of the community memory gradually turns out to be a useful point of criticism, resistance, and redefinition. This movement between the certainties of the myth of Amar Chitra Katha (1967) and the disjointed, uncomfortable narratives of River of Stories (1994), Corridor (2004), and Kari (2008) is a critical change in the mode of storytelling, which remains a preserve to telling stories as an interrogative. This is not merely a formal but

a philosophical transference, which questions the nature of what the authority of narrative has always been based upon. The crux of this metamorphosis is the inception of graphic fiction as a visual epistemology, visual form of knowing that does not trust in the hegemony of text-based linear storytelling. In addition, unlike in classical prose, where the emphasis is usually applied on the coherence, closure and resolution, in graphic fiction, fragmentation, silence and juxtaposition are more effective. It moves in and out in between the panels, in between the words and pictures, and in between the presence and absence where meaning is not provided but made. The reader is not a passive punter but a participant who will have to create meaning out of his/her interpretation. The boundaries between the author and the reader, the narrative and the interpretation, the reality and the representation are contaminated in this act of engagement, and a more dynamic and fluid concept of storytelling develops.

Furthermore, the process of the development of graphic fiction in India should be put into the context of globalization and cultural hybridity. To this end, the current paper uses the theoretical frames of Arjun Appadurai, an Indian American anthropologist basically known by his primary theories as proposed in the discipline of globalization studies to determine how modern graphic narrative has influenced identities that have been informed by migration, media flows, and transnational interactions. The Indian subject that is depicted in these works is not separate and fixed anymore but is torn apart, bargained, and in a continuous state of movement. This is a frontier where the ambiguities are not merely presented but inhabited, where the ambiguity and contradiction of contemporary living could be offered simply by a single visual representation. This change is further amplified by the digital turn, which adds to the possibilities of the graphic storytelling to be transformed into the interactive and participatory forms. However, even though it is no longer the same medium, it continues to have the same issues as censorship, market restrictions, and the legitimacy of literature. No such rigidities, however, make it less important, but, on the contrary, only reinforce its status as a critical and subversive form, such that still manages to challenge mainstream narratives and offer new ways of thinking.

Generally, the history of the graphic fiction in India is not only the history of the progress and development of literary form; it is the history of the tradition, culture, and civilization of the Indian ethos that retrieves and reclaims its long-suppressed visual imagination. It instructs one and all Indians in its silent insistence, in its overwhelming power, that narrative is not a word, that images can think, that images can ask questions, that images can give rise to meanings that go far beyond the spectrum of language, and that seeing is itself a process that can be thought-

provoking of the most. In such a world that has become over-saturated and image-based, graphic fiction presents itself as a powerful manifestation of the power of the visual to transform, to disrupt the status quo, and to radically redefine the manner in which reality is comprehended, experienced, and known.

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