



GENDERED HEROISMS: A STUDY OF SELECT STORIES FROM THE *AMAR CHITRA KATHA*

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Abstract

Recent theoretical developments in literary criticism have not only made us question and revisit the category of children's literature, but also shed a new look at its purported aims and effects. Therefore, many texts, considered 'children's literature' have now been seen simply as literature that is read not just by children but also by many adults.

Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha* is one such example of Indian children's literature whose readership and appeal has never been limited to children. It is therefore fruitful to view *Amar Chitra Katha* books as texts constituted by, and, emanating certain political ideologies. Ideologically located within the rise of a national consciousness in post- independence India, Pai's graphic narratives negotiate with the various models of heroism accessed through primarily mythology and history. As children's literature, they perhaps have a pedagogical and moral value and contribute to the socialisation of the child- reader. As literary and cultural texts, available to a larger demographic, they are also implicated in larger social and ideological debates central to the shaping of the new nation.

The paper aims to analyse a few female-centred stories in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series as reflective of , and negotiating with the dominant male-centric discourses of heroism circulating in the space of Indian popular culture. The chief architect of this discourse were the graphic narratives published as *Amar Chitra Katha*. Within this larger context, the paper views the representation of female characters in the *Brave Women of India* series. In their negotiation with conventional and patriarchal model of male heroism, they represent a moment of hegemonic struggle and intervention in the politically charged climate of the 1970s.

Keywords: Amar Chitra Katha, Brave Women of India, Gender, Heroism, Violence, Rani of Jhansi, Popular Culture



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Many media and cultural theorists have seen the decade of the 1970s as a very crucial decade in the cultural and ideological history of India. It was a decade of disillusionment with the Nehruvian promises and hopes, a decade with an almost pan-cultural preoccupation with the defining of an 'Indian' identity. It was also a decade of the rise of the television, of the rise of feminist consciousness in India, and of other movements against social injustices. It in this ideologically tumultuous context that the *Amar Chitra Katha* enterprise emerged.¹

Since its inception, *Amar Chitra Katha* has been central in shaping the myth of 'India'.² The idea of the Indian nation frames the narratives ACK retells. For instance, the "introductory" page of "Rani of Jhansi" places the story of Lakshmibai in the context of the idea of the nation: "She ruled over a small kingdom, but dreamt of freedom for the *whole country*. In the Great Revolt of 1857, Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, matched wits and force, with the rest of the British generals. The image of the brave Rani of Jhansi charging her steed through enemy lines, her sword raised for the next thrust, is forever imprinted in *Indian hearts*".

Direct references and allusions to the idea of *India* as a country also appear in the tales that appear in the graphic anthology titled *Brave Women of India*. Creases in the wrinkled historical accounts of the "revolt"/ "mutiny"/"war" of 1857 are ironed out by an appeal to this unified country whose existence at the time of these wars is disputed.¹ India is the "mirror" in which these representations look at themselves and consolidate their identity. The idea of India, frames their narratives at the outset. They are "always- already" Indians.

Straddling the realms of both popular and children's literature, *Amar Chitra Katha* represents the "hegemonic intervention at the historical conjecture of 1970s". As a cultural text, therefore, *Amar Chitra Katha* represents a moment of ideological negotiation within popular culture. In a Gramscian sense, the hegemonic groups whose interests need to be secured and universally propagated as "truth" and "common-sense" have to shed their "corporatist aims" and be sincerely concerned about the welfare of the groups over which they have to exercise



hegemony. Hegemony therefore is a continuous negotiation between the hegemonic and the hegemonized groups. Therefore, as Raymond Williams indicated in his work, the hegemonic process is both a process of the expression of the dominant ideas of the hegemonic class, as well as a moment of resistance to those ideas. *The Brave Women of India* series is read in this paper as signifying one moment in the larger hegemonic process of creating a “myth” of India.

This idea of the nation is reinforced in ACK books representing warriors and kings of the past through the figure of the hero. The hero is predominantly male, and if not so, seen to be located within a patriarchal discourse. At the heart of the construction of the idea of male heroism, is a construction of violence – in both real and symbolic terms.³ Ranging from an exhibition of physical prowess to an attitude of force and even including even a posture of compassion, violence in ACK takes various forms. In the figure of these heroes, violence is naturalised as the last but a necessary means to secure the dignity of an individual.

The stories that this paper will primarily focus on are “Rani of Jhansi” and “Kalpana Chawla”. “Rani of Kittur”, “Rani Abbakka” and “Sultana Razia”- also part of the *Brave Women of India* series will be used as co-texts to these primary texts. An analysis of “Rani of Jhansi” and “Kalpana Chawla” will display the ‘continuous negotiation’ with the changing definition of the nation from 1970s to 2000s. It is largely within this theorisation of hegemony that this paper locates its analysis of the female heroes and violence in *Amar Chitra Katha*.

Deepa Sreenivas in her seminal work titled *Sculpting the Middle Class: History Masculinity and The Amar Chitra Katha in India* traces the genealogy of the “contemporary ethical ideals of hard work, merit and citizenship” to the ideological struggles of the 1970s cultural landscape of India. She proposes that along with the radical movements demanding freedom from social inequalities that emerged during the time, there also emerged along with them “conservative demand for a masculinisation of the inner self”. In her detailed study of the verbal and visual aspects of select Amar Chitra Katha stories, she highlights the discourses that constitute the image of the “male hero” through whom the sensibility of the middle-class child is “sculpted”.

The modern male hero as the central ideological figure is constituted by the discourses of militant Brahminical nationalism and patriarchy; and in his contemporary Amar Chitra Katha avatar, also poses a challenge to them. For instance, in her analysis of “Chanakya” she states, “The boundaries of the ashram suddenly expand to occupy the battlefield of the world and the guru comes to occupy the centre of the arena of war and politics”

Similar to Chanakya, Shivaji too, in Amar Chitra Katha emerges as a “combination of force and mercy”. The sagely and the militaristic exist in a harmonious balance in the representations of the male heroes of the Amar Chitra Katha. Through the use of visual and



literary resources, they are portrayed both as historical/mythical warriors with a certain ease with violence and as humans essentially desirous of peace and order. They are unerring emblems both of a “glorious past” and the reformed and progressive present. The representation of the bodies of these male heroes can help us understand this. The posture of the male heroes (“Ashoka”, “Akbar”, “Chanakya”, “Krishna” etc) is erect, their bodies well-chiselled and proportionate. The visual economy of the front pages of the *Amar Chitra Katha* subject our vision to the gaze of these heroes. We follow their ‘gaze’, their bodies, their vision and their stories dominate the narrative.

The traditional valorisation of a violent masculinity in the figure of these heroes is legitimised by the evocation to the idea of the nation and the individual. War and violence are not represented within the discourse of a militant nationalism but within a universal discourse of a moral and ethical rightness. The stories, therefore create a binary structure within which the morally legitimised (humanistic) “pro-order” violence is pitched against the “anti-order” immoral violence of the “invader” or the “foreigner”. The invader, Meera Sreenivas notes, is very often the religious other – “Christian” or “Muslim”. At times this “other” or “invader” is not the religious other but a figure that threatens to disturb and challenge the “fundamental order of things” as established by patriarchy, and the patriarchal logic of the text.

The violence undertaken by the hero, pitched against the violence of the ‘other’ is legitimised by the text. It is morally and ethically justified, and represents moderation. For instance, Shivaji, like Ram is “ready at one moment to take up arms against a foe, at another to forgive him who must remain meek and submissive.” In this measured balance, they are as heroic as the myths represents them, and as human as the readers of *Amar Chitra Katha*. They represent “the glorious heritage” of India and the modern man.

This paper takes this idea of male heroism as a point of comparison for its study of the representation of female heroism in the series.

FEMALE HEROISM IN THE AMAR CHITRA KATHA

Kathryn Henson in “The *Virangana* in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture” discusses the various ways in which female representation has been coded in Indian myths, epics and popular folk culture. According to her, more often than not, mythical goddesses are located largely within the discourse of motherhood and it is the patriarchal discourse that situates women primarily as wives of heroes in Indian epics. In the introduction to her essay she writes, “The epic heroine type – the sacrificing chaste, loyal wife –is viewed as representing the ideal for female behaviour at least among the high Hindu castes. Hindu mythology offers another female paradigm – the all-powerful mother-goddess.”

She states further

“Between these polarities there lies an overlooked yet an important paradigm of Indian womanhood: the *virangana*, the woman who manifests the qualities of *virya* or heroism.”

This paper proposes that the Amar Chitra Katha enterprise, in the represents female heroism as a melange of all the above mentioned “types”. The origin of the *virya* of Rani of Jhansi, Rani of Kittur, Rani Abbakka and Sultana Razia owes both to the upper-caste discourse of femininity and female virtue represented in Indian epics and mythology, and to the potentially subversive discourse of woman as “warrior”.

The contemporary figure of Kalpana Chawla too is situated at this crucial point in the story. She represents all the attributes of a “good” daughter, wife and a mother, along with a “manly” spirit of enterprise, bravery and courage. In this she resembles her grandfather who, as the tale tells us, had to leave Pakistan and come to India to make a life for his family. Her bravery mirrors his.

Rani of Jhansi’s, Rani of Kittur’s, Rani Abbakka’s and Sultana Razia’s bravery although radical in its existence in the public space of the state and state politics (rather than in the home and the hearth), it is also firmly rooted in the idea of the family. All these female characters appear in the public space as a result of crises in the private space. The boundaries of the private and the public dissolve to make them appear in their state as rulers and queens. This transition from the conventional role of a mother and wife performed in the public place, to the role of the warrior-queen fighting in the public space doesn’t necessitate the abnegation of their conventional roles, but it becomes an extension of them. The public assumes the structure of the private space.

Henson in her study of the popular folk theatre in India discusses the context in which the female figure’s *virya* was located in Indian history and popular culture. History and folk theatre abound in references to the figure of this warrior- woman who displays a manly mastery of violence. She further states that while historical legends like Rani of Jhansi who occupy the ‘public’ space and undertake violence to defend their land against “invaders”, the *virangana* from popular folk drama transform into warriors only to secure their love interests, to secure and locate themselves firmly within the private discourse of love, family and chastity. Such a figure appropriates a masculine role in order to secure her feminine existence, much like the warrior-queens of history whose public role far from being a declaration of an individual spirit, is often seen as a response to, and an extension of their private space.

The contemporary *virangana*- Kalpana Chawla- we are repeatedly told- does never abandon her true duties of a good daughter and wife. Her unconventionality does not place her



at odds with patriarchal expectations. We are told that along with her drive to excel and her interest in outdoor physical activities, she “participated in school dances”, “wrote poetry” and was “quite interested in the latest fashions”. The gendered structuring of her identity is indicated very powerfully by the visual text. While playing volleyball, she is represented as the only girl in the picture, claiming the public space as her own. While the picture depicting her interest in fashion shows her surrounded by girls. Even when she is not a real “mother” she is symbolically so. She, talks to and inspires children with ease. She answers their questions patiently after coming back from her visit to outer space. In the character of Kalpana Chawla, similar to the character of other brave women of India, the reader is given a representation of a well-balanced and moderate feminism.

In stories of the Amar Chitra Katha, we find that the Rani Lakshmibai’s commitment to securing the future of the male heir runs parallel to the dedication with which she serves Jhansi. She is both queen and mother. It is therefore important that the fate of the kingdom and the fate of her child overlap with each other. A comparison of the representation of the figure of the Rani with the child tied to her back, with her image mounting a horse and carrying a sword fighting a battle against the invaders we get an interesting juxtaposition of the public and the private which are never too far from each other. Her transition from the young Manu, to Rani Lakshmibai, to Rani of Jhansi is smooth because it does not make her shed her private role of a dedicated mother. Similar to the gendered division of spaces in “Kalpana Chawla” we also see that its only in matters of private importance that other female figures appear in the narrative. In matters of the state and governance the pictures are dominated by male figures. While she inspires women of Jhansi to help men fight the invasion, she also organises a “*haldi-kumkum*” ceremony “to inspire confidence in women”. In the bravery of the female heroes of the Amar Chitra Katha, we have a fusion of the Hansen’s “types” of female heroes- the mother, the wife, the queen and the warrior.

The text and the visuals of “Rani of Jhansi” however also draw attention to the gradual marginalisation of the aspects of her characters traditionally regarded as feminine in favour of her emergence as a “hero” in the public space. The language of patriarchy constitutes her emergence in the public space. When she becomes Rani of Jhansi from Rani Lakshmibai, we have her displayed in a manly garb, her child which has been a yellow blur slowly disappears into nothingness. Kalpana Chawla becomes an ungendered “Indian”, her woman-ness is slowly but gradually taken out of the equation.

The characters of Rani of Jhansi do not only reflect the patriarchal ideology, but with ease also become its spokespersons. The feminine discourse of “care” which sits harmoniously with their roles as good mothers, wives and daughters, coexists unproblematically with the masculine



vigour with which they marginalise any potentially anti-order expression of “otherness”. For instance, she is depicted defending her state violently against its/ her “enemies”. When Sadashiv Rao, a distant nephew of the late maharaja comes to assert his right to the kingdom, the text tells us that “Lakshmibai sent her troops against him and defeated him in a single instant.” This ‘real’ violence often coexists with a ‘symbolic’ violence. When the British prepare to attack Jhansi, the instance of an opposition to war are not acknowledged or discussed, but are overwhelmed by a unanimous nationalistic pro-war rhetoric.

The masculinisation of the heroine is done by marginalising her femininity and by appropriating it to the demands of a masculinist state. The patriarchal unconscious with the masculinist idea of heroism demands that the woman be the image of the man. The conventional phallic symbols of the sword (Jhansi ki Rani) and the rocket (Kalpana Chawla) appear and dominate the narrative space. The characters display the kind of ease with violence that was attributed to the male heroes, this violence is then legitimised by the call to the idea of the nation and universal morality. In its performance of male heroism this violence is naturalised and legitimised. At the heart of the construction of the female heroine, is her faint femininity and rising masculinisation.

CONCLUSION

The idea of heroism central to the Amar Chitra Katha enterprise is gendered. While ostensibly it appears to have create an ‘ungendered’ universal idea of the “Indian” hero, it preserves the traditional gender binary. Women are both nurtures as wives and mothers in these stories and the patriarchal agents of a real or symbolic violence, which is at the heart of this idea of Brahminical masculinity. The figure of the Rani of Jhansi, dressed as a man, mounting a horse, with her son firmly tied to her back and holding a sword, points to the ideological configuration of the figure of the heroine in Amar Chitra Katha stories.

They are counter hegemonic in the disruption their appropriation of the male language and resources and in their reconfiguration of what is traditionally deemed a masculinist space. But they represent the hegemonic patriarchal structures in their ways in which such re-appropriation takes place. The representation of the female heroes of ACK, therefore, represent a moment of “hegemonic intervention” in the crucial moment of the ideologically charged up 1970s.

Endnote:

1. Sreenivas, Deepa. Introduction. *Sculpting a Middle Class: History, Masculinity and the Amar Chitra Katha in India*. Routledge. 2010.





2. Roland Barthes describes myth as a kind of language that acquires a specialised meaning (“a second-order semiological system”) within a structure. Barthes also states that myth are a “meta-language”, this meta language encroaches upon language and controls the signification within language. This meaning is ideologically constituted and can be deconstructed. Such an exercise enables us to analyse the apparent “innocence” of language. Benedict Anderson, too, in his book *Imagined Communities* speaks of the nation as an “idea”, as an “Imagined political community” nurtured through the creation and circulation of images within a nation.

3. Louis Althusser, in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” distinguishes between ideological and repressive state apparatuses stating that while the former works by generating consent, the latter work by force/or coercion. The paper views representation of physical acts of violence depicted in ACK as an instance of a moment of consent rendered by the text to the use of violence and force (RSAs) for the maintaining a sense of order and balance in the state. The violence is in this sense seen as real. In addition to this, it is also represented symbolically.

In the work of Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic violence denotes symbolic representation of violence and the violence enacted on a social agent with his/her complicity. For example, the exercise of symbolic violence include gender relations in which both men and women agree that women are the weaker sex- physically, intellectually and emotionally.

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