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Transmogrification as a Phenomenon of Intersections in the Post-millennial Indian Graphic Novel: A Study of *Corridor* and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*

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Abstract: The Indian graphic novel emerged as a medium of counterculture and a space to discuss societal issues. The graphic narratives produced under the label of 'graphic novel' steered away from the early Indian comics like Amar Chitra Katha, Chandamama, Raj Comics, etc., by shifting the focus from nation-building to questioning the issues within the nation-state. The publication of the first Indian graphic novel, *River of Stories* (1994) by Orijit Sen, coincides with India's economic liberalisation during the 90s. The globalisation that followed changed the publishing culture, as global publishers began establishing bases in India. The post-liberalisation period served as a bridge between local and global cultures, and their amalgamation can be seen in any art form produced during and after this era. Technological advancements gave rise to new forms of media for cultural expression, and the Indian graphic novel was at the centre of shifting tides in the economic, cultural, and social spheres. The spirit of counterculture, combined with new medialities, made the Indian graphic novel a site of experimentation and hybridity, the manifestation of which can be seen across different aspects of the medium, including intermediality. The appropriation, assimilation, and adaptation of elements from other media lead to transmogrification, and the term signifies the changes in medialities and modalities of intermedial references. These intermedial references embody aesthetic hybridity and cultural intersections, which are at the centre of making the post-millennial Indian graphic novel. This paper aims to study the intersections between medialities, modalities, and visual cultures through analysing the phenomenon of transmogrification in Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015).

Keywords: *transmogrification, intermediality, graphic novel, visual culture*

Transmogrification is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as the act or process of change or being changed completely. Bill Watterson, in his famous comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, uses this concept as a scientific device. Calvin creates a 'trannsmogrofier' to transform himself into anything he wants, yet "he repeatedly fails to transmogrify into something he finds acceptable" (Robison 43). Watterson's take on transmogrification as a transformative process is that it is unpredictable and yields unexpected results when someone or something transforms from one materiality to another. The intertextual references of various medialities and modalities undergo a similar process when they are borrowed from the source text to the target text. Hence, the intertextuality analysed in this study is essentially intermediality in its rudimentary sense, serving "foremost as a generic term for all those phenomena (as indicated by the prefix -inter) that in some way take place between media… therefore designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media" (Rajewsky 46). Rajewsky says that there is a more specific take on intermediality which "approaches intermediality as a fundamental condition or category for the concrete analysis of specific individual media products or configurations" (Rajewsky 47). This study adopts the former, more generic, definition of intermediality because Indian graphic narratives do not fit within Western theorisations of mediality, narratology, and visuality.

To better understand the above-stated theoretical limitations, it is crucial to examine the history of graphic narratives in India and how social, political, and economic forces have shaped and reshaped the medium into what it is today. Academic readings of the history of comics and graphic novels (collectively, graphic narratives) in India focus mainly on the early Indian comics published by Amar Chitra Katha, Raj Comics, and Chandamama in the decades following Indian independence from colonial rule. It is well established that the early Indian comics carried strong undertones of nationalism based on the values of Hinduism. The paradigm shift occurs with the publication of India's first graphic novel, River of Stories (1994), by Orijit Sen, which shifts the focus from the nation to its socio-political issues. This study intends to go a step or two further back in history, to the origins of comics and print culture in India, to better situate Indian graphic narratives within the global and local continuums of cultural production.

Cartoons in newspapers and magazines were the predecessor to comics in India. Though various other forms of sequential art existed in the form of cave paintings, folk arts, murals, and temple wall sculptures, cartooning and sequential art in the print medium evolved under colonial influence in the pre-independence era. British humour magazine *Punch* popularised cartoons and played a pivotal role in originating a cartooning tradition in India. In the mid 1800s, "the cartooning and comics tradition in India began distinctly in the colonial era with the publication of different indigenous versions of the humor magazine Punch. As a satirical magazine, the British *Punch* introduced the modern meaning of the term 'cartoon' as a visual form of wit and humor" (Sugathan 23-24). The

vernacular 'Punches', cartoons in periodicals and newspapers, were used to satirise and criticise the British rule in India and "collectively, the vernacular magazines and newspapers in colonial India and the growing readership of English language books, newspapers and magazines helped forge a common political vocabulary", among the educated urban elite and a new group of English educated middle class (Sugathan 25-26). In this era, the sequential art form closest to the multi-page modern comics was the single-page comic strip, which functioned more like a cartoon than a comic. The early to mid-20th century was characterised by an increase in political cartoons, closely associated with the Indian freedom movement.

In the decades following Indian independence, local comic publishing houses such as Indrajal Comics, Amar Chitra Katha, Raj Comics, and Chandamama emerged. Barath Murthy argues that Indian comics emerged at a time when the Indian art traditions were either wiped out or severely thwarted by the dominance of Western visual aesthetics. The comics were always considered low art, and hence the medium evolved without critical scrutiny and academic engagement (Murthy 1-39). The comic industry was at its peak in the 70s and 80s, when access to Western comics increased alongside the production of culturally rooted Indian comics. In the 1970s, Diamond Comics started publishing "*The Phantom* comics in digest format… along with licenses for *Flash Gordon*, *James Bond*, *He-Man*, *Tarzan*, *Spider-Man*, *Batman*, *Archie* and *Garfield*" (Eqbal and Kaur 25). "Anant Pai along with the Indian Book House published India's first comic book magazine Tinkle in 1980", which contained stories with original Indian characters (Biswas 53). In the middle of both these trends, there was a middle space where "other Indian publishing houses followed suit with translation and transmogrification of several western comics", in which stories and characters were borrowed from the source material and Indianised by changing character and setting names to be palatable to Indian readers (Eqbal and Kaur 25). The main shift from the cartoons and comic strips of the pre-independence era to the early Indian comics is the presumable "class divide between 'cartoonists' and 'comics artists'. The difference is mainly (that) comics artists are mostly salaried employees in an industrial system, drawing whatever story is thrust upon them. At the same time, cartoonists are responsible for both text and image" (Murthy 4). Murthy further argues that such a divide caused a stagnation in the development of Indian comics, both narratively and visually.

The visual culture in India changed due to shifts in the country's economic policies. Anu Sugathan says, "After the economic liberalisation in 1991, there was a notable shift in consumer behaviour, leading to a significant decline in comic book sales. This decline can be attributed to the growing influence of television, video games, and the internet during that period" (Sugathan 42). The rise of new visual media and the lack of innovation and advancement in the Indian comics industry led to a decade of stagnation in print visual culture, except for one noteworthy outlier: Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994). Sen's long-form comic, later widely considered as the first Indian graphic novel, set the

tone for the evolution of graphic narrative culture in India at the turn of a new millennium. The stagnation in visual print culture did not carry over to print culture as a whole because significant changes were occurring in the publishing sphere with economic liberalisation. "From the early post-millennial years, the publishing companies began attuning themselves more closely to the domestic market", as more resources were directed into producing "domestic genre fiction in English", and also to make global works available for the local reader through international publishers setting up their base in India. "This shift in production and distribution has led to inroads being made to level the playing field in terms of knowledge production and consumption" (Varughese 2-3).

The Indian graphic novel evolves into a new medium in the new millennium, shaped by changing economic tides, carrying the subversive spirit of cartoons and comic strips, and deviating from the 'Indian' comic norms established by early Indian comics. It is a product of various cultural intersections across both global and local cultural realms, an embodiment of hybridity in narrativity and visuality. "Indian graphic narratives encode post-millennial Indian modernity in new ways, expressing themselves through styles, grammar and modes of visuality different from those experienced in the West", the manifestation of which can be studied through investigating intermediality (Varughese 9). This study aims to break the linear understanding of the history of Indian graphic narratives by positioning the Indian graphic novel simultaneously as a breakaway from early Indian comics and a continuation of the subversive spirit of Indian cartoon tradition. The post-millenniality of the graphic novel comes from its "reduced opposition to the West" and its demand for "new Indian ways of seeing" as it "usurp(s) traditional visuality… to critique and disturb the idea of Indianness" (Varughese 1-11). In this study, the phenomenon of transmogrification refers to the process by which various cultural references intersect across medialities and modalities to form new, interesting, sometimes peculiar, and hybrid visual aesthetics. The intermedial references are the sites where transmogrification can be observed, and they require both local and global visual literacies to understand their meanings, which are sometimes discernible, sometimes not. The texts analysed in this study to this end are *Corridor* (2004) and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), both written by Sarnath Banerjee.

In *Corridor* (2004), the narrative is set in New Delhi, and it follows the lives of multiple characters. Brighu, the protagonist and primary narrator, takes the reader through the city and various kinds of people, their experiences, and the issues they face. The narrative is anecdotal as we follow the likes of Digital Dutta, Jehangir Rangoonwala, DVD Murthy, and Shintu. Every central character faces an issue closely tied to their urban lifestyle, with the city being intertwined with every aspect of their lives. On the other hand, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) narrates a dystopian future closely based on the present, in which a severe water shortage in New Delhi triggers a provincial war between residents of different parts of the city. The protagonist, Girish, a skilled plumber, is sent underground to find the

mother of all rivers, the mythical Saraswati. When he digs his way through the underground, he meets various characters living there for different reasons. After he finds the mythical Saraswati, Girish discovers that Rastogi has masterminded the war to seize power by monopolising the water supply to the whole of Delhi. Girish takes countermeasures with the help of the characters he met underground, foils Rastogi's plan and saves the city.

Sarnath Banerjee borrows cultural references from various visual cultures, both global and local, and mixes and assimilates them into his narratives. These references combine to form eccentric and provocative images scattered throughout the text. "Graphic narratives are rewarding objects for intermedial and transmedial investigation", hence looking into these cultural references will reveal the workings of cultural intersections and the resulting hybridity exhibited by the text (Rippl and Etter 201). The images in question are of different materialities, some of which are retained within the text and adapted and assimilated into the narratives' visuality. Maps, photographs, and posters are featured in their own material form and sometimes adapted to the diegetic visuality. However, "the tellability of any given narrative may depend on the resources and constraints of the given medium, just as each medium has particular affinities for certain themes and certain types of plot" (Rippl and Etter 201). So, when references from different media, such as music, cinema, or newspapers, are adapted, they undergo a process of transformation to fit the narrative capabilities of the graphic narrative medium. In Banerjee's works, various cultural references and visual styles intersect to form a single image, making the transformation process layered, and the final image produced is not merely a transformation but a transmogrification of all the intersections.

In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), Banerjee visualises the tunnel having multiple branches and the full-page image is accompanied by the text "Grish soon realises Jagat Ram is not alone. The whole of middle earth is teeming with water-borne criminals" (Banerjee 24). The term "middle earth" is a reference to a realm in J.R.R Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings* books. However, the tunnel illustration resembles the popular visual renditions of the tree of life in manga and anime, such as *Fullmetal Alchemist* and *End of Evangelion*. In *Corridor* (2004), two toothbrushes morph into the 'Yin and Yang' symbol, a concept originating in Chinese philosophy (73). The image itself traces back to the 11th century, when "Zhou Dunyi, the forerunner of neo-Confucianism…published a diagram of the Supreme Ultimate (taijitu)" as a part of his philosophical account (Wang 307). These cultural references have undergone various changes over time across art, literature, and media. When they are reproduced in the diegetic visual language without clearly establishing which previous rendition of these cultural images is being referenced, the references, with their accumulated layers of meaning over time, become signs with a code, but without a key to unlock them. So, the cultural references not only transform but also undergo transmogrification; the visuals become abstract not because of a lack of detail, but because of an abundance of detail without direction.

The medium of cinema is closer to the graphic narrative medium, as they are structurally similar, with visual narration conveyed through individual frames of images placed in sequence. From the earliest days of Indian comics, there were cultural transactions between cinema and the comic/ graphic narrative medium. One of the early examples is the comic "entitled *The Adventures of Amitabh Bachchan* (in which), the actor was presented as his alter-ego Superemo" (Eqbal and Kaur 37). Banerjee's works contain film references across several materialities, where some are retained in their original form, others translated into the diegetic visual style, and others presented as mixed media. The multitude of semiotic layers in these intermedial transactions makes them sites of transmogrification, where the final visual output is unique, sometimes grotesque, and requires both local and visual literacies to identify and understand them.

When Shintu meets Hakim, the quack, the narrative is flooded with film-based mixed-media references. (56-69) All these images serve as aids to Hakim's words on the surface, but with each new image, the association between the words and the accompanying image becomes less meaningful. In other words, the reader has to try to associate both the word and the image, however remote the connection might be. In a panel, Hakim says, "do not think of girls", and within the panel are images of women which reflect the three kinds of intermedial references mentioned above. (66) The fully drawn image of a woman is in the diegetic visual style; the cutout photograph of the other woman is mostly retained in its original material form; and the image of the third woman is half photograph and half hand-drawn, a form of mixed media.

On the very next page, there is a cutout image of Rajnikanth from the film *Muthu* (1995). It is a photo still from the movie's opening song, but Rajnikanth's hands are drawn in the diegetic, making it a photograph that is part cartoon (67). In another instance, a photograph of Sharmila Tagore from one of her old movies is presented in its original materiality (66). There are other images from black-and-white movies quoted in the narrative as mixed media, distorting the originals by combining them with various medialities and art styles. These distorted images come from various cultural texts, and a reader with specific visual literacies can identify them despite the distortion. A reader who is familiar with Tamil cinema and popular culture will readily recognise the image of Rajnikanth, and similarly, a reader well acquainted with Hindi popular culture and old Hindi movies will readily recognise the image of Sharmila Tagore. So, the multifarious intermedial references are not intended for every reader to understand immediately. Since they tap into various cultural texts and are transformed into something new, they can be said to undergo transmogrification. The transmogrified images occupy a liminal space between cultural, medial, and aesthetic boundaries, and this liminality distinguishes transmogrification from transformation.

In *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), the intermedial references contain less mixed media and more diegetic visual language. However, the distortion happens in the form of assimilating all the references into the story. When the water war breaks out on the surface in New Delhi, a masked superhero called Shadowy H documents the conflict through photographs. These photographs are presented to the reader as full-page movie posters in the diegetic visual language. They have catchy titles at the top to describe the incident presented, but these images and captions also call back to various classic Hollywood movies. For example, "Saving Private Arora", "Khurana's List", "Chronicles of Narayana", "Good Morning, Shahpurjat", "Full Aluminium Nehru Jacket", and "Indraprastha Now" refer to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Chronicles of Narnia* (2005), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), respectively (90-106). All these images either directly depict famous movie frames or thematically represent the crux of their plots. The "Good Morning, Shahpurjat" poster is accompanied by the tagline "Naveen Siyani's War Transmissions" (102). Naveen Siyani is a radio jockey in the story who helps Girish's faction by sending public transmissions about the evil plans of Rastogi and is killed by the goons. Naveen Siyani is based on a real-life radio announcer named Ameen Siyani. The poster is designed similarly to its movie counterpart starring Robin Williams, but the man in the poster has an uncanny resemblance to Ameen Siyani. The liminality of this image stems from the different cultural texts and personalities referenced, creating an image that simultaneously distorts and recalls the original images. These examples demonstrate that transmogrification can occur even without the overt use of contrasting visual elements (for example, mixed media) to achieve visual hybridity.

Conclusion

The Indian graphic novel is an embodiment and culmination of the history of visual print culture in India. Early Indian comics steered away from the subversive tendencies of the cartoon and comic strip tradition that originated in the pre-independence era. In the case of cartoons and comic strips, the writer and illustrator were one and the same. When dedicated comic publishers emerged in the 60s and 70s, authorial unity broke down, and the publishing houses provided the illustrators with stories to illustrate. This situation hampered the evolution of the comics medium in multiple ways until the period of economic liberalisation. Economic liberalisation brought forth new technologies and exposure to new medialities, ushering in a paradigm shift in Indian comics culture with the advent of the graphic novel. The Indian graphic narrative steered away from the nationalist undertones of early Indian comics and engaged with the socio-political issues. The authorial unity is restored to a certain extent, with most graphic novels written and illustrated by the same person, or, in cases like Bhimayana, the artist having more say in the narrative direction.

The Indian graphic novel also embodies the subversive spirit of the cartoon and comics tradition, as it criticises power structures, unlike early Indian comics, which focused on consolidating power. Economic liberalisation and globalisation led to experimentation with various global and local visual cultures, making the medium a site of hybridity. The hybridity exhibited in the graphic novel is most evident in its intermedial references, where the various materialities and modalities intersect to produce unique, eccentric, and sometimes grotesque visualities that can be understood only through the knowledge of multiple visual literacies. The concept of transmogrification approaches these hybrid, intermedial references as liminal spaces where varied and contrasting cultural references intersect, thereby demonstrating the liminality of the medium itself. Transmogrification offers a new approach to understanding Indian graphic narratives, which are layered texts shaped by cultural intersections.

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