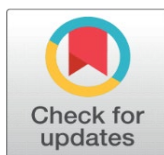
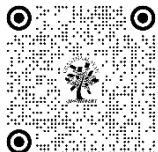


# VOICING THE SUBALTERN: DIVINE INTERVENTION AND FEMINIST EMPOWERMENT IN *PRIYA'S SHAKTI* THROUGH GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Priya's Shakti* is an innovative feminist graphic novel that discusses the issues of gender-based violence, molestation and empowerment within the socio-cultural context of India. The narrative begins by introducing a colourful Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, who represent the male and female energies of universal creation and balanced energy, on "Mount Kailash" (*Priya's Shakti* 3). Lord Shiva takes farewell from the Goddess and leaves her for meditation. On the next panel which represents the Earth, shown in the darker illustration, the author introduces us to the truthful devotee and our female protagonist Priya, a rape survivor who faces ostracization not only from her community but also from her parents. Upon losing hope she turns towards Goddess Parvati and prays "Help me, Goddess Parvati...I have nowhere to turn" (ibid. 4). As a result of her unconditional devotion and deplorable situation, Parvati swept through Priya's past and present experiences. Goddess Parvati decides to reside within Priya's body by transforming into a superwoman figure

## ABSTRACT

*Priya's Shakti* is a 2014 progressive and ingenious graphic novel by Ram Devineni and Dan Goldman that has half-and-half spiritual power, feminism and activism to grapple with the theme of sexual violence in India. The paper probes into the interchange of mythical voice and empowerment by applying the theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminism. Using the concept of Spivak's "Subaltern", the paper examines how Priya, the female protagonist, in the novel metamorphosis from a marginalized voice to an empowered figure through the spiritual power of Goddess Parvati with the help of the tiger. The paper delves into the examination and treatment of women character using the seeable and sayable medium of narration. By employing a mythical voice in the narration, the author cerebrally creates a space for survivors of sexual violence to repossess power with modern feminist discourse. The text also presents the concept of Dues ex machina as a force to combat patriarchal norms and inspire other women.

**Keywords:** Myths, Empowerment, Graphic Novel, Gender Justice & Divine Intervention

mounted on a tiger. She rides on to promote and rescue all the abused exploited women in India. The divine intervention of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati serves as a *deus ex machina* to prevent the human figure from bad deeds as well as to emphasize the idea that the people of earth are so helpless that the contemporary society is not able to protect the pride of society (women). India's established, repressive misogyny of the modern era is illustrated by the helpless female, who is viewed as a convenient target and sufferer and therefore is constantly taken advantage of by male predators. Priya's acceptance of this idea of being a exploited woman even in the face of criminal activity is demonstrated by the fact that, following her rape, she is more concerned with feeling ashamed than seeking justice. (Gupta, 5)



Figure 1. Goddess Parvati's Incarnation. *Priya's Shakti*. Page no. 9

A graphic novel is considered one of the evolving genres of literature that touches with various issues like eco-criticism, posthumanism, postmodernism, feminism, queer narratives etc. The medium of graphic narratives can express the "visual-verbal literacy [that in particular] can respond to the needs of the present moment" (Marianne Hirsch, 2004, p. 1212). The graphic novel popularized by Richard Kyle in 1964 has gained recognition with the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. The genre gained popularity after facing a portentous welcome. In *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* by Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey expresses:

[That] the graphic novel, as an idea and a publishing phenomenon, has endured and has had a significant impact on comics, literature, film, and many other media besides.... Today, the graphic novel has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics universe and has gained great respect, not least in the United States, one of the pioneer homes of comics and comic books. (2)

India has already made progress in the literary world with graphic novels. However, it also made the voyage from Indian Comics to current publications in the industry. The 1990s, 2000s, and modern period are the three eras that constitute the chronological progression. The tradition of Indian graphic novels may be traced back to Anant Pai's, often known as Uncle Pai, Amar Chitra Katha series. Established in 1984, Raj Comics Publishing is another prominent comic book production firm in India. In the emergence and establishment of Desi superheroes, they are crucial. Therefore, the impact of building the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the native people of Narmada is outlined in Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994), which is likely the first graphic narration in India; Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010) canvases the Emergency of 1975-1977 that thwarted the democratic system; *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) written by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, reiterates the story of untouchability through the biographical graphic account of Dr B.R. Ambedkar; *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013), curated by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, turns to the partition of India and its ongoing legacy. Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) paints the horrors perpetrated by the government and the trauma of dwelling in a conflict zone. Pramod Nayar in his book *Indian Graphic Novel* welcomes the graphic turn in Indian Writing in English. He says the Indian graphic novel possesses all the qualities of a literary text",

and the average Indian already is exposed to a range of colourful visual stimuli that it becomes an easy transition to welcome the medium and to engage with graphic fiction because the literacy in the demotic register of graphic narrative is already there. Indian graphic narratives possess mayhem of themes like myth, commix, autobiographies, history, social issues etc. The Indian graphic novels efficiently utilize the visual narrative or visual language and its potential by using it to narrate and depict testimonies, memoirs, and critiques as well as self-appraisal. Indian graphic novels push visual engagement which deals with intellectual, emotional analysis as well as cultural engagement. The idea of “graphic culture” (Prakasan, Raveena and M G Priya 68) or cultural instances that are expressed in an image or icon format characterize the “reproducible and communicable” phenomena (Nayar, 80). These instances provide a reader with signifiers to engage with a particular culture.

## 2. DISCUSSION

Subalterns are the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power of an imperial colony and the metropolitan homeland of an empire. A term coined by Antonio Gramsci is identified as postcolonial analysis and critical literature as the dominant cultural structure that eliminates and relocates particular people and social categories from the social and economic organizations of society to deny their autonomy and contributions in colonial governance. However, the third-world feminist Gayatri Spivak’s idea of subaltern makes the reader to understand the concept better. In an interview, she expresses:

Subaltern is not just a classy word for “oppressed”, for [the] other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie ... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference. Now, who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern...Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus; they don’t need the word ‘Subaltern’. They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They’re within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern (Spivak 34).

In Gayatri Spivak’s essay *Can The Subaltern Speak?* Spivak critiques both Michel Foucault’s concept of power and Gilles Deleuze for their approach towards subaltern, power and subjectivity. Edward Said argues that Foucault’s theory of power neglects various forces like class, economics, insurgency and rebellion and fails to maintain historical factors like class struggles and economic exploitation. Spivak adds Said’s critiques on the occasion of the “surreptitious subject of power and desire” (75) and marked as transparency by the intellectuals by decentralizing the intellectuals’ position and rejecting the idea that intellectuals are only privileged figures in a leading society. Since Spivak is further concerned that Foucault’s approach collapses the complexity of power relations and excludes marginalized voices—particularly the subaltern—who are unable to advocate for themselves inside hegemonic frameworks, Said critique is relevant to Spivak’s approach.

Spivak describes the “epistemic violence” (78) as how colonial (and post-colonial) knowledge production processes obscure or distort the experiences of the underprivileged class. She emphasizes how the imperialist institutions have misrepresented the actual circumstances of the marginalized communities and suppressed them via speech, ethics, and the law. This particular type of aggression doesn’t involve a physical assault but the eradication of their cultural, intellectual, and social independence. In the novel, from the very beginning when we meet an ambitious and curious Priya, she wants to rule the world, she “worked tirelessly towards her dream of being a teacher” (*Priya’s Shakti* 5). Unfortunately, her dream was shattered when her father, a patriarchal force, ordered to “stay home and take care of the house” (ibid.). She considers the “margins” of the society which include illiterate peasants, tribal populations and the urban subproletariat. These “silent [or] silenced center[s]” are not just marginalized but epistemically and morally silenced by the dominant (patriarchal) system (78). In the novel, Priya is sexually abused and molested by a group of male figures even though she repeatedly requests “No!! Stop it” (*Priya’s Shakti* 8). Spivak brings out the fact that the “center” of this hegemonic power system is silent and silenced in a way that the subaltern voices are logically disregarded from crafting the dominant discourse (78). The influential forces of her village including her parents and the panchayat abandoned her by criticizing, “You have shamed our family!” (9). “Why were you out by yourself? You must have provoked them. If it’s true, then you’ll have to marry one of them!” (10). In her essay, Spivak talks about Foucault and Deleuze’s notions on the fact that if the marginalized group or the “oppressed” are “given the chance” they “can speak and know their conditions” (78).

The question is asked again and again in an essay whether the subaltern can speak. Whether Priya in the novel can raise her voice? Spivak discusses the different approaches to the notion of "feminine" in terms of deconstructive criticism and feminist criticism. Such a critical approach which often uses the woman figure is considered problematic by Spivak:

In the former case, a figure of 'woman' is at issue, one whose minimal predication as indeterminate is already available to the phallogocentric tradition. Subaltern historiography raises questions of method that would prevent it from using such a ruse. For the figure of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves; race and class differences are subsumed under that charge. Subaltern historiography must confront the impossibility of such gestures (82).

Spivak compares and contrasts feminist criticism with marginalized historiography. Subaltern historiography is concerned with the actual past experiences of oppressed groups under the rise of imperialism especially of postcolonial situations. She argues that abstract figures like utilizing "woman" as an ambiguous figure are prohibitively expensive for subaltern history. When interacting with subaltern women, the complexity of race, class, and other elements cannot be readily absorbed or disregarded. Stated differently, critical feminist analysis that ignores these other dimensions in favor of a gender only perspective ignores important facets of subalternity. Besides, she adds that the subaltern women's voices are not heard, not because they are oppressed but due to the system of power (ethics) and knowledge that removed them from being represented at all. At this stage, the condition of Priya seems powerless which symbolizes the "power of a particularly potent kind is latent inside women, but of which both women and men remain oblivious" (Mukherjee 62). Even though Priya tries to get the answers from the men who attacked and gang rape her. One of the attackers replied "It was your fault, you shouldn't have worn those loose clothes" (*Priya's Shakti* 10) and again molested her. Here, the divine intervention of Goddess Parvati surreptitiously enters Priya's mind and body and the narrative ascends into a mythical realm where Lord Shiva awoke from his meditation, and his "anger grew" (*Priya's Shakti* 11) on seeing that Parvati has "revealed herself to the attacker" to punish the attacker (ibid.). In a violent outburst, Lord Shiva commands that "men will no longer be able to procreate" (ibid. 12). Afterwards, "a great war began across all the worlds" (17) and Parvati persuades Lord Shiva to disclaim his order so that the people of Earth calm down.

Meanwhile, in the novel Goddess Parvati acts as a *deus ex machina* to support Priya who is "living" in the Jungle. Goddess Parvati chose Priya because "[she] has the courage to persevere and overcome fear" (21) as an attempt to negate the political values to fight against the male-dominated society and to address its violence within the community (Mukherjee 63). The mantra "speak without shame, and stand with me...bring about the change we want to see" (*Priya's Shakti* 22). Equipped with the divine Shakti, Priya embarks on her metamorphic journey riding a tiger. Readers acquainted with the representations of Hindu goddesses could identify the awakened Priya as an emblem of Durga, the ferocious goddess who triumphs over evil entities (male figures) seated atop a lion (Mukherjee 63). She travels through the same village that "had shunned her" (24).



Figure 2. The Mantra. *Priya's Shakti*. Page no. 25.

Priya's words quickly spread and even her parents joined the march and travelled from village to village to spread her message of power (*Priya's Shakti* 29).

### 3. CONCLUSION

*Priya's Shakti* captures the nuances of subjugated identity, as posited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Priya, who is initially a speechless rape survivor, exemplifies the subaltern situation of being hushed and marginalized by cultural and societal factors. Her incapacity to stand up for herself, as well as the community's attempts to isolate her, illustrate the pervasive patriarchal institutions that keep oppressing women, particularly those living in marginalized or rural areas. However, the participation of the Goddess Parvati marks an important phase in Priya's destiny. With the divine intervention, she is able to overcome her subjugated status and actively oppose the systems that previously suppressed her emotions. Parvati's empowerment represents a broader communal transformation in which the spiritual and mythical intersect to question patriarchal traditions and promote for equality for women. This heavenly presence creates serious concerns about the nature of Priya's independence and whether her independence is inextricably linked to a supernatural power. Although Priya's journey is set in mythology. It connects with modern feminist challenges against authoritarian power structures. While the supernatural aspect has great symbolism in the narrative. It raises concerns about the constraints of human endeavor in situations where structural challenges appear unbreakable. Can women, especially those who patriarchal and colonial regimes have excluded, recover their agency without sacred power actions? Is communal effort, education, or legislative change sufficient to provide places for subaltern women to express themselves and be heard, or does the work indicate that a power greater than oneself is required for meaningful transformation?

Furthermore, Priya's Shakti provides a captivating tale that combines mythical creatures, activism, and female rebellion. The narrative also raises whether supernatural assistance is the independent road to emancipation for the subaltern. While Goddess Parvati performs an important part in the narrative she emphasizes the significance of cooperation and coordinated effort to remove patriarchal conventions. Priya's narrative therefore serves as both an illustration of divine strength and an encouragement to take action for society to acknowledge and elevate the voices of underprivileged women worldwide.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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