Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives
E. Dawson Varughese
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Review
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E. Dawson Varughese's *Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* aims to explain the relationships between readers' experiences of post-millennial Indian graphic novels, some of the historic contingencies of vision, visualisation and depiction in India and the new types of plot and form emerging to show stories about contemporary Indian life and memory in Indian graphic novels, asking "How do patterns of power and visuality intermesh in the India of today?" (x)

Dawson Varughese writes that she is not concerned with Indian comics in this book, establishing a distinction between comics and graphic novels in India that is increasingly evidenced by her arguments and insights as the book progresses. Rather, the book is concerned with the emergence of new and often dissonant relationships between Indian graphic novels and the characteristics of visualisation in India that, she argues, Indian comics generally re-enforce and reiterate (5).

Hence, the book's discussion of the approach to depiction taken in *Amar Chitra Katha* ('Immortal Picture Stories' in Hindi), the popular and world-famous Indian comics reprising religious and mythic plots, since 1967, serves only to exemplify an Indian conception of vision in which the sacred, numinous and portentous is often actively co-present with everything seen. The sight of a depiction of a diety, and even of a politician or a brand of washing powder, influences not only the viewer's relationship with the subject, but also adjudicates the auspiciousness or otherwise of the viewer's current situation (Kumar 2015). In the case of viewing depictions of deities, vision is conceived as a reciprocal exchange in which the viewer is also seen by the god via the image – 'seeing', in Sanskrit, 'darśan'. (Eck 1998) – and this reciprocal exchange qualifies the act of seeing and renders it fortunate for the viewer. In this sense, it could be argued that reading the visual narrative depictions in Indian comics can be considered to be a contribution to the wellbeing of the Indian reader or, rather, certain types of depictions have become nominal, in India. Seeing these types of depictions is thought of as contributing to well being.

In this book, the idea of culturally pervasive 'darśan' in *Amar Chitra Katha* is realised in their formal characteristics, focusing on the properties of the styles in which they are drawn, with "(…) bright colourways, clear, strong lines and intricate, often patterned detail." (17). This identification of correspondences between depictions considered to be auspicious and particular types of formal properties develops in the book into close reading, as a method of determining the characteristics of both normative ideas of Indian vision and, subsequently, the dissenting visions of Indian graphic novelists (Lentricchia and Dubois 2002).

Once the notion of auspicious vision is located and affirmed, realised in the example of both *Amar Chitra Katha* and historic depictions of "(…) the State (…)", Dawson Varughese constructs detailed rationales for the identification of visual metaphors (Jain 2000, 165). Power relationships, political initiatives and psychological conditions are deduced from aspects of the formal properties of the graphic novels in view, in which her personal readings substantiate the book's central thesis that Indian graphic novels index

dissent, by providing inauspicious narrative depictions of suppressed, marginal or taboo experiences, which are antithetical to normative Indian visions, visualisations and depictions of India.

The relative acuteness of the systems of closely read metaphors identified by Dawson Varughese is both a strength and a weakness, according to this approach. Close reading relies exclusively upon the identification in the text of a series of mutually substantiating metaphors. In a formal analysis of Singh's graphic novel *The Photo* (2015), the relationship between mother and daughter is deduced from the tone of the depicted space between them, such that "(…) the grey symbolises the area in which each woman's position is contested (…)" (27). Verbally (in English, at least), such a grey area is an established metaphor for equivocation, indecision and liminality. Here, the 'grey area' is a visual metaphor for such a littoral in the relationship between mother and daughter. However, in a close reading of Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2003), a similar area of ink wash is "(…) redolent of whitewash (…), whereas the metaphoric property of whitewash resides entirely in its ability to obliterate from view (to 'cover up') – a formal property that the sepia wash in no way shares.

More seriously, the method of close reading acts to structure the book's analysis around Dawson Varughese's own experiences as a critical reader. In very few instances does the book look beyond this personal reading experience to understand the broader social structures of readership (and visual readership) in India, or to reveal the historical contingency of previously accepted knowledge, practices and explanations. Even the idea and practice of 'darśan', relative to the inauspicious visions of the Indian graphic novels in view, is approached through a personal reading of identified formal properties in both comics and graphic novels.

The experience of other readers and observations made about the significance of reading, to them, is largely absent, despite the wider significance of historic increases and decreases in Indian literacy, the influences of economic class, as well as caste and religion, the status of urban and rural reading and the impact of foreign genres (such as manga) and digital media, since the millennium.

An exception to this is provided in the book's analysis of the transformed social status of the style of Pardham Gond drawings, derived from vernacular traditions of visual story telling as building decoration in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Dawson Varughese notes that Vyam, Vyam, Natarajan and Navayana, authors of the 2012 graphic novel *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, show a story in which the central character moves "(…) from a marginal and peripheral position to an empowered and central one (…)" (79). To do this, they utilise the Pardham Gond style precisely because the style itself has undertaken a parallel social journey, in which its status has been increasingly raised, from 'tribal' art to gallery art, with all of the changes in types of attention and significance that such a social transformation entails (73).

Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives is a timely addition to scholarship of the emergence of the sub-genre of the Indian graphic novel. Although its reliance on methods of close reading somewhat limits the scope of the book's analysis, it provides a cogent introduction to the graphic novels in view and a detailed analysis of the ways in which stories of inauspicious experiences (that is, suppressed, marginal or taboo experiences) challenge normative ideas of India, by disturbing a pervasive category of Indian vision.

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