

From Oral Tradition to Visual Narrative: Retelling and Revision of the Mahabharata in Amruta Patil's Graphic Novels

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doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV1218-191097-459

Abstract—This paper examines the Mahabharata has long both been a plural narrative tradition, with centuries of oral performance history and regional versions as well as textual accretion, and existed as a plural text in numerous versions. The contemporary adaptations thus engage into a continuous process of transmission as opposed to reproduction. In this paper, the author will review how the Parva duology of Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean (2012) and Sauptik: Blood and Flowers (2016) by Amruta Patil adapts oral epic tradition into the form of the graphic novel and at the same time update narrative and cultural authority interrogatives. Based on the orality theory, adaptation studies, comics' Narratology, and paratext theory, the paper claims that Patil redefines epic authority as decentralized and not centralized. By means of sutradhar like narrators (Ganga and Ashwatthama), paratextual framing that underscores the notion of retelling, and a visual verbal narrative technique that would insistently ask the reader to be a part of the tradition that Patil inherits, she is not so much an originator but a mediator in an inherited tradition. The paper has shown that the graphic novel is not a subservant or illustrative genre but rather an acceptable contemporary epic performance an ability that can achieve both the plurality of the Mahabharata and express new ethical issues of our times including ecology, gender and post violence.

Index Terms—Amruta Patil, Mahabharata, Graphic novel, Oral Tradition, Retelling, Adaptation, Sutradhar, Paratext

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahabharata has a unique place in the history of South Asian culture as an epic that is not characterized by textual fixity but rather by narrative multiplicity.

Scholars and cultural historians are noted to continue to stress that the epic was developed by performing orally, by being a matter of regional difference, and by being a matter of being overlaid by multiple versions and different authors, rather than a matter of being dictated by an authoritative version or even a single author (Doniger; Mahadevan). The Mahabharata is especially open to media adaptation and retelling due to this custom of multiple versions.

Amruta Patil, in her Parva duology, Adi Parva, and Sauptik, has made an important intervention into this long history of retellings in the twenty-first century. Spoken directly as a project founded on the Mahabharata, the Puranas and the art of oral storytellers (Patil, "Parva Duology"), this duology is not aimed at reproducing the epic in visual form but at reinstating oral narrative logics into the grammar of the graphic novel. This orientation is further emphasized by the use of the narrators, where Ganga in Adi Parva and Ashwatthama in Sauptik are used, because they are foregrounded to mediate, interpret, and focus on ethics as opposed to linear heroic chronology.

The question in this paper is: How does Patil bargain narrative authority by adapting an epic in which the authority has in the past been produced through oral performance and collective memory? It claims that Patil is redefining authority as retelling work that is shared by tradition, narrator, artist and reader and the graphic novel is a modern space of epic performance as opposed to a derivative medium.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Mahabharata is extensively recognized as a complex epic that has been the result of centuries of oral and textual transmission by many scholars. According to Mahadevan, there are three rails of the epic tradition: initial oral bardic nucleus, subsequent theological and didactic elaboration, and editorial solutions, which eventually resulted in contemporary critical editions. Though useful, such editorial projects can only flatten the multiplicity of performance of the epic (Mahadevan). This is supported by public scholarship. Sahapedia defines the Mahabharata as a collection of writings and enactments that developed through local languages, folklores, and conceptual improvisation of stories (Mahabharata: Texts and Performances). Encyclopedia Britannica also points out that it was comparatively late in life that the epic was written in its present form and this is an indication of the long oral and accretive tradition of the epic (Doniger).

The Orality theory offers an example of conceptual understanding regarding the reason as to why retelling is not a secondary act. Ong claims that oral cultures rely on repetition, aggregation, and interaction with audiences in order to support narrative memory and authority. In oral tradition, authority is based on performance and not textual fixity (Ong). The fact that Lahiri is a research of the Rajasthani folk Mahabharata performances also proves that oral epic traditions exist within a different kind of epistemic of the written texts in which the meaning is negotiated in the face of the narration, response, and adaptation (Smith). These are critical insights that can be used to explain the narrative strategy of Patil.

Adaptation theory redefines retelling as imaginative retelling. Hutcheon describes adaptation as repetition without replication with a focus on transformation as opposed to fidelity. A sander also uses adaptation and appropriation as culturally productive processes that create new significances in altered situations. These structures enable the Parvaduology by Patil to be interpreted as not a derivative adaptation, but rather an interpretive argument that is done by form and emphasis.

The theorists of comics like McCloud and Groensteen emphasize the importance of meaning in graphic stories that is created in a way of readerly closure,

visual sequencing, and Trans linear relationships. Using these theories, Jha and Chandarn state that Adi Parva written by Patil comes through, but not by Amruta Patil is a paratextual gesture, which intentionally refuses the single authorial ownership and aligns the text with the oral narrative tradition (374). Sharma and Rath also show that the employment of color, metaphor, and visual symbolism by Patil creates multiple layers of meaning which could not be brought down to textual narration itself. These studies, combined, set the work of Patil as a high-level intermedial retelling as opposed to a low level illustration of myth.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This paper is noteworthy in four major aspects. First, it adds to the epic studies through foregrounding of retelling as constitutive of Mahabharata tradition as opposed to a deviation of an original. Second, it develops the field of study of graphic novels by placing Indian graphic novels in the context of serious literature and culture. Third, it provides a subtle description of narrative authority that unites orality, paratext as well as visual form. Lastly, it touches upon the mobilization of ancient stories by the contemporary ones serving as response to contemporary ethical issues like ecological degradation and gendered violence (Pillai).

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- ❖ The aims of this study are to: Analyze the way Patil positions her project of Mahabharata as a retelling and not as first time writing.
- ❖ Examine the contribution of sutradhar like narrators in the building of narrative authority. The investigation of the way the graphic novel medium reinstigates oral storytelling strategies.
- ❖ Evaluate the revisionist focus of Patil to redefine the authority of the epic to the present-day readers.

V. METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative research paper that follows a close reading and visual analysis of Adi Parva and Sauptik with the help of paratextual sources like interviews of

the author and the description of a publisher. Theories of orality (Ong), adaptation (Hutcheon; Sanders), comics Narratology (McCloud; Groensteen), and paratext (Genette) are used to put the analysis into perspective. The primary analysis is enhanced by secondary scholarship on the work of Patil and the Mahabharata tradition.

VI. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

From oral sutradhaar to graphic sutradhaar Patil explicitly reinscribes her narrator structure through the sutradhaar of Sanskrit drama and oral performance, which recasts herself and her narrators as thread bearers who "aerate" an old story for a new age. If Adi Parva used Ganga as a consciousness, then Sauptik shifts to Ashwatthama, by which time what was once an anonymous, male, omniscient bardic voice is situated, gendered, and ethically troubled, already marking a revision of authority in the epic tradition.

Visual narrative as reinterpretation

The hypothetical essay would probably discuss how the layout of these panels, framing, and painterly effects reproduce the rhythm and pauses of oral communication: the page alternates between areas of dense textual-verbal/visual clusters and silent zones of reflection equivalent to pauses for effect, repetition, or digression in oral communication. As in most of her works, the hand-painted quality of her visuals, the use of symbolism (snakes, flowers, rivers), as well as metaphoric meanings in her choice of colors, render the page itself as the performative space where meaning is conveyed as much in visual metaphors as in words, thereby attaining what can be described as 'visual alchemy' in interpreting mythologies.

Gendered and ethical revisions

Through the narrative centrality awarded to Ganga, to a figure as morally ambivalent as Ashwatthama, the duology performs a reorientation of the reader's empathies away from the heroic center of the canonical text toward marginal, wounded, or even non-human agencies. This recentring, in concert with Patil's modern idiom and essayistic captions, underlines questions of responsibility, trauma, and complicity in war, producing an ethical commentary

on the epic far more complex than possible in more didactic or devotional forms of retelling.

Myth, ecology, and contemporaneity

Note that the study would also underscore the fact that Patil's storytelling often links cosmological phenomena to rivers, forests, soil, and elements, thus decode the epic as an environmental archive through illustrations to remember the forgotten relationship between humanity and natural worlds. As the books combine elements from the Purana and the epic with the current lexicon and imagery, these works contextualize the Mahabharata within the ongoing discussion on gender, violence, and environment.

VII. DISCUSSION

The narrators which Patil has selected in her work reconfigure the epic authority. The cosmic and non-human voice of Ganga, in Adi Parva, resonates with the oral traditions, in which the narrator of the stories places events in a mythical perspective. The shift of power in the narration of Ashwatthama in Sauptik is directed to post-combat, memory, and moral judgment instead of heroism (Anasuya). This approach is supported by paratextual framing. This way of showing the books as retellings through the artist places Patil in a family of storytellers as opposed to being considered an epic author (Jha and Chandran 374). The visual symbolism and metaphor also spread the meaning between image and text, and they involve active involvement of the reader as well as oral performance dynamics (Sharma and Rath).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Amruta Patil's *Parva* duology demonstrates that the graphic novel can function as a contemporary mode of epic performance. By translating oral storytelling strategies into visual narrative form, Patil re-conceptualizes authority as distributed, dialogic, and ethically responsive. Her work affirms that retelling is not secondary to tradition but central to its survival, positioning the graphic novel as a vital space for reimagining the *Mahabharata* in the present.

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