

Pativrata or Virangana: The Narrative Portrayal of Ideal Womanhood in Amar Chitra Katha

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Abstract

The comic series, Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), has played a major role in shaping the understanding of the Indian history, mythology, and culture to the generations. However, its portrayal of women often links to classical notions of morality and devotion. This questions the representation of gender roles and cultural values. It is on this background that this study seeks to analyse the portrayal of women in ACK comics from a feminist lens, to explore whether these portrayals support, challenge, or complicate the past conceptions of women and gender in Indian society. This study relies on a qualitative study approach and feminist media analysis to analyse four ACK comics: Krishna and Rukmini, Kannagi, Noor Jahan, and Rani of Jhansi. The analysis seeks to dive deeper into the representation of women in various historical eras, so that to gain insights into what makes an ideal womanhood. The analysis found that women in ACK are portrayed as obsessive, self sacrificial characters whose power and virtue are linked to obedience, chastity and service to men, family, and nation. Even strong women like Noor Jahan and Rani Lakshmi Bai are shown to be placed within the framework of conventionality, and that means that female heroism is cherished in-so-far as it reinforces patriarchal principles. The study emphasises that Amar Chitra Katha perpetuates a confined, sustained vision of Indian womanhood as devotedness, humility and sacrifice as opposed to agency or equality.

Keywords: Portrayal of Women; Female Heroism; Women Chastity; Ideal Womanhood; Amar Chitra Katha.

INTRODUCTION

Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) is a comic series that was founded in 1967 by Anant Pai. It contributed to the development of the ways in which a certain group of people perceive Indian history, mythology, and culture. Pai attempted to educate young readers through the tales of Indian heroes, heroines, gods, and legends in colourful pictures and easy narrations (Dev, 2022). Gradually, ACK turned into a large cultural product in India, with millions of readers, including the Indian diaspora. It shaped the way Indians envisage their history as well as comprehend their culture. However, it attracted criticism for its ways to portray social groups, particularly women, minorities, and the concept of Indian cultural nationalism (Nayar, 2022).

Of over 400 books published under ACK, only about 40 focus on women as protagonists. These women are mostly mythological or religious or historical women like Sita, Draupadi, Rani Lakshmi Bai or Meera Bai. Ideals of virtue, sacrifice and devotion are frequently evident in their narratives as in a traditional manner (Chettiar, 2024). This begs the question on how ACK builds their ideals of

womanhood and whether these images reinforce cultural norms of gender roles in the context of Indian society. As the work of ACK continued to shape the culture of the Indian people in terms of popular culture, it is crucial to observe the manner in which women are portrayed in the comics and what the portrayals tell us about the society that creates and consumes them.

Despite its iconic status, the portrayal of women in ACK has not been examined using a feminist viewpoint. The few narratives which are led by a woman and their steady representation within the boundaries of morality or community express a very limited idea of what incorporates ideal womanhood. This study seeks to analyse such representations in order to gain insights into how ACK activates and conveys ideologies on femininity, agency, and gender relations. Affirming the observations of Stuller K. Jennifer (2012) that no single feminist model exists, this study draws on the feminist media analysis to discern the cultural messages in these visual and narrative selections. In this way, it adds to the overall debate concerning the influence of popular media on social perception of the role of women in the past and the present.

The primary objective of the study is to examine the portrayal of mytho-historical women in ACK in a feminist perspective. It examines the evidence of whether women are portrayed as free men or objects of the male gaze, the treatment of their relationship with men and other women, effects of visual effects on their portrayal (dress, body positioning, etc.) and the implications of such treatment on the cultural notions of gender and femininity during the period the comics were created. Through this analysis, this study attempts to reflect the narrative ideology of ideal womanhood in ACK and whether the images of such ideal womanhood are progressive, conservative, or ambivalent towards such feminine portrayals in Indian socio-culture framework.

ARTIFACTS & METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a feminist media analysis method using a qualitative approach to cover the ideal female characters in ACK. It discusses four comics about women protagonists, Krishna & Rukmini, Kannagi, Noor Jahan, and Rani of Jhansi. The images of women are reflected in each comic in different eras of Indian history. Rukmini, the wife of Krishna, illustrates the mythical vision of womanhood. Based on the epic of Ilango Adigal titled *Silappatikaram*, Kannagi is an epic which relates the unwavering fidelity of a traditional Tamil wife. Noor Jahan, the wife of the emperor Jahangir, reveals the position of women in the Mughal period. Rani Lakshmi Bai shows the boldness of women in the struggle for the independence of India.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

Portrayal of Women

ACK in the Krishna and Rukmini comics projects Rukmini as a woman with an identity as well as boundaries. She courageously expresses her love for Krishna and sends him a secret message declaring her desire to marry him (pp. 8-9). This gesture illustrates her autonomy that exists in conservatism. Her agency withers away after she elopes. When Krishna shames her brother by cutting his hair, Rukmini is left with no choice other than to weep at his feet. Balarama, in her place, was allowed to speak and apologise (p. 30). Therefore, the voice of Rukmini is only admitted within the boundaries of feminine etiquette and devotion.

ACK romanticises the heroine as a chaste and submissional image in Kannagi. Kannagi still takes her husband Kovalan despite him abandoning her to Madhavi. Her inability to speak out against injustice is

her ticket to becoming the ideal pativrata who is courageous and pardons. Kannagi holds back and her voice becomes anger after the false execution of Kovalan. She dares to penetrate into the palace of the king, asserts justice and curses Madurai (p. 27). This change, though, cannot bring her uniqueness; even when she is angry, she characterises herself by the innocence of her husband and her virtue as a wife. Kannagi is still the symbol of a virgin but speechless woman who identifies her existence with the marital devotion.

ACK in Noor Jahan depicts a woman who is a combination of love, wit and boldness. As a child, Meher shows her boldness by challenging Emperor Akbar. She proves to be emotionally strong when she opts to have control on her personal desire and instead choose her responsibility. She becomes politically active after she marries Jahangir, and the empire is run in a good way that assists the orphans and protects the empire against Mahabat Khan (p. 25). Despite the fact that the plot of her narrative begins with romance, her character is not limited to the male gaze. She turns into an icon of female intelligence and power in the royal confines and maintaining the balance between love and leadership.

ACK in Rani of Jhansi praises Rani Lakshmi Bai, the queen of Jhansi, by claiming that she is a true virangana, a fearless warrior and a patriot. Since the time she was a little girl, Manu (her real name) does not correspond to the traditional ideas of gender roles by playing and studying with boys. Being a queen, she rules fearlessly and does not give away her kingdom to the British. She is not used as a romanticised figure of a wife or a mother but is respected as a leader and a fighter. Rani Lakshmi Bai is unique among other heroines because she had the courage to form her own will and take public actions.

Across these narratives, ACK transforms its image of women into obedient devoted women namely Rukmini and Kannagi to intelligent women with a personal will of their own namely Noor Jahan and Rani Lakshmi Bai. Rukmini and Kannagi symbolise the ideal of pativrata that is praised in the chastity and faithfulness. Noor Jahan and Rani Lakshmi Bai are evolving woman who incorporates reason, strength, warriorism, and personality. Nonetheless, it is even in the progressive representations that we find the female agency in the context of patriarchy; even the love of Rukmini, the wrath of Kannagi, the power of Noor Jahan is all presented in the context of serving men or the empire. Rani Lakshmi Bai is the only one who crosses these limits and becomes a free resister. Consequently, the women of ACK oscillate between submission and rebellion, demonstrating how the ideal woman changes, i.e., her image turns into a heroic leader, yet pressured and conditioned by the demands of patriarchy.

Portrayal of Relationships

ACK in Krishna and Rukmini depicts that the relations of Rukmini to men are both affectionate and moderate. She is not afraid of her family; she even tells her family that she loves Krishna regardless of her brother. The fact that she takes a risk and arranges a secret message to Krishna indicates agency that is not typical of mythological women (p. 107). But the dominant nature of her brother Rukmi reminds us that a woman's (Rukmini's) freedom is only within bounds. Rukmini is a distant person in her relationship to other women: her mother and maids. Her mother is not very active, but can do little to stop her (p. 111). Such silence between women and the necessity to rely on men messengers depict a limited solidarity of women.

ACK in Kannagi shows that Kannagi's relations with men are characterised as loyal and painful. She does not grumble when her husband Kovalan betrays her and carries on with worshipping him as her God (p. 110). It is her devotion and not her individuality that determines her value. Her anger becomes divine after his death as she claims revenge and incinerates Madurai (p. 108). The way Kannagi treats other women as opposed to how she remains silent in front of men, as the neighbourhood feels sympathy

towards her grief and gives her comfort, and Madhavi, the dancer, upholds sensuality and freedom (pp. 112-113). This opposition between the chaste wife and the dancer who seeks pleasures reveals the way women are opposed to each other to promote patriarchal values.

ACK in Noor Jahan shows that Noor Jahan has a more balanced relationship with men and women. She admires Akbar, is in love with Salim and is his queen and his counsellor (p. 109). She is doing things in a politically intelligent manner, in contrast to Rukmini and Kannagi, who are making decisions in the interest of the empire (p. 108). She gets along well with other women, including her mother, Salima Begum, and other women at the court (pp. 111-113). In these contacts, there is an evidence of a world in which women play significant and worthwhile roles in the world and at home, albeit under the control of the male strength and love.

The relations of the women to the men across these characters demonstrate a step by step enlargement of voice – from devotion to assertion. The love of Rukmini remains within the boundaries of patriarchy; the love of Kannagi becomes the divine retaliation; the love and duty of Noor Jahan become the political power. Female relationships as well change, to the silence (Rukmini), to moral opposition (Kannagi), to collaboration (Noor Jahan). Collectively, these images demonstrate how ACK supports two values the pativrata (chaste wife) and the virangana (heroic woman). According to McLain (2009), the ACK heroines belong to the two models: pativrata or martial virangana (p. 115). This depicts that although Rukmini and Kannagi are idealised chastity, the narrative of Noor Jahan brings with it some limited modernity in tradition. But even she, as the rest, is enslaved by the cultural figure of womanhood as the obedience to the husband, family or the nation.

Visual Elements of Womanhood

In Krishna and Rukmini, Rukmini appears graceful and sensuous. Her youthful adorable body of three pieces reflects youthful beauty and self-assurance. Sometimes her back or body curves are depicted, with indications of erotic undertones, particularly when she is secretly listening to her father or brother (p. 113). But her beauty and virtue are well balanced; her countenance is frequently devout and dignified.

The appearance of the heroine in Kannagi is very modest and traditional. Her wardrobe is a plain sari, and rarely her body is divided and objectified. The submissiveness of her devotion to her husband is emphasised by her unemotional face and inexpensive costume, but the opposition between the chastity and sensuality can be seen clearly because Madhavi is presented in her glittery dancer outfit (p. 113).

In Noor Jahan, visuals focus on sophistication and luxury. They underline elegance and refinement. As Meher, she is fully covered in long robes and veils, which are an indication of restraint and royalness. Intriguingly, in sentimental moments, her sexuality is not revealed by the nudity of the body, but rather by expressive eyes (p. 114). Mughal environment makes it even more vivid, yet she is concerned with her dignity and strength.

ACK in the comic Rani of Jhansi portrays the queen as a self-reliant person. She also is depicted as a warrior, riding horses or with swords so her body is not shown as objectified but as active and strong. The confident look of the character, combined with a half-squat posture gives her a sense of bravery and agency (p. 109).

Across all four artifacts, the symbolic role of each of the women in visual design: the beauty of Rukmini reflects the divine love, the modesty of Kannagi reflects the chastity, the poise of Noor Jahan embodies noble intelligence, and Rani Lakshmi Bai's armor is symbolical of the heroism. The female body is no longer decorative and passive (Rukmini, Kannagi), but dignified and active (Noor Jahan, Rani Lakshmi Bai). This visual evolution shows how ACK tried to negotiate ideal femininity and the new models of

female agency. But the lens is still patriarchal: the virtue or courage of the woman is only determined however in reference to male authority or national obligation.

Cultural Notions of Womanhood

Rukmini is portrayed as the ideal pativrata, the faithful, yet affectionate. Although she dares to send a secret love message to Krishna, she eventually yields to the patriarchal system to get her father and brother to approve her (pp. 107-108). Her tale glorifies female submission and permits some subdued personal voice.

Kannagi identifies herself with fidelity to her husband. She tolerates infidelity and forgives him, and she succeeds later on in proving him innocent. The purity and restraint she experiences turn to spiritual strength and point to the Tamil ideal of a self-sacrificing wife (p. 108).

Noor Jahan demonstrates the shift between personal devotion to public responsibility. She loves Salim but restrains herself to respect Akbar and subsequently marries Jahangir in the name of the empire. Her brilliance, her administrative facility and her self restraint made honour of power as opposed to submissiveness (pp. 108-109).

The narrative of Rani Lakshmi Bai praises motherhood with patriotism. She also fights colonialism, blending womanly righteousness with manly valour. Her womanhood is a caring and warlike one that shows the virangana type, an archetype that is self-sacrificing, courageous, and loyal to the country (p. 109).

The four women have an Indian womanly progression culturally, through domestic innocence to national heroism (pativrata to virangana). Rukmini and Kannagi are the embodiment of spiritual obedience at home whereas Noor Jahan and Rani Lakshmi Bai express moral power in the open life. Combined these women protagonists show how ACK develops the ideal womanhood in terms of service first to husband, then empire, finally nation. The period in which these women appear is different, but their personalities are measured by the worth of their obligation rather than desire, and this shows that even strong women are put in the context of the traditional virtue and sacrifice.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to understand how Amar Chitra Katha constructs and propagates the concept of an ideal womanhood using portrayals of Rukmini, Kannagi, Noor Jahan and Rani Lakshmi Bai. Throughout these narratives, the trend is identifiable: women are glorified only when their lives are conforming to either of two broad patterns: pativrata (faithful, virtuous wife) or virangana (heroic, self-sacrificing women protagonist). According to McLain (2009), there is no place in ACK where heroines that do not fit one of the two models can be found. Feminists who are not included in those groups modern, urban, educated and political are not prominent, a fact that underscores the ACK emphasis on mythical or historical past as opposed to reality in the present.

The female protagonists in the narratives of Krishna and Rukmini and Kannagi are surrounded by their submissiveness being wives. The boldness of love of Rukmini and the silence of Kannagi both finish up in submission to the patriarchal demands. Their merit is not to be independent but to be controlled by themselves, to be patient, and to serve faithfully their husbands. They are what Anant Pai describes as the “female heroic virtue of voluntary long-sufferance devotion”. Although when Kannagi is furious and even transforms it into divine revenge, it is still righteous due to the innocence of her husband; it is not associated with her need to get the justice as a woman. Through these narratives, ACK reinforces the pativrata women as the ethical foundation of Indian society - pure, forgiving, and self-sacrificing.

ACK introduces the courtesy of Noor Jahan as the concept of womanhood, with its smartness, power, and compassion. However, when she comes to political prominence her power is kept in context of the obligations of the royal and the loyalty to her husband and the Empire. When she is serving a greater cause as a moral or masculine, she is free. Equally, Rani Lakshmi Bai symbolises a virangana, whose fearless and patriotic spirit makes her consistency with the masculine heroic trait of self-sacrifice to the nation. She is the only heroine of the four whose narrative goes out of home devotion to civil action. Nevertheless, her power is depicted as a continuation of the female virtue caring about her people and guarding her kingdom as a mother. Her heroism, although strong, is also in the service and sacrifice, not in the expression of self or liberty.

Together, these portrayals follow on each other. The ideal of the chaste housewife giving way to the ideal of the brave warrior, yet both on the same moral doctrine of the humility of a devout self and a devoted service. The lack of modern heroines, reformers, scientists, political leaders, demonstrates that ACK confines ideal womanhood to Hindu golden past, as observed by Pritchett (1985) and McLain (2009). The series fails to account women such as Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi or Indira Gandhi which implies up to silent that the essence of a woman is inherent to tradition rather than modernity. To speak critically, female autonomy, romantic choices, and professional ambitions are missing in ACK. Yet, what is depicted in ACK speaks louder than what is missing.

ACK women are gracious, modest, and devout in a visual and narrative way. Even when they are depicted as active or strong, they are hardly left without expectations of coy femininity or domestic duty. Their chastity, obedience and beauty are glorified whereas desire or defiance is suppressed or meted out. The ethical teaching remains timeless and unchanging, even under different landscapes, an ideal woman serves first her husband, second her empire and last, her country. Repeating the same message, ACK also reflects and reinforces the patriarchal values of Indian culture and positions it as a universal truth instead of a social construction.

In conclusion, the study finds that Amar Chitra Katha builds a constricted but lasting concept of Indian womanhood through the direction of devotion and sacrifice. Rukmini and Kannagi are symbolic or spiritual and moral ideal of the pativrata, Noor Jahan joins love and political wisdom in the face of patriarchy and Rani Lakshmi Bai is nationalistic virangana. These women may be different in terms of time, religion, and activity, but their value is always assessed by the degree in which they clear the social duty, but not the ease in which they can live. With this, the world of women under ACK is still one of adoration and avoidance, where heroines are divine and fearless.

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