



Two Armies on a Colour (less) Plain: Tracing the Cultural Narratives of Amar Chitra Katha as a Colonial Embodiment

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Abstract— *Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children’s media culture continues to be underrepresented in the field of history and popular culture. The world of comics and graphic novels shapes not just the minds of individuals but also the collective consciousness of communities and their unsung histories. Amar Chitra Katha has been an important cultural institution that has played a significant role in defining, for several generations of Indian readers on what it means to be an Indian. The paper seeks to address the politics of representation and the symbolic significance of the visual representation of different historical figures and events throughout the history of India. In today’s Indian society, love towards fair skin is seen in every spectrum of life, from songs to movies to marriages. Through this study I will explore how all these variables are linked and connected over the period of time with the skin tone preference thereby re-writing the essence of ‘Indianness’. The historical representations of this comic book tradition render Amar Chitra Katha a crucial resource to understand paradigm shift in the ways the nation imagines itself.*

Keywords— *Amar Chitra Katha, Neo- colonialism, Indian mythology, Colorism, Collective consciousness.*



I. INTRODUCTION

“You see, the trouble is that colonialism isn’t over yet...”
(Morgan 212)

The evolution of culture and societies through history is not a priori or given but is discursively produced within a constellation of discourses, cultural beliefs, and national myths in particular, and is shaped by different ideological institutions. The narration of “history” is, thereby, consequent upon the expression of different ideologies. It is quite interesting to note how the changing modes of representation of the past ranging from cave paintings to digital storytelling have refracted history through their own prism of ideologies, more so since the twentieth-century world’s transition into modernity. Thus, visual communication remains an indispensable medium of expression and has shaped the way one perceives ideas and thoughts. European imperialists have brought in lighter skin as the right mentality to the indigenous colonized lands

of India.

When Europeans started exporting their ideas of the white European master race to the colonized lands, the toxic reaction between old lifestyle-based colorism and the new Western racism produced a harmful new compound which the associated European features with power, wealth, and beauty. While considering the above concerns, this paper addresses the comic book tradition of Amar Chitra Katha the first indigenous children’s comics to be published in 1967 in postcolonial India, and the way two of its mythological characters; Draupadi and Rama are portrayed in the light of colorism which is viewed as an unfortunate consequence of British colonialism. ACK’s idiosyncrasies lie in its ability to narrate stories through indigenous or mythographic prisms, translated from Hindi as “Immortal Picture Stories,” Amar Chitra Katha, a brainchild of Anant Pai, has been known for the representation of Indian mythology, history, and regional folktales in the form of

graphic narratives. ACK's creative representation of mythology

has shaped not just the Indian visual portrayal of the mythological tales but also the minds of its consumers, these tales are an important cultural institution that has played a significant role in defining culture, for several generations of readers. Drawn from Hindu mythology, the protagonists of ACK are Hindu gods and goddesses like Krishna, Durga, Draupadi, Sita, Shiva, etc. By delving into the visuals of representation, this paper examines the wrongful portrayal of two Indian mythological characters, Draupadi and Rama respectively; thereby distorting the age-old tales and traditions and how they are couched in the larger social, cultural, and ideological national imagery and thereby falling prey to internalized colonialism. The historical representations in ACK render it a crucial resource to understand paradigm shifts in the way the nation imagines itself, and the way it has educated whole generations of the Indian psyche into victims of colorism. Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children's media culture continues to be underrepresented in the field of history and popular memory. And yet, when engaged with the world of comics and graphic novels, one can realize how it shapes and is shaped by, not just the minds of individuals but also the collective consciousness of communities.

This research paper also draws attention to how these mythological parables of India are visually represented by highlighting the posters or front covers pertaining to the respective characters along with the original textual descriptions from ancient Indian texts to further bring out the issue of colorism and the magnitude in which ACK has drawn away from its actual representation. For a major part in the early series of ACK, it could be felt that the founder-editor Anant Pai revolutionized children's entertainment by interweaving it with India's mythological narratives. However, he also altered the ways in which they are portrayed, thereby giving a western image, especially with their skin tones. Thus, examining ACK remains crucial, on one hand, when looking into the myth parables shared in the visual-textual format; on the other hand, it remains vital to understand the paradigm shifts in the ways the Indian mythology and identities are imagined.

1.1 Amar Chitra Katha - An Overview

Amar Chitra Katha, a leading historical comic-book series in India, enjoys a ubiquitous presence among the urban middle-class in India and the South Asian diaspora. Founded in 1967 by Editor-in-Chief Anant Pai, ACK has sold over 100 million issues consisting of nearly 500 different titles, translated into 20 Indian languages. Pai worked as an editor at Indrajal Comics in the early 1960s;

the company that popularized Western comics in India since its inception in 1964. Thus, ACK was founded as a reaction to what was perceived by Pai as an excess of foreign influences trickling into the consumption of popular culture by Indian youth. ACK was founded on the principle of educating the young readers of India about Indian myths and mythology, religion and history, and nation and national figures. Accordingly, these comics now could be loosely grouped into two categories: mythological and historical. The mythological ones include narratives from classical Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata and various Puranic stories. On the other hand, the historical ones added several years later, feature regional personalities to promote national integration. In a country like India, so vast and varied, the series also serves as a medium of national integration by introducing young readers to the rich cultural diversity of the country and highlighting the achievements of local heroes. Although ACK as a visual narrative form is different from its Western counterpart, it does apply some of the formal conventions of Western comics in its visuals. An in-depth exploration of ACK reflects how it merges with some visual and formal conventions of Western comics to create an effect that is common to the existing comic books tradition, yet unique due to its focus on the immediate historical and cultural context of India. Moreover, ACK's stories about gods, goddesses, kings, and historical legends have often associated light-skinned masculine figures with strength, virtues, and compassion, whereas dark skin, in the comic book illustrations, has primarily been coded through the semiotics of violence, brutality, and low caste status. This

paper highlights the way ACK deploys fair skin as an ingredient of beauty, success, and heroism. Furthermore, it could be observed that ACK's reliance on hegemonic 'original' versions of historical narratives underscores the colorist ideologies of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India. ACK is a ubiquitous form of public culture, familiar to an enormous section of the educated Indian population, practically creating a shared shorthand for its conceptualization of Indian mythology while simultaneously functioning as a platform for debates surrounding that very conceptualization.

1.2 Ancient India

India, being one of the world's earliest civilizations, did not discriminate based on skin color.

Indians, as we know now, are a mix of numerous races and diverse cultures with many commonalities who came together to establish the modern-day nation-state of India. Depending on the geographical location to which they belong, Indians have varying degrees of hue and facial

attributes. It is often said that color discrimination in India has a base and can be seen if one dwells in its ancient texts; however, since the society was grouped into different structures it gave away a wrong message. The 'Varna system' is often misinterpreted as a social structure that classified people based on their color but it never defined people based on color but was a

concept dealing with people's occupations. The oldest categorization, according to the Rig Veda, was not found at birth but rather on a hierarchy dictated by one's employment. Varna (not to be

confused with jati 'caste'), an ancient Indian system also known as Varna Vyavastha, "classifies people in the Indian society; and it has various implications: social, political, ethical, and

economical" (Dwivedi). "Unlike European countries and the United States, this classification has nothing to do with the color of the human skin or races; therefore, one shall not be misguided

and confused it with racism" (Dwivedi). Ancient India considered dark complexion as something vibrant and throbbing with life and exuberance. Vatsyayana wrote, "Shyam varnam saundrya bhutim pratimanah asti", meaning beauty resides in dark color and texture and Amaru an ancient Sanskrit poet wrote, "Shyam chaapalya priyadhaam" meaning black is always agile and

sprightly. (Paul). In The Monthly Review, Pennant's View of Hindustan states; "The word Hindu-stan is a Persic compound, signifying the country of the black people (Tulsi Jayakumar).

From the above statements, it is explicitly seen that in ancient India there were differences in skin tone but people weren't discriminated on its basis, in fact, all of them were embraced.

II. APPLICATION

The term 'post-colonial' is used to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day, and a theory is a cultural end product having

accommodated all the things from that area. Hence, postcolonialism is such a construct, which can be placed anywhere irrespective of the locale, because it works more in connection with the ones who acquire power. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression (Ashcroft et al 28). India was

colonized for almost 200 years and while the political struggle and violence are often spoken about, the level at

which they exploited the identity of the Indians is yet to receive some light.

They came, saw, and conquered and after years of looting, left the land giving the country what we call today, 'Independence', the real question is the level of freedom the country is able to exercise. Even though India is a free nation, certain colonial stigma is still prevalent especially when it comes to skin color, thus one could say internal colonialism exists today, with respect to culture. Independence did not symbolize considerable change, rather it replaced one class of oppressors with another, with its novel practices of exclusion. The unconditional desire to be 'white' or equating whiteness with supremacy or success or beauty can be seen as a colonial residue. As already mentioned, the ancient Indian society had differences but did not discriminate people on the basis of one's skin color. Colorism, a term coined by American novelist, Alice Walker, is a concept where people belonging to the same ethnicity or race are discriminated solely on the basis of their skin tone or color (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*). This form of color discrimination can be explicitly seen in Indian popular culture, which is one of those neglected domains of inquiry for postcolonial studies, in comparison to elite cultural formations or practices. In the words of Stuart Hall, in his renowned essay 'Notes on deconstructing the "popular"' (1981), 'popular culture matters' (Hall 1998, 453). They reveal both the importance of each to the other and the ambivalence that characterizes their relationship. The true power of postcolonial critique begins with the analysis of indigenous cultural production and how these studies might respond to the popular through an examination of religious possession. One must begin with a view of postcolonial popular culture as a battleground in which dominant power and resistance to it are played out, locating it in a complex web of social forces and power relations. As Hall puts it:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stakes to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it (453).

The first ACK poster to be analyzed is that of Princess Draupadi, the daughter-in-law of Dhritarashtra and revered as the epitome of femininity. She is depicted as a beautiful woman of the color of a 'blue lotus' and referred to as the 'dark beauty' or 'Shyama', also referred to as Krishnaa and

Panchali, she is the female protagonist of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, and the consort of the five Pandava brothers; Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva.

Mahabharata includes an exceedingly flattering description of Draupadi as she arose from the fire;

“The fire-born woman was extremely beautiful. Her eyes were black and large as lotus petals, her complexion was dark, and her locks were blue and curly. Her beauty was such that she had no equal on earth. Like a celestial herself, she could be desired (in marriage) by a celestial, a Danava, or a Yaksha (Mahabharata. Adi Parva. Chapter 169:3)”.

However, in the ACK poster, volume 542 which is on Draupadi, the poster is on the infamous disrobing scene of Draupadi by the Kauravas, with the subtitle “*The dusky firebrand*”, she is visually represented as a white woman who is completely in contrast with the actual description given in the epic *Mahabharata*. ACKs being one of the first mythological narratives for children, this wrongly represented image can not only distort the tales but could damage their understanding of beauty itself. Another striking aspect of the poster is that, of the Kauravas, since they are the antagonist of the whole epic the artist pictured them as brown in complexion to bring out the villainous look which again is not the right representation.

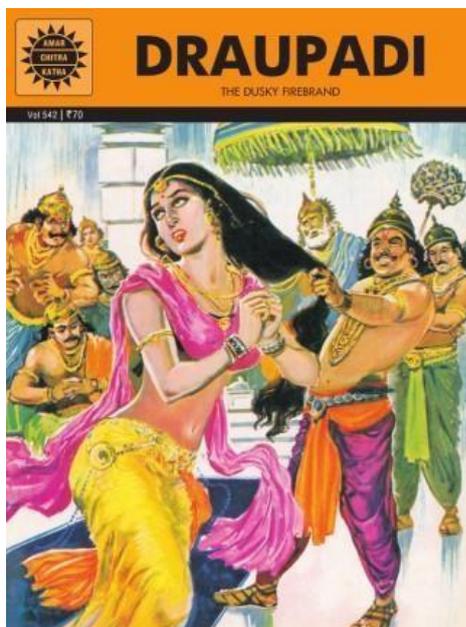


Fig 1: Draupadi - The Dusky Firebrand

The life of Prince Rama, who is widely revered and worshipped throughout present-day India as well as South East Asia and the seventh major avatar of Vishnu, is detailed in the Ramayana, another major epic believed to have taken place in 5700 B.C.E, written by Sage Valmiki.

According to the actual text of the *Ramayana*, Rama, the

idealized handsome prince, was of adark bluish or brown complexion:

“Rama, whose face is like the full moon, of dark brown complexion, whose collar-bone is invisible, a conqueror of foes, whose arms descend to his knees, whose eyes resemble lotuses, the elder brother of Lakshmana, who takes initiative in speaking and expresses

with sweetness, truthful of speech and possessed of extraordinary strength, is benevolent to all, delightfully charming as the moon, that tiger among men, as mighty as an elephant

in rut, that great car-warrior, will surely adorn the woods while roaming through them”. (Valmiki Ramayan - Book II: Ayodhya Kanda - Book of Ayodhya: Chapter 48.)

In a passage from the Mahabharat, Vasudeva, the father of Krishna, tells of adark-skinned, strong, and handsome Prince Rama:

“ Possessed of youth, of a dark complexion, with red eyes, he looked like the leader of an elephantine herd. With arms stretching down to his knees and of handsome face, his shoulders were like those of a lion and the might of his arms great” (The Mahabharata, Book 12: Rajadharmanusasana Parva: Section XXIX.)

In ACK’s posters, volume 504, *Rama, retold from Ramayana*, and volume 10001, *Valmiki’s Ramayana, The great Indian epic*, Rama is visually brought out in blue complexion in the former poster and white or pale in the latter. Being the hero or protagonist he is given a shade far removed from his actual representation. A collective theme can be seen emerging from this, white being pure, royal, and elite.

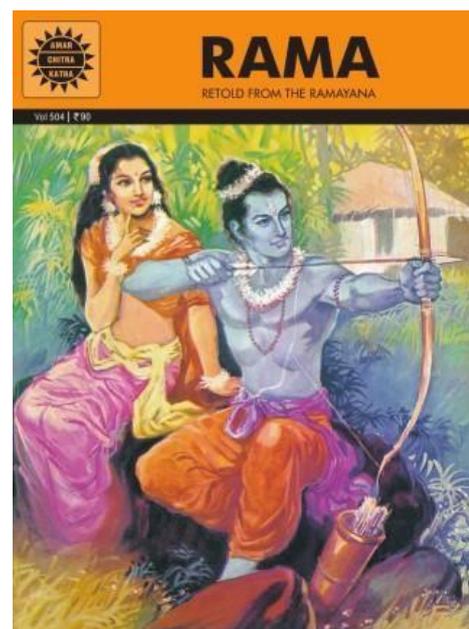


Fig 2: Rama- Retold from the Ramayana

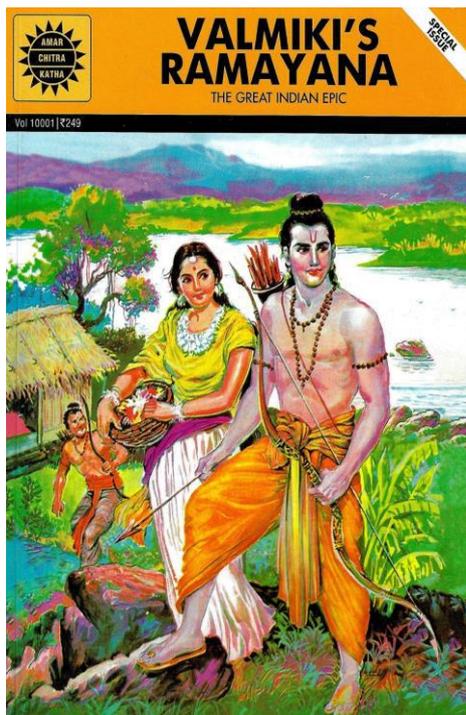


Fig 3: Valmiki's Ramayana – The Great Indian Epic

This white supremacy which began from the colonial roots can be thus traced in these volumes of Amar Chitra Katha's which today stand on the pedestal of Indian popular culture. In ACKs, the villains or asuras are in shades of brown or black, and the heroes or heroines or god-like figures in shades of white. This concept of mimicking is seen from these visual arts to popular media. Homi Bhabha's definition of colonial mimicry is the "desire for...the subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite...almost the same but not white." (*The Location of Culture*). Colonialism was carried out through physical and psychological violence. It supplanted the existing cultures of the colonized communities, and it brought irrevocable changes. The media channels narrow the bandwidth of each individual's preferences, hence a crowd-pleasing image becomes a mold, and beauty is followed by the imitator, and then by the imitator of that imitator.

The visuals from ACK's are imitating the color tones of the colonizers are in striking contrast to the actual Indian skin tones. This creates an unconscious understanding or belief among the young readers that having white or fair skin is much better in terms of acceptance and also a symbol of power. Colonialism is manifested through the "configurations of power" (Said 133) that worked and still works to control indigenous lands and populations. Notions of white supremacy constitute the power relationships and hierarchical structures within the colonial endeavor. European supremacy is based on the civilized/uncivilized

dichotomy, and it effectively justifies colonization. Today, "cultural imperialism rests on the power to universalize particularisms related to a specific historic tradition by making them (mis)understood as universally true" (Garner, 2007, p. 6). In the case of these ACK posters, when the princess herself is depicted in such a light of having a fair complexion, the young readers tend to believe the idea that fair skin is equivalent to being elite or royal and is the epitome of beauty and class, and when it comes to the male counterpart, it stands for heroism, chivalry and sheer attractiveness which is seen only in a person having a white complexion. British colonialism created this idea of white vs brown and that seed of thought has been growing inside the minds of many generations. Even today the young minds are taught to believe the same and ACK is proving to be one among many conductors reinforcing this dim view. The colonizers are depicted as an advanced civilization, while the colonized are projected as a backward civilization, and one major distinction that promulgates this thought is the difference in skin tones. The West is associated with superiority, and the East is represented as primitive, weak, and in need of salvation. The advanced/backward dichotomy works effectively to support dominance and control. However, as time evolves this notion of white being the symbol of purity, beauty and elegance has grappled to the Indian psyche and brought in a collective consciousness that skin color is a mandatory requirement to gain an identity and acceptance, majorly since people with darker skin tones are showcased poorly in popular culture. The perception of the personal unconscious consists of things that have been from the consciousness of the individual, and Carl Jung believed personal unconscious could have an enormous impact on the individual, whereas the collective unconscious is moderately diverse from the personal unconscious. This is not an individual aspect but applies to the entity of the human species. It can be understood as an inheritance to all human beings. "The collective unconscious goes beyond cultural barriers of human beings and presents a commonality to all humans" (McLeod). The unconditional desire to attain a fair skin is the perfect example of the concept of this internalization, and the internalization however becomes part of the personal psyche, which later becomes associated

with the collective psyche.

The colonizer's relationship differs from one country to another. In a country like Africa, the methods used to colonize them were immensely brutal than in India, while the current superpower, the United States of America, was also once under the clutches of the British masters, but they have their own hidden tactics thus covering up their dark era. The power and hegemonic

structures are different and hence today, America is celebrating its colonial past. The Hamlet syndrome is exactly what postcolonial India is facing, they have been reduced to being an 'exclusive insider', and yet at some point this is a hallmark of privilege they carry upon themselves. The underlying truth beneath being an 'exclusive insider' is that they imitate the colonizers at many levels and put themselves in a third space, where they are not treated as one among the masters nor are they part of their roots any longer, the dilemma always prevails. In many cases, colonizers employ language as the perfect instrument to apply their cynical strategies and in India, they utilized language as their medium to bring forth changes in each human's body and thus created a perfect foundation for it by adding the necessary ingredients to generate the forged ideas of ideal by working on the power politics of color.

III. CONCLUSION

"Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests." (Emerson 2); Emerson called for the immediate need to have an American Scholar and to cease mirroring the Europeans. India has always desperately aping its colonizers and fixating the irrecoverable state of neo-colonialism, the very word explicitly producing the significance of having an era of old colonial racism.

Whiteness is a visible marker of what has come to be accepted as superior. The deconstruction of whiteness as a sign of superiority and the celebration of differences is advocated as "a revolutionary intervention" by Hooks (20). She asserts that a discourse on whiteness would facilitate the analysis of conventional assumptions about race. Anti-racism projects need to challenge white supremacy and "white racist paradigms." Part of the process of unlearning colorism is to recognize that history has been defined from the white standpoint. Pre-colonial India was characterized by a pluralistic cultural, religious, and political structure. Classic colonialism is now practically dead, it consisted of a colonial power taking over a country and staying there to dominate the local people politically and in every sphere of their lives. The objective of colonialism was economic exploitation through the control of the resources of the colonies, and the use of the colonies as markets for its products, but today it is the era of neo-colonialism, there is no military conquest in the traditional sense and political control of the population within a territory but the objectives still remain and their roots are well cemented on the Indian grounds, and today the proud colonial past is

celebrated in distinct forms consciously or unconsciously. This paper tries to bring into limelight the colourist attitude that this particular Indian comic has, however the paper doesn't dwell into other aspects of this comic book nor does it deal with aspects related to gender differences nor racism. Colorism is an unfortunate consequence of colonialism. As Darwin wrote, "If everyone were cast in the same mold, there would be no such thing as beauty" (*The Decent of Man*). The colonial encounter has been devastating to the ex-colonized communities, and a reawakening is timely and necessary.

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