



BOOK REVIEW

Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives, by E. Dawson Varughese, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 119 pp., \$69.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-319-69489-4

Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives (2018) by E. Dawson Varughese is a valuable exploration of graphic narratives that portray how post-millennial modernity has influenced new conceptualizations of “Indianness.” Varughese analyzes a number of contemporary Indian graphic narratives in order to trace the significant evolution of what she refers to as Indian “ways of seeing” (xiii). Throughout the book, she employs the term “reader-gazer” to emphasize how “looking,” “seeing,” and “knowing” all come together to create a complex notion of visuality. She begins by outlining the economic, socio-cultural, and political conditions that led to the creation of the post-millennial Indian moment in which the Indian graphic narrative was able to emerge and thrive. In the first chapter, she notes how the economic liberalization of India in the 1990s generated conditions that were eventually responsible for the formation of a “generation of ‘young’ Indians ready to both consume and create Indian-oriented graphic narratives” (2). These narratives were marked by their striking difference from comics such as *Amar Chitra Katha*, which had been extremely popular throughout the mid and late twentieth century. Varughese construes that this remarkable change in the portrayal of “Indianness” in the graphic narrative genre was caused by a combination of factors, including the growth in the number of independent presses and the shifts in production and distribution techniques. How did the perception and representation of traditional notions about “Indianness” change and evolve in the post-millennial moment? This is the question, posed in the first chapter, which she answers in the following chapters.

Titled “Modes of Visuality in New India,” the second chapter interrogates “ways of seeing” within the Indian cultural context. Varughese argues that the Indian graphic novel is a manifestation of the changes that have occurred in the modes of visual and cultural consumption in the post-millennial moment. By tracing the movement of Indian visual culture from the realm of the sacred and auspicious to the realm of the secular and inauspicious, this chapter provides the reader with a helpful genealogy of the various “ways of seeing” that the book explores. Varughese contends that post-millennial Indian graphic narratives challenge traditional modes of representation by drawing attention to the inauspicious, problematic, and unfavorable. These uncomfortable and challenging depictions are, as she points out, in stark contrast with the *Amar Chitra Katha* tradition, which was more invested in the celebration of Indian national identity post 1947. Drawing upon the work of Baeten and Frey, she closely examines this shift in both content and narrative styles to show how, by invoking the inauspicious, “Indian graphic narratives suggest an ominous and portentous future” (17).

Varughese moves the argument forward in the third chapter by giving us a wide variety of examples that illuminate how post-millennial Indian graphic narratives represent India in an “inauspicious” manner. She does close readings of five different graphic narratives- “The Photo” (2105) by Reshu Singh, *Delhi Calm* (2010) by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, *HUSH* (2010) by Pratheek Thomas, Rajiv Eipe, and Vivek Thomas, and *The Harappa Files* (2010) and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) by Sarnath Banerjee. Her insightful analysis maps how these diverse texts represent non-traditional and non-normative ways of seeing

contemporary India. By analyzing the use of colour, symbolism, and dialogue, Varughese underscores how each of these works has moved away from the traditional *Amar Chitra Katha* mode of visualization by focusing on issues related to class, caste, and gender. She begins with “The Photo,” and contends that Singh “usurps traditional visualizations of the mother, the home, and desired female (social) behaviour” (31). The narrative abandons notions of male heroism and demonstrates the need for female empowerment in the form of *Shakti*. In the next section, Varughese takes a close look at three instances of free illustration in Ghosh’s *Delhi Calm*, and argues that the text offers the reader “several ways of ‘seeing’ the Emergency years” (32). She expertly demonstrates how “history might be *re-visioned* from and through an Indian aesthetic” (41). The third section discusses the ways in which *HUSH* destabilizes normative modes of Indian visuality by narrating a story about sexual abuse within a family and an educational institution. Varughese devotes the final section of the chapter to two works by Sarnath Banerjee, and traces how they comment upon the contradictions of contemporary urban Indian life. As she argues, *The Harappa Files* “engages significantly and at times controversially with issues of urban New India through its reminiscence of past Indias” (51). *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* becomes a powerful example of how the graphic narrative genre is able to engage in the “inauspicious invocation of personal and public memory” (60).

The fourth chapter, titled “Identity: Representations of ‘Indianness,’” is similarly structured to the third chapter, and does close readings of four graphic narratives in order to address the changing depictions of nationalism, caste-based discrimination, and celebrity culture, among other issues. Varughese explores the “visual language of contested Indian identities and looks at how these various identities are problematized, presented, and embodied in the text-image interface” of the four graphic narratives being discussed. She begins with *Twelve: How it Ends* by Manta Ray. Published in 2013, this graphic short story was created by a team of four, Pratheek Thomas, Aindri Chakraborty, Dileep Cherian, and Prabha Malaya, and gives us an account of the brutality of armed conflict during the Naxalite insurgency. Varughese notes, “the reverence and the sincerity of the ‘Indian Army Officer’s Oath’ are pulled apart by the graphic reality of war” (69). Through both form and content, *Twelve: How it Ends* deconstructs notions of loyalty, allegiance, and martyrdom for “Mother India.” Navayana’s creative graphic non-fiction titled *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2012) is analyzed next. *Bhimayana* uses the Pardhan Gond style of artwork to chart the life and experiences of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Varughese asserts that by emphasizing the horrors of caste-based discrimination, this narrative “is far from a celebration of Indianness in any established sense of tradition; rather, it celebrates a marginal Indianness” (80). In the third section of this chapter, we are invited to engage with *Kashmir Pending* (2007), a highly stylized graphic novel which brings together private and public memory. Created by Naseer Ahmed and Saurabh Singh, *Kashmir Pending* narrates the story of two characters in order to separate the individual from the mob, and to trouble the way in which the situation in Kashmir is otherwise portrayed. The final section of the chapter looks at *Legends of Halahala* (2013) by Appupen. Varughese focuses on the fifth legend of this text titled “The Accordion Manoeuvre.” Appupen uses the figure of Lady Mayaveh to raise questions about “modernity, the role of religion (or spirituality) in post-millennial society and the manner in which the female is revered, gazed upon and consumed” (97). By bringing together these diverse graphic commentaries, Varughese displays how form and content can be made to work together in order to defamiliarize and disturb.


In the fifth and final chapter of the book, titled “Conclusions: Decoding Current Lines and Future Spaces,” she begins by drawing a connection between the post-millennial

Indian graphic narrative and the *Nayi Kahani* (New Story) genre that emerged in India in the mid-1950s. The *Nayi Kahani* movement is significant for Varughese because it “...emerged from a newly independent, fast urbanizing and industrializing India” (102). She notes that even though there are numerous differences between these two genres, they share a common interest in portraying realist rather than idealist notions about society and modernity by “pushing the extant boundaries” of the ways in which “Indianness” is constructed (103). We are reminded of the way in which form and content work together in these graphic narratives to destabilize “sacred” and “auspicious” modes of seeing and knowing. She ends by emphasizing the need to continue examining the changing position of such narratives within the publishing industry and academia.

Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives is an illuminating and useful text which pays close attention to a number of previously unexamined aspects of Indian visual culture in the post-millennial moment. By revealing the shared formal and narrative strategies used by a diverse set of graphic narratives, Varughese proves that they form an extremely important archive which should continue to receive commercial and academic attention. This book will be extremely useful for scholars who are interested in the evolution of the graphic narrative as a genre, especially in the Indian context. *Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* will be a good fit in undergraduate and graduate level courses that explore the ways in which literary form and content evolve and influence each other.

Notes on Contributor

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