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REPRESENTATION OF “GOD” AS A SUPERHERO: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED  
GRAPHIC NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In the recent years, there has been proliferation in a number of representations of Hindu deities in new forms through the medium of graphic novels. Now the writers have started to approach that sacred part of the religious myths which was considered taboo some times before. The research paper would analyze the portrayal of gods in the graphic novels. It will present a critical study of changing visual representation of gods in the Indian print culture. The paper will analyze how the writers have made them to come out of their traditional forms. It's all part of a revamp that instigators feel makes Hindu stories more relevant to the increasing segment of middle-class youths in India who live in a different societal context than generations before them. The paper will examine the various changes that have occurred in the visual graphics and narratology of the post modern graphic novels.

**Keywords:** representation, Hindu, gods, visual, graphic novels, superhero, post-modern, rewriting, re-imagine.

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Indian mythology with its rich line of stories and archetypical characters has been an area of interest among authors across the globe; be it classical authors who write about Indian Gods with their larger than life image or recent attempts by Indian authors and artists to humanize them or to re-imagine them in new forms. The idea of rewriting a God has almost always been accepted by the readers as well as the publishers. The condition however is that the interpretation is not very deviant from the common belief. Hindu myths have survived much over the centuries through a complex form of cultural negotiation and resistance against the forces of colonialism. In the present day, mythology may not seem overtly in danger of extinction, but it will have to be thought through carefully to remain as vibrant and vital as it has been.

At present, Hindu mythology is under strain from two opposite tendencies that are not entirely unrelated to broader debates about religion and politics in India and the diaspora. There seems to be a “didactic” extreme and an “experimental” extreme in present approaches to the tales of the gods. The didactic tendency views mythology as a litany of facts about history and geography. It shows up in some of the recent

animated mythological movies. The gods are depicted like pop culture superhero figures while a pedantic voice lists facts about them. The experimental tendency, on the other hand, sees mythology as open to virtually any sort of reinterpretation without regard to virtue or intent. Some artists and intellectuals espouse this view, and end up assuming that any imputation of sanctity to mythology is inherently fundamentalist.

“Graphic novels” is an imprecise term used to describe a format that uses a combination of words and sequential art to convey a narrative. Over the past ten years, graphic novels have seen a resurgence in popularity for well-established genres and characters (such as superheroes), a new interest in previously little-known genres and titles, and increasing critical attention and acclaim toward graphic novels as a medium. Aimee Bender, in her essay “Flat and Glad,” addresses the subconscious, psychological effect of the type of text and image used in graphic novels, as well as the format. Bender suggests that “there’s an immediacy to iconic words and pictures...” (47). She explains that the visual elements allow the reader to linger on pages, often offering extra-narrative meanings through their use of space and the juxtaposition of graphic details. The desire to involve the reader in the narrative as an active member is critical to the experience of graphic novels. Schmitt notes both the formal aesthetic and thematic subversive nature of graphic novels, suggesting that the medium has “used its marginality to celebrate that which is unacceptable in ‘serious’ discourse. Schmitt illustrates this potential by relating the formal approach of graphic novels to the Derridean concept of difference, or the relational production of textual meaning.

In new graphic novels, paintings and popular books, depictions of Vishnu, Rama and other deities of the Hindu pantheon are being re-imagined to give the deities broad shoulders, six-pack abs, flashy get-ups and smouldering good looks. A new generation of artists, writers and publishers of graphic novels are portraying the gods as warriors and action heroes, in some cases re-imagining religious epics that are thousands of years old. The artists use popular aesthetics in order to appeal the very senses and emotions of the readers as the elements of popular aesthetics stimulate the effective ability of a graphic novel enacted under the garb of entertainment ideology. In the recent graphic novels, the weapons have been made attractive and strong. For instance, the trident of Shiva looks like the Roman god Neptune’s weapon. In the battlefield’s depictions of graphic novels, the arrows burn fiery and look like rockets and their *raths* fly as a spaceship. With black background, the red colour used to depict the battlefields and blue used to draw the evening and night. The garland of *rudrakshas* replaced the garland of flowers and heavy jewels of gods. The most important change is the new muscular look of gods. The bodies of gods have been projected as attractive, pumped up and upgraded as the bodies of western gods and superheroes. They have “V” shape face and muscular body with six pack abs (stomach muscles), heavy chest and arms. The curly hair has been replaced by long dark hair. And hair has been waving in most of the pictures. The biological changes represented a modern attitude in graphic novels. By this way, these changes create another myth of the Puranic tradition and increase the complexity of comic culture.

Contemporary artists and authors assert that Hinduism’s multitude of gods and goddesses deserve an updated look. Lord Shiva who is often shown in a meditative, calm pose in traditional Indian calendar art, is portrayed as a warrior chieftain in a recent graphic novel series titled “Shiva— The Legends of the Immortal.” In this graphic series, the title character, Shiva boasts bulging muscles that ripple under his tiger-skin wrap and dark tresses that blow in the wind as he battles with his trident. These texts are canonical in projecting Shiva as a “Superhero.” That is a big shift from the standard iconography of the past century, which has tended to portray the gods in beneficent and contemplative poses, modestly clad and with bodies that are often curvy and soft. The books also humanize these larger-than-life figures in unfamiliar ways. This projection of Shiva in different forms best suits the requirements of the modern readers. In another graphic novel named *The Skull Rosary* by Shweta Taneja and Vivek Goel, Shiva has been depicted in a new light. The first person narration on the part of Shiva gives a new insight to the narrative. *The Skull Rosary* portrays the dark and destructive side of Shiva in a new manner. It projects Shiva as a God of five heads.

A famous artist Anirudh Sainath Krishnamani observes that the traditional depictions of Hindu god Rama as clean-shaven and fair-looking doesn’t comport with the Rama described in Hindu texts, which

describe the god living for years in a forest, fighting many battles and single-handedly slaying fourteen thousand demons. Rama “was this really macho, warrior kind of person,” he says. He shouldn’t be “looking like this really soft and nice-nice person.” A recent digitally-rendered piece by Krishnamani shows Rama with a dark complexion, dreadlocks and broad chest, aiming an arrow while riding on the back of Hanuman, the monkey-god, who is slicing through the sky like a jet.

Some readers like that the new comic books and graphic novels explore different themes. One of the best-selling graphic novels in India is about Ravana, who captured the wife of Hindu god Rama in the epic, *The Ramayana*. Ravana has typically been portrayed as a villain in India. But in a new graphic novel named *Ravana: Roar of the Demon King*, Ravana sports a lean, muscular physique, and the story lines turn him into a romantic anti-hero of sorts, who was a scholar before he took Sita, the wife of Rama. Another artist, Anant Mishra, shows gods in clothes and settings that might not seem out of place in a Western comic book. In one painting, Hanuman, the monkey god lounges in a Batmobile-like vehicle in the sky, wearing armor appropriate for a sci-fi film, watching over an apocalyptic scene on earth.

As the publishers think that Hindu gods were also warriors so they are supposed to be as strong as they could fight anybody and the resultant tougher new look in the graphic novels is appealing to younger people. People today require “a little bit more visual convincing” of gods’ extraordinary powers. These changes are part of a reimagining of Hindu stories that supporters say makes them more relevant to India’s middle-class youth, who are navigating a far different world than the one in which their parents lived. Young Indians want to connect to the tradition in a very different manner, says Joseph M.T., assistant professor of sociology at University of Mumbai. The gods’ new look has resonance to an aspiring India at some level.

In traditional depictions, for instance, Vishnu, Hinduism’s four-armed god of preservation is often shown reclining, with his wife, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, sitting at his feet. But in the graphic novel named *Dashaavatar*, a ripped Vishnu, in one of his incarnations as half fish, battles a demon that is part horse, part fish. Gone is the passive pose and feminized features (and apparently two of his arms). Surrounded by roiling ocean waters, the god clenches his four fists, then shoots laser beams from his eyes—“Szzzzttt!” A trilogy of recent novels on Shiva blends Indian stories with the hot genres of science fiction and fantasy, and has become a best-selling book series in India. The author Amish Tripathi, “is humanizing these characters into Tolkienean heroes,” says Layne Little, a professor of religious studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Tripathi says that readers of his books have told him that by reading about their god in a modern idiom “they felt more connected with their heritage.”

These visual changes on the part of graphic novels have envisaged a new trend in English literature. The sensitive religious topics which were considered taboo in the past have been provided a new perspective. In a constantly evolving world, how can old traditions keep up with modern culture? In order to relate them to the modern scenario, the classic mythological stories are embellished and updated to appeal to younger minds by using typical archetypes and art styles seen in popular graphic novels today. The writers and publishers have redesigned the classic epic of gods into superhero comic books in order to help keep religion relevant in today’s pop culture. Right from the Seventies Hindu comic books *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal Picture Tales) and traditional Indian art, which inspired the superhero-style versions of the Hindu deities in the short to the much liberal interpretation of the Hindu gods in the twenty first century today, Indian mythology has evolved in terms of its content and form. These graphic representations of the most prominent Hindu deities are supplementing the religious sanctity up to some extent in this post-modern world except discrediting it.

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