

Enter the Indian Super hero'ine': Questioning Stereotypes and Understanding Contemporary Issues through Superhero Comics

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Abstract

The portrayal of gender dynamics and contemporary issues in popular media has attracted extensive discussion in the recent years, particularly with the creation and readership of Indian superhero comics challenging conventional gender roles and established media narratives. This paper examines the prospect of using select superhero'ine' comics as a medium to question gender and cultural stereotypes, as well as to educate children about contemporary issues. It will explore the ways through which these comics tackle a variety of contemporary themes, including gender equality, environmental preservation, and social justice. By studying the intersections of culture, gender, and storytelling, the paper will induce a deeper understanding of the potential impact of superheroine narratives in shaping perceptions, and in fostering a more inclusive and equitable-thinking society.

Keywords: Children's literature; Comic Books; Gender Stereotypes; Social Issues; Visual Culture.

Introduction

Indian children's childhood is enriched with the heritage of oral literature and storytelling, which has resulted in producing a long, rich, and multi-layered tradition of children's literature. The development of children's written literature in the contemporary sense, however, only dates back to the colonial era, and has subsequently evolved to take into account the shifting social, cultural, and educational needs of children in India. Kamal Sheoran, in his article "Contemporary Children's Literature in India", sheds light on the traditional and modern children's literature and

determines “On one level we have the traditional children’s literature, which, for the most part, is oral narrative. It is a living literature that spills into various forms of the spoken and written word. On the other hand is the “modern,” printed children’s literature dealing with present-day styles and subjects”. (127)

In her article “Children’s Literature in India”, Manorama Jafa traces the history of children’s literature in India; she reveals that, “India has the privilege of bringing out *Panchtantra* – the world’s first collection of stories for children in Sanskrit.” (33) *The Panchatantra*, a collection of animal fables assumed to have been written around the third century BCE, contains some of the earliest documented children’s tales in India. “These have been translated and adapted in more than 200 world languages.” (Jafa 33) Later, *The Jataka Tales*, which describes the past lives of Gautama Buddha, is well-liked among children and also contains moral lessons. Jafa in her article further discusses the themes used in traditional stories and informs that, “The themes of traditional stories were based on worldly wisdom, triumph of good over evil, bravery, courage and even revenge.” (34) Children’s literature has been greatly influenced by Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. For younger audiences, these epics have been simplified and retold in adaptations and retellings that place a strong emphasis on moral principle. (Jafa 34) English-language books and the Western storytelling style were introduced later to children’s literature during British colonial administration in India. After the country gained independence in 1947, a number of Indian authors emerged, including Ruskin Bond and R.K. Narayan. These authors penned tales that spoke to Indian youngsters and portrayed their day-to-day challenges and aspirations. Contemporary children’s literature discusses a range of social topics, encourages inclusivity, and honours local languages and cultures. Illustrations also play a crucial role in presenting stories, and are frequently influenced by traditional Indian art.

Development of Indian Comics Post Independence

Indian comic books also referred to as “Indian comics”, have a distinctive aesthetic and cultural appeal. Among these, *Indrajal Comics*, a series by the Times of India Group that debuted in 1964, featured Indianized versions of well-known foreign comic book characters, such as *Phantom*, *Mandrake the Magician*, and *Flash Gordon*. (“History of Indian Comics”) Anant Pai, also known as Uncle Pai, introduced the legendary *Amar Chitra Katha* series in 1967, which specialised in recounting Indian mythological and historical tales. *Amar Chitra Katha*’s success prompted

Uncle Pai to introduce *Tinkle* in 1980. A monthly children's publication, *Tinkle* included a variety of articles, stories, puzzles, and comics. Mandovi Menon in his web article "A Complete Timeline: The Evolution of Comic books in India (1926-Present)" informs about the popularity of the comic book "Over 600 issues have been published thus far and many of its characters such as 'Shikari Shambu', 'Ramu' & 'Shamu', 'Tantri the Mantri', and 'Suppandi' have achieved nation-wide recognition." (Menon) Indian comic book publishers began developing original superhero and adventure characters in the 1980s and 1990s. Superheroes like 'Nagraj', 'Doga', and 'Super Commando Dhruva', were first published by Raj Comics, and quickly gained enormous popularity among Indian comic book fans. These characters frequently took on distinctive Indian identities and integrated parts of local culture into their tales. With the development of the Internet and digital platforms, Indian comic books gained a wider audience outside print media. With their unique blend of traditional storytelling and modern sensibility, Indian comic books continue to evolve and flourish, inspiring and educating readers, conserving cultural histories, and offering people a space to express their creativity.

Dabung Girl and Priya

There has been a definite shift towards diversifying the superhero landscape in the realm of Indian comic books. Among these, *Dabung Girl* and *Priya* stand out as remarkable characters that defy expectations, and capture readers' attention with their special combination of determination and tenacity, owing to their strong portrayal of superheroines'. The comic book series *Priya* was published as a response to the Nirbhaya Case of 2012. Its creators conceptualised a new Indian superheroine', Priya, who is a rape survivor and who, through the power of persuasion, is able to motivate people to bring about a social change. The creator of this comic book series is Ram Devineni, who launched it at the Mumbai Comic and Film Convention in December 2014. The comic book and character became an instant hit and went viral with over 800 news stories worldwide, and over five lakh digital downloads, with over 30000 printed copies distributed in schools, NGOs, festivals, and comic book convention. In the narrative, readers are introduced to Priya, a young Indian woman who is a victim of sexual assault. She rushes to the forest to commit suicide because she is terrified and ashamed. However, the Hindu Goddess Parvati, notices her situation and tries to help her. Indian mythology describes Parvati as one aspect of the holy feminine spirit, also known as Shakti (power) or Devi (the shining one).

She is a metaphor for resistance, power, and retributive justice, as well as for inspiration, reason, freedom, and strength (Narayan). Priya, imbued with the powers given to her by Parvati, combats injustice, misogyny, and apathy. The narrative takes an innovative approach in narrating the origin story of a superhero, delving into important topics like gender-based violence, human trafficking, and the stigma attached to survivors.

In the superhero 'ine' genre, *Dabung Girl* has become a symbol of female emancipation, resilience, and social significance, and is one of the most well-known comics among children in India's contemporary comic book culture. The Hindi word "Dabung" denotes bravery, and the comic book series is a multi-award-winning one that supports diversity, inclusivity, and gender equality. Alumnus of IIT-Harvard and creator of this superhero toon, Saurabh Agarwal, brought out this series with an aim to educate children about societal issues, and launched it during ComicCon Delhi in 2019. With a goal to create and increase the readership of comic books, Team *Dabung Girl* has worked with a number of social organisations, such as Seeds of Peace (USA) and Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation (India), who incorporate the comic as a pedagogical tool in their activities to promote gender sensitivity. The titular superhero inspires children to find their inner superheroes and view the females as one ("Dabung Girl – a Gender Equality Superhero – a Social Impact Superhero"). In addition to important themes like encouraging girls to participate in sports and leadership positions, the *Dabung Girl* comic books tackle challenging issues like child labour, underage marriage, etc. They use fantasy, creativity, humour, relatability, and delight to expand their readership. The most significant feature of this comic book series is that, unlike other superheroes that show up and save the day, Dabung girl encourages the young readers to explore issues and learn how to find solutions on their own.

These comic books are increasingly being acknowledged as powerful tools in the battle against gender stereotypes because they have the ability to alter attitudes, upend conventional thinking, and raise consciousness. With their diverse and empowering depictions of gender, they work to subvert and alter prevalent social standards. Comic book creators help debunk misconceptions and highlight the variety of roles, skills, and experiences of women by portraying strong, multifaceted, and intricate female characters. The restricted historical representations of women as submissive or secondary characters are thus challenged by the prominence of female heroines and superheroes.

Popularity of Superhero Toons

Comic book superhero toons, or animated depictions of superheroes, have grown extremely popular in the last two decades. They offer viewers a chance to escape from the mundane realities of daily life and engross themselves in a universe of fantasy that includes superheroes imbued with exceptional powers and abilities. They are endowed with unique skills that help them overcome obstacles, fight for justice, and prevail over hardships. Readers who aspire to wards personal empowerment and want to create a positive impact on the world are drawn to this representation of courage and heroism. Comic books, notably superhero cartoons, use a dynamic and bright art style that grabs readers' attention and piques their visual senses. Over the years, Indian consumers have grown to love characters like Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruva, Doga, Shaktimaan, and Parmanu. These protagonists are shown possessing special abilities, contending with neighbourhood bad guys, while incorporating Indian cultural themes into their tales. For Indian readers, they are relatable since they combine mythology, history, and modern social issues. (Menon)

Superhero comics often include appealing and intriguing stories that focus on contemporary societal issues. The sketches hold the children's attention and pique their interest by portraying these issues in a relatable and approachable manner. Children can comprehend difficult ideas and connect with the experiences of the characters through the power of narrative. They reflect virtues like equality, kindness, integrity, and justice. They act as role models for children, showing them how to address societal issues and have a positive impact through their actions and decision-making. They also serve as effective teachers of empathy, responsibility, and standing up for what is right. Additionally, superhero comics tend to address contemporary societal themes, including preservation of the environment. They introduce children to these issues and teach them how they affect both, society, as well as their personal lives. Further, they enable children to take action and bring about positive change by fostering critical thinking and holding discussions about possible solutions.

Popular Culture and Comic Books

Comic books have made a significant contribution to popular culture, influencing a wide range of different media and impacting the way stories are shared. Jeffrey K. Johnson in his book, *Super-history: Comic Book*

Superheroes and American Society, 1938 to the Present highlight the importance of popular culture and extrapolates, “One of the most important attributes of popular culture is that it quickly changes to meet a society’s needs. Popular culture often serves as both a mirror and moulder in society and is frequently one the best gauges of a society’s current hopes, fears, wants, and needs”.(34) Additionally, by addressing important societal and political issues and presenting a variety of viewpoints, comics have contributed to the development of society attitudes and values. They act as mirrors that reflect the ideals, issues, and aspirations of the society from which they emerge. Superheroes serve as an example of how cultural ideas of justice, heroism, and the victory of good over evil are embodied. Since their inception as niche magazines, comic books have evolved into a global phenomenon that influences all facets of popular culture. Their capacity to combine literary ability with artistic talent, reflect society ideals, have an impact on the media, build communities, and inspire creativity serves as proof of their continuing relevance.

Questioning Stereotypes through Superhero‘ine’ Toons

In *Dabung Girl*, the main character is Tara, whose alter ego is Dabung Girl. The daughters of a scientist mother, Tara and Maya are sisters. According to the plot line, one day, aliens abduct their mother and unintentionally, abduct Tara and Maya as well. Three years later, when the girls are returned to their father in Tadkapur, they find that they have been imbued with superpowers. Maya chooses to move to the city, while Tara remains in Tadkapur and transforms into Dabung Girl. This comic book series comprises a variety of books that addresses various societal issues. The subject of child marriage in India is explored in the comic book *Dabung Girl and Giving Wings to Dreams*. Despite legislative initiatives and shifting norms of Indian society, child marriage—the practise of marrying children younger than the legal marriage age (18 for women and 21 for men)—remains a serious social problem in India. According to a 2023 report by UNICEF, nearly one in four young women in India (23%) were married or in union before their eighteenth birthday. (tkarino) The report also suggests that one in three of the world’s child brides live in India, which is an indicator of it being a serious issue in the society. The comic book focuses strongly on this subject matter and not only underlines the problem but also offers solutions. This is where superhero‘ine’ toons differ from superhero toons. The former offer solutions instead of just acting as avengers of society. They seek to tackle social ills at the grass root level and offer tailor-made solutions that can be put into practice by the readers.

Dabung Girl and Giving Wings to Dreams narrate the tale of Naina, a school-going girl who is caught in a difficult situation. Her parents are forcing her to marry when she would rather be following her interest in running and sports. Naina hopes to one day surpass the fastest runner in India. Even though she is aware that Child Marriage is illegal, she is unable to persuade her parents to oppose the marriage. Girls who are married as children frequently drop out of school, which prolongs poverty cycles and reduces their possibilities for development on both a personal and financial level. The report presented by UNICEF in 2023 also demonstrates that child brides face challenges in continuing their education: while the majority of unmarried girls are in school, fewer than two in ten married girls continue to attend school. (tkarino) Naina is aware that she would not be able to continue her studies or pursue her passion of being a runner after being married.

The narrative opens with a description of a race taking place in Tadkapur, which Naina is winning; her friends admire her passion, and she herself predicts that one day she will run as quickly as Milkha Singh, her role model, who is also known as the “Flying Sikh”. This is because he holds the record of being the fastest runner in India. Later in the story, Naina’s parents arrange her marriage, and upset by the news, her friends Tara, Muskaan, and Chintu decide to help her. In this endeavour, they seek the whereabouts of Dabung Girl because they believe she will be able to speak with Naina’s parents and convince them against the marriage. “When the going gets tough, Dabung Girl always shows up!” (Agarwal and Singh 12) is the credo that is associated with the heroine. Unknown to others, Tara’s alter ego Dabung Girl, visits Naina’s parents with Ghazal Ji, a child protection committee officer, to educate them about the pitfalls of child marriage and how it will impact Naina’s physical and mental well-being. However, they are told by her parents that it is a family affair and that they should not interfere.

To convince Naina’s parents, who are still unwilling to stop the marriage, Tara, i.e., Dabung Girl prepares a play to be presented at the Tadkapur Annual Fair. She informs the audience, through a puppet show, about the tale of two sisters and how one sister’s health deteriorated after getting married young. On the other hand, the second sister, who did not get married at a young age, fared well in school and went on to become a doctor. After seeing this play, Naina’s parents decide not to proceed with the wedding and to allow Naina to continue her studies instead. Tara and Naina are two examples of strong, independent female characters that the comic uses to encourage young readers, particularly girls, to

challenge social expectations and strive for their highest potential. The characters' ability to reflect children's thoughts help them feel like they belong and have an appreciation of who they are.

There are many reasons for the high incidence of child marriage in India, which is sustained by ingrained gender inequality and the undervaluation of females in society. Families may wed off young girls in order to lessen perceived hazards to their safety and honour. In India, there are several communities with ingrained traditions and practises that support child marriage. These traditions frequently relate to ideas of caste, purity, and social standing. Another reason is that the understanding of the harmful effects of child marriage, including health risks, lack of education, and economic hardship, is still low in distant and marginalised communities. (tkarino)

In many societies across the world, the practice of child marriage is driven by various factors that are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and social norms. One such factor is the perception of girls as an economic burden, leading to their marriage at an early age. The perception of girls as an economic burden arises from traditional gender roles and expectations, where male offspring are often seen as contributors to the family's economic well-being, while girls are considered liabilities. This mind set is most prevalent in communities where financial resources are limited, and the cost of raising a girl, including education and dowry expenses, is perceived as a huge burden. Early marriage is often viewed as a solution to alleviate this perceived financial burden on families. When Naina confronts her parents about her early marriage, her father expresses his helplessness that they are very poor and it will be difficult for him to arrange her dowry if she does not get married now.



Fig. 1

Early marriage is frequently encouraged in the Indian society in an effort to reduce the perceived financial pressure on families. Social conventions which prioritise a girl's responsibilities as a wife and mother above her ability to pursue her education encourage this practice. These deeply embedded conventions which promote early marriage can be dismantled through an array of education campaigns, economic empowerment efforts, and ensuring girls have access to education and equal opportunity.

Along with its intriguing narratives, *Dabung Girl* also includes supplemental information and educational resources on current issues at the end of the comic book. These materials improve children's awareness of the topics covered in the comic by providing them with information on facts, the consequences of child marriage, Indian legislation pertaining to child marriage, and how to file a complaint about child marriage. The educational component invites a greater understanding of the topics and reinforces the information gained from the stories. The comic book title also gives readers the thought that the word "Dabung" (Hindi for fearless) which is usually used to describe the characteristics of men, can also be used for women. They are also fearless if they have their space to practice agency. The term "Dabung" should no longer be confined to male superheroes; it is a trait that transcends gender. Female superheroines who defy expectations and break away from the limits of traditional gender conventions demonstrate fearlessness, a trait that was formerly reserved for male superheroes. Not only is the term "Dabung" that is used for female superheroines a cultural decision, but it also speaks to the larger demand for diversified and genuine representation. When women see themselves portrayed as courageous, it communicates a strong message about their strength and resiliency. In addition to validating the experiences of female readers, this portrayal helps to undermine deeply held social stereotypes that link fearlessness exclusively to masculinity.

Comic books, often celebrated for their ability to captivate and inspire, have not been immune to perpetuating gender stereotypes. The way gender roles and characters are portrayed usually mirrors ingrained cultural conventions and expectations. *Priya and the Lost Girls* (hereafter referred to as *Lost Girls*), specifically focuses on the harrowing reality of human trafficking and the exploitation of young girls. The story of *Lost Girls* begins when the protagonist, Priya, returns home to find that her village has become devoid of girls. Her sister Laxmii is also missing and when she asks her family about her, her father says that she has gone for work to the north. Priya ascends to Rahu's den (city) mounted on her flying tiger, *Sahas*, in order to learn the truth about where the women,

like her sister, have been taken. Women in Rahu's city are expected to live solely to serve and appease males and those who rebel are turned into stones.

The city is dominated by desire, jealousy, and greed, and serves as a metaphor for a brothel. Priya is threatened and attacked, and a woman who works for Rahu tries to lure her into the sex trade saying: "If you work for us, you'd serve only five to six men and not 20" (Devineni15). However, in the end, good wins over evil and Priya manages to vanquish Rahu and liberate her sister and all the other trafficked girls. Yet, she is still not able to bring them back in the social sphere of the village as the girls that were saved do not want to return to their families. This is because they know that they will not be welcomed by their family and society owing to what has befallen them. They will never be able to live the life they had before being taken to Rahu's den. The women experience humiliation, disdain, and mockery, and are regarded as "lepers". This discrimination becomes one of the most severe challenges that women who have experienced sexual abuse have to contend with. Also, when reporting their experiences to officials, victims frequently encounter doubt, victim-blaming, and a lack of empathy. In the scene from *Lost Girls*, where the ladies are seen interacting in Rahu's den, one of the female characters reveals that she was raped by four men in her village. To this, another woman responds, "That was your own fault! If you go out alone in tight clothes, what will happen?" (19)

The emotional toll of sexual abuse is made worse for women since they are often doubly victimised with the added trauma of social stigma and exclusion. A culture of secrecy and shame is perpetuated by society's propensity to place the responsibility on survivors, rather than holding the offenders accountable. Survivors may experience either isolation and judgement, or exclusion, which makes it difficult for them to start over and look for support from friends, family, and their communities.



Fig. 2

Traditionally, comic books have represented the female characters as passive, nurturing, and subservient, while male characters are embodied with strength, authority, and assertiveness. These one-dimensional representations contribute to the perpetuation of restrictive gender norms, limiting the potential for diverse and complex characterization. In the comic book, *Lost Girls*, during one interaction between the women in Rahu's den, a woman says "Truth is, you must let men protect you", which reinforces the idea that women are weak and they need men to protect them. The standard trope of the "damsel in distress," (a young woman who is in trouble and needs a man's help) (Cambridge Dictionary) in which female characters are portrayed as unprotected victims in need of male counterparts' rescue, is very commonly used in comic books.

Such a narrative perpetuates antiquated gender stereotypes and undermines female agency by reiterating the idea that women are weak and dependent on men for protection. In his book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practises*, Stuart Hall addresses the politics of representation by interpreting it as a channel or medium through which meaning is produced. He makes the underlying assumption that things like objects, people, etc., do not actually have stable, true meanings, but rather that meanings are created by individuals who are part of a culture and have the power to give things meaning. "The relation between 'things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'." (Hall 19) Priya deviates from the conventional representation of female characters in popular culture. Rather than perpetuating the preconceived notions of her gender, she transforms into a representation of courage, resilience, and self-determination. Her character subverts the stereotype that women are helpless or incapable of taking initiative. Priya challenges the prevailing belief about women being weak and defenceless.

The comic book also challenges the prejudice that women are nothing more than objects of desire. Filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" explores the notion of "Male Gaze", which refers to the prevalent and often objectifying way in which visual media, particularly cinema, portrays women as seen from a heterosexual male perspective. Women, within this framework, become objects of desire and are subjected to a passive, often voyeuristic, scrutiny by the male spectator.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been spilt between active male and passive female....In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (808-809)

Mulvey argues that this objectification perpetuates a power imbalance between the genders, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's agency within the narrative. In *Lost Girls*, Rahu describes his city as a "city, where women serve men" (16) when Priya enters his den to save her sister. Later in the story, Manidhari tries to entice Priya into the city by stating, "Our worship is pleasing men." (16) However, later in the narrative the comic challenges and subverts this notion, portraying Priya as a symbol of empowerment, resilience, and strength rather than as a sexualized superhero. This break from the hypersexualization that is often seen in the media's depictions of female characters helps dispel prejudices against women and promotes a more nuanced view of women's roles in society.

Additionally, *Lost Girls* addresses concerns about women being exploited and trafficked. The phrase "Lost Girls" itself calls into question the dehumanising terminology that is frequently applied to victims of human trafficking. With its emphasis on the narratives of these "Lost Girls", the comic challenges the cliché that limits survivors to inanimate objects or anonymous victims. The inclination to generalise and oversimplify the lives of people impacted by human trafficking is challenged with this unique story.

The term "Lost Girls" takes on a broader meaning when applied to women's representation in narratives dominated by male perspectives. Historically, male-oriented viewpoints have influenced much of literature, film, and other storytelling mediums, which have, in turn, led to the development of narratives that uphold established gender norms. Female characters are restricted to archetypal roles, either like the damsel in distress, the protective mother, or the enticing temptress. The assumption that a woman's value is determined by her adherence to predetermined roles is reinforced by these stereotypes, which also limit the diversity of female experiences and uphold damaging societal expectations.

Narrative Techniques

Comic books are among the many types of visual media that act as a vital

tool and significant component of visual culture. A unique style of visual storytelling, comic books combine graphic art, typography, and a narrative framework. They hold the readers' attention by skillfully combining images, text, and sensory input to communicate intricate narratives, emotions, and notions. Irit Rogoff defines visual culture as "Visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments" (24). *Priya* and *Dabung Girl* are among such comic books that focus on raising awareness in children about contemporary issues through visual storytelling. The ability of visual culture to work as a formidable teaching tool for children to better understand complicated social issues has recently come to the attention of educators and experts. Comic book creators can navigate complex issues in a visually appealing and engaging manner due to the distinctive way that text and graphics merge and come together in comic books (Schwarz 5).

Visual culture also offers a platform to address complicated social concerns in a way that is comprehensible to children, who can then learn about complex issues like racism, injustice, poverty, environmental concerns, and others, through visual tales in books, movies, or documentaries. In the comic book series *Dabung Girl*, the last page in each comic engages children in conversation about the issue that it addresses. For instance, the comic book *Dabung Girl and Giving Wings to Dreams* raises awareness against child marriage in India. At the end of the book, it defines child marriage, discusses its consequences, and informs children about the laws combating the issue. (Fig. 3) (Agarwal and Singh, "What Is Child Marriage?") Similar to this, in *Priya and The Lost Girls*, the issue of sex trafficking in India is dealt with, and the readers are informed that the comic book is based on the life of Ruchira Gupta and her journey of building an NGO named "Apne Aap Women Worldwide", that works to end sex trafficking. (Fig. 4) (Devineni)

Fig. 4

81



19

Fig. 5

The comic book *Dabang Girl* also employs other narrative techniques to hold the readers' attention, such as framed narrative and the use of rhyming dialogue to increase

the story's impact on the minds of children. A framed narrative, also known as a frame story, is a literary technique where a main story serves as a context for one or more subsidiary stories (Duyfhuizen 186). In other words, it is a story within a story. Comic books employ framed narratives that serve as literary lenses to place the main plot into a larger perspective. Readers are introduced to the characters, scene, and situations that surround the main narrative. Since the main theme of this comic book focuses on the issue of child marriage, the narrative similarly use the technique of framed narrative to narrate the tale of two sisters in order to highlight the contrast in their lives, where one accepts child marriage and the other resolves to be single while continuing her education. Teena, the girl who marries young, is impacted by the pressure of early marriage, which affects her physical and mental health. As opposed to this, her sister Meena pursues her education and becomes a doctor (Agarwal and Singh 23). This story within a story offers emotional clues that guide readers' responses and interpretations. The framing story in this book establishes the emotional tone, which helps the readers empathise and connect with the characters and events in the primary

narrative.

Additionally, the comic book uses the splash pages to introduce the main heroine Dabung Girl with a large image of the superheroine and the words “Aayi Re, Aayi Re, Dabung Girl Aayi Re.” (13) Splash panels, also referred to as splash pages in comic books, are large panels (the parts of the page that carry images) that may even span two pages. They have a significant role in keeping the rhythm of a comic. (“Splash Panel”) It is used to create a dramatic effect. The Priya Series also uses this technique to show Rahu’s den in the narrative, the whole city is red, since it is a place described as ruled by fire. (10) (Fig.7.) The specific purpose of a splash panel is to add dramatic weight to a scene, be it a shocking reveal, a character’s entrance, an establishing shot of scenery or a building, a dramatic fight scene is the specific goal of a splash panel.



Fig. 6

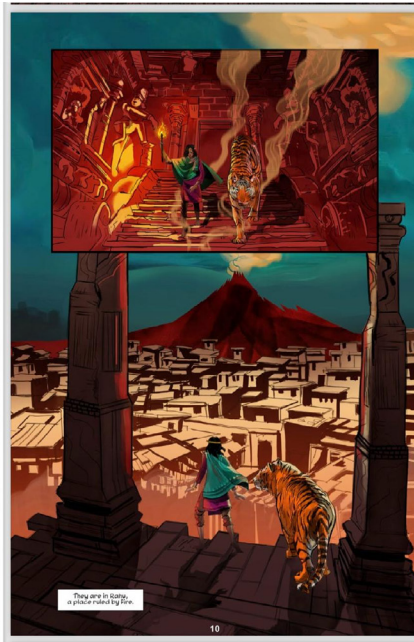


Fig. 7

In the *Priya Comic Series*, Priya is accompanied by a flying tiger named *Sahas* (Hindi for courage). Linking with the supernatural, the notion of a tiger taking flight introduces an element of the fantasy in the series, which in turn becomes an attraction for the readers. The flying tiger can

be seen as a symbol that encapsulates the essence of magical realism. Wendy Faris defines magical realism as genre which often emerges from the clash of two or more cultural and narrative traditions. Owing to this hybridity the focalization oscillates between two perspectives: "events that are verifiable from a modern Western empirical viewpoint, as well as events that are impossible to verify by that standard, such as people flying through the air, or trails of blood climbing street curbs." (282) Tigers are real animals, firmly rooted in the natural world, and their image carries cultural and symbolic significance in many societies. As a symbol of magical realism, the Flying Tiger transcends traditional boundaries of reality in order to communicate an engaging and thought-provoking narrative. As the Flying Tiger gracefully weaves through the skies, it invites the readers to embrace the magic that lies at the intersection of reality and fantasy, encouraging a sense of wonder that resonates with the timeless allure of magical realism.

Comic books have long been acknowledged as a powerful storytelling tool because they combine visually-appealing illustrations with engaging narratives. This dynamic mode of communication gains more impact when combined with rhyming conversations, especially for children who are readers. *Dabung Girl* also employs rhyming dialogue to hold the attention of the comic book readers. This technique is used in the puppet show in the comic book *Dabung Girl and Giving Wings to Dreams*. The puppet show's narrators, Naina and Muskaan, chronicle the story in rhymes with phrases such, "This is a story about Teena and Meena who were sisters, they loved each other deeply, and be it summer or winters." (Agarwal and Singh 23) Another phrase which helps in creating impact on the minds about the issue of child marriage of reader occurs at the end of play, "If only Teena was not married off this soon... her life too would have bloomed." (Agarwal and Singh 27) Children are more engaged owing to the musical ability of the rhymes, which draws them into the world of the story. Rhymes give reading a rhythmic and anticipatory feel, making it memorable, as well as entertaining.

Conclusion

These Indian superheroines are more than mere ink and colour in the world of Supertoon comics; they are agents of social transformation addressing contemporary issues of society, challenge gender norms, and raise questions through their narratives. The amalgamation of cultural elements gives their narratives more depth, elevating them beyond the status of superheroes. As they read these humorous and informative sto-

ries, readers are invited to explore where they encounter prejudices, question conventions, and eventually aspire to a society that is more equal and inclusive. In keeping with the New India, Shining India image, such comics feature an Indian superheroine who shines brightly, beckoning readers to “Enter” a world where preconceptions are debunked in favour of a new image of women.

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