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Seriously comic

Georgina Maddox Posted: Mar 17, 2008 at 0059 hrs

We have never seen the Mahabharata told from Draupadi's point of view, nor do we know what happened to the two-headed goddess who fell in love with each other. But then we also didn't think that paintings with speech bubbles would climb into the realm of high art. Enter the world of women graphic artists, who use their lines and squiggles to create an alternative world of myth and miasma.

"There have been people like writer Durga Bhagwat, reclaiming myth in Marathi literature, but right now the graphic novel is really hot," says Amruta Patil, whose graphic novel Kari and Parva, published by Harper Collins, just hit the stands. "I am not sure if the medium in which I work will be seen in the same light as that of artists Chitra Ganesh or Dhurvi Acharya, but I do feel that woman artists are deriving a lot of inspiration from mythology. In fact every one is cutting their teeth on it," says Patil.

The second half of her Kari series tells the Mahabharata from three points of view—that of Kunti, Draupadi and Ashwatthama. "I have had always had a preoccupation with myth, Jeanette Winterson being one of my primary sources of inspiration. However, in the instance of the Mahabharata, I don't agree that the women characters are contained. If one reads between the lines, one finds they weren't oppressed though the viewpoint of the epic is male," reasons Patil. "I am interested in giving a 'voice' to some of the minor characters like Ashwatthama. Two of my narrators, Draupadi and Kunti, are both extremely important characters, in their ability to influence decisions and destinies—but their voice is upstaged by male narrators."

Dhurvi Acharya has centered her upcoming solos at Chemould Prescott (scheduled in August) and Nature Mort (September) around the notion that "Even when women actually do something heroic in comic-strips like Amar Chitra Katha, they still have to be doting wife and loving mother. The artist, who revisited the Kathas while suffering a severe bout homesickness while in the US studying art, explains, "When you're growing up, you think that is the only way to be. Later as an adult, one realises that there is a choice about these things."

Moving away from the damsels-in-distress image trap, Acharya's women come across as thinking and philosophising characters while speaking within the realms of popular mythology. Though the epic wars have not entered her narrative, Acharya does look at the figure of Kartikeya who fought wars as a boy. "Their weaponry is depicted such that violence is accepted in these comics. My work questions that," she adds.

Patil, who has a Bachelor's degree in graphic design and Masters in illustration, prefers the book over the canvas since her endeavour is to reach more people. "International graphic novels cost Rs 600-Rs 800. But that has not daunted the readership. I think there is a growing respect for the medium, and people think of buying graphic novels as buying something that is akin to artwork," says Patil.

But multimedia—including photographs, works on paper, digital collages, and paintings—are what Chitra Ganesh falls back on to express views. Throughout them, Ganesh reveals a fragmented narrative coupled with fantastical constructions that come from a vocabulary of motifs that are Indian, queer and camp, all in the same breath.

"I continue to explore the nature of authorship while confounding our cultural, sexual and gender definitions," writes Ganesh, whose Homeric epic unfolds on idyllic landscapes where nudes are intercepted by winged beings flying past three-headed women. Celebrating these more than human forms of the so-called fairer-sex, these women artists are taking giant leaps in the world of graphic art.