

**THROUGH THE QUEER LENS: AN ANALYSIS
OF THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN
AMAR CHITRA KATHA'S MAHABHARATA**

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

The study of comics, especially comics based on mythological and religious narratives, begs the question of how the study of comics contributes to the understanding of religion in contemporary societies. Thus, this concluding chapter collects the insights gained from the thesis and proposes questions for further research. Indian mythological comics allow the reader to learn about culture, society, and, above all, the existence of religion in society. The study of religion and comics shows that comics are a way of encountering, doing, and making religion in various social contexts.

I. Doing Religion

Reading religious comics, looking at pictures, using them as guides to visit sacred places, or talking about them have become part of the range of religious practices for people participating in religion. Religious groups, expressions, motivations, and teachings have been involved in the promotion of comics, as well as the protest against comics. While people participating in traditions enjoy seeing their familiar stories and mythologies represented in the visual language of comics, many have rejected the medium of comics for portraying people who are considered sacred. The appearance of image and text appears to have a sacred power which brings forth responses ranging from reverence and awe to indignation and hurt. Readers of *Amar Chitra Katha* have a varied reaction to the narrative of the comics as has been established in Chapter Three. From regarding the visual imagery as sacred to worshipping the panels of the comics that depict the pictures of the gods and goddesses, *Amar Chitra Katha* has been known to provoke emotions of veneration and worship among individuals. However, the opposite also stands true. The lack of representation of certain communities or the villainised portrayal of religious and caste minorities have caused emotions of indignation and hurt among confident readers. The highly popular comics are a tool of alienation for such readers.

Visual language has been used in various religious traditions (Vermassen, 2018). For instance, in various comics, including *The Gita*, the mythological character has been depicted in their all-powerful glorious form. Krishna, in *The Gita*, shows Arjuna his form as the all-encompassing Vishnu, a depiction that is portrayed in a full-page panel

in *Amar Chitra Katha* (Fig. 7.1). Such examples are when the comics transcend from being a medium of literature to being a medium of worship. Religious comics are related to these examples, although it is important to note that the popularity of the comics depend on these high-status sacred images. Chapter Three in this thesis has shown the delicacy of dealing with the sacred gaze in comics.



Fig. 7.1: Krishna in *Amar Chitra Katha's The Gita*

On the other hand of reverence is outrage. People can be highly sensitive in religion about visual representation, parody, and satire of their beloved mythological characters in a cartoon format. Comics can also be considered provocative by people who consider the mythological characters to be belonging to a sacred order. Many traditions have prohibited portrayal of certain images altogether (van Asselt et al. 2007, 309). The medium of portrayal, hence, matters. As discussed in the thesis, Anant Pai, however, took great care to avoid this conundrum or criticism. By portraying the characters as not directly facing the readers, Pai takes away from his comics being viewed as an object of worship. Pai also makes sure to not include any parodies or satire in the portrayal, even distorting the narrative to maintain the elevated status of the characters. Elements of queerness, as documented in Chapter

Four, have been repeatedly left out of the various characters' narratives to maintain a certain image of the character that conforms to the majoritarian beliefs.

The impact of the medium of comics is evident in two categories—classic religious comics for children, and contemporary religious comics for adults. *Amar Chitra Katha* as a comic, extraordinarily falls in both these categories. The first category shows religion through its traditional message as presented in its time. The comics designed for the religious education of children depict the ideals of organised religion as well as mirror the surrounding culture of the time. *Amar Chitra Katha*, although depicts religious figures and characters, does not market itself as a religious comic. It adheres to the ideals of Hinduism, mirrors the culture of the times while maintaining an apolitical stance. However, for its readers and certain organisations, *Amar Chitra Katha* is openly used as an object of worship and politics. The second category, comics for adults, is even more embedded in culture. Lived religion, instead of organised religion, is the core idea of the comics. These comics turn to the living religion, the evolving religion as a key part of the narrative and reflects a more personal approach to religion. It shows that the religious comic has come of age. While *Amar Chitra Katha* falls primarily to the first category, it is interesting to note that due to Anant Pai's contribution to the comics, the comics also reflect personal religion. For example, as explored in Chapter Three, when it came to the depiction of Krishna performing miracles, Pai had initially decided to omit these from the portrayal in order to present the narrative of Krishna as a real-life character. However, as his opinions changed after seeing the perception of the comics as an object of reverence, he included the episodes of the miracles in later reprints. Hence, while *Amar Chitra Katha* portrays organised religion in its ideal state, it also alludes to Pai's personal lived religion.

Thus, comics participate in, and influence lived religion. Lived religion is also living religion and open to change and transformations. Comics can help bring forth traditions as well as portray the evolving culture. *Amar Chitra Katha* can be considered a classic in depicting traditions and its surrounding culture but has failed to depict certain religious, gender, and sexual minorities in its reprints. This thesis has presented some of the varieties of religious expression in comics. However, both the production and impact of comics deserve greater attention. Questions like how production work within the religious field does? How are religious comics produced?

and how does the interplay between religious or secular publishers operate need to be investigated further. Future studies may also demonstrate tensions within religious fields directed toward maintaining traditions or depicting the changing landscape of India through comics. Much can be learned about cultural sociology from comics. This thesis has tried to answer the questions (among others)—what is reflected in comics like *Amar Chitra Katha*? How do comics affect society and how does reading comics affect society? What are the manipulations in comics like *Amar Chitra Katha* with reference to gender and sexual minorities?

II. Encountering Religion

In societies where religion is not controlled by religious institutions, a type of religious presence is the existence of religion as pure faith. However, with mediatization, religion is involved in advertisements, games, movies, documentaries, political campaigns, and comics. *Amar Chitra Katha* claims that the religious undertones in its narrative are not unimportant, but their production and reception is not determined by religious motives. The comics are made by artists who operate out of pure faith and without any mandate from religious authorities, and they are published by commercial publishing houses. They are intended to be considered entertainment or art, not instruments of religious education, although they are likely to teach and inspire worship. No matter what effect they have, they are important means of encountering the religious culture, if only because of their wide popularity.

The *Amar Chitra Katha* series contributes immensely to the existence of religion in popular culture, and beyond the boundaries of religious communities, it is regarded as an attractive and befitting introduction to the faith. It is through mythological comics like *Amar Chitra Katha* that people, the secular and the agnostic, encounter the religious (Herbert, 2012, 90; Meyer and Moors, 2006, 16-19). As elaborated in the thesis, in Chapter Three and Four, the *Amar Chitra Katha* series plays a huge role for religious introduction during a child's formative years. In many school curriculums, the *Amar Chitra Katha* books are used instead of the recommended schoolbooks and these books are also a popular gift choice for children living abroad and not familiar with traditional Hinduism.

The chapters in this thesis have highlighted how the medium of comics influences the portrayal of religion. The format of traditional western-style comics promotes a

protagonist who saves the day through their extraordinary problem-solving skills and powers. The *Amar Chitra Katha* series emulates this style but changes it to fit the Indian context. Gods become superheroes. This allows the image of the character to appear even more holy and godly. The eye-catching style of portraying Gods as superheroes attracts the target audience easily but also forms a distorted idea of Hinduism in their mind as they begin to believe the narrative of *Amar Chitra Katha* as the truth.

Religion can appear in comics as the object of ridicule or can be portrayed in all its complexity, bringing forth these reactions sometimes in the same comic. Thus, a religious comic can be both represented or criticized, it can both inspire and appal. The *Amar Chitra Katha* series is a perfect example of that. For years, *Amar Chitra Katha* has been both admired and criticized by fans and researchers respectively. The way religion is presented says much about the subject being represented as well as the culture from which it springs. Thus, comics also present readers with familiar religious and cultural elements and re-present it to them. Other than children, the *Amar Chitra Katha* series is widely popular among adults too for this reason. It not only presents familiar characters and narratives to adults who have heard of them since childhood but re-presents them in a different format that is both fun and seemingly informative. Comics, hence, mirrors culture, including religion.

This thesis tries to point out how readers consider comics to be merely easy-reads or only know about them through experience or hearsay and through that they evaluate these references. It also explores how these references influence people's perception of religion. There is also several promising avenues for future research of comics as a part of networks in which meanings, artefacts, persons, and institutions interact.

III. Making Religion

Comics are not only a means of encountering the religious or practicing pre-existing religions, but they also produce something that closely resembles religion. *Amar Chitra Katha*, for instance, produces a brand of Hinduism that may appear to be very closely related to the religion but presents a distorted narrative of many of its mythological characters. Not only for worship but comics are also used for various social functions related to the art of practicing religion—ritualization, finding meaning, sacralization, and imagining narratives that provide answer for the various

conundrums and dilemmas of everyday life, thus giving the reading of comics an existential dimension. Arjuna, in *The Gita*, for instance, raises many such questions that teaches someone how to be an ideal human being and warrior (Fig. 7.2). Through the words of Krishna, these questions are answered. Reading these words in the comic hence provides a similar existential effect. Although in a comic format, the propagation of divine wisdom happens in connection with religion.



Fig.7.2: Krishna and Arjuna talk in *The Gita*

Not only characters, but comics can contribute to sacralising pilgrimage sites, meanings, and places too. There are titles of *Amar Chitra Katha* based on the origins, mythology and significance of religious places and holy sites and their meanings like *Jagannath of Puri* (Fig. 7.3), *Tripura* (Fig. 7.4), *Elephanta* (Fig. 7.5), *Vaishno Devi* (Fig. 7.6), *Thanjavur* (Fig. 7.7), and *Konark* (Fig. 7.8) among others. This sacralization goes hand in hand with the realisation that the narrative portrayed is fiction. In fact, in spite of it being fiction, the comics taken an exalted holy status for portraying the subject.



Fig.7.3:Jagannatha of Puri



Fig. 7.4: Tripura

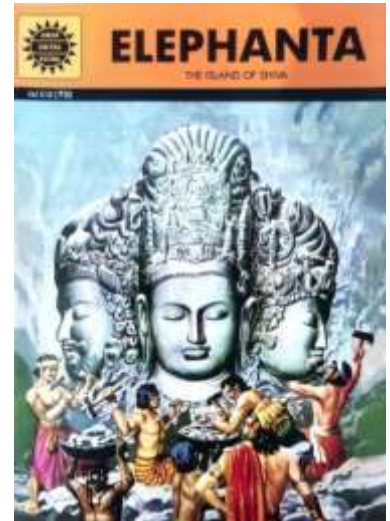


Fig.7.5: Elephanta



Fig.7.6: Vaishno Devi

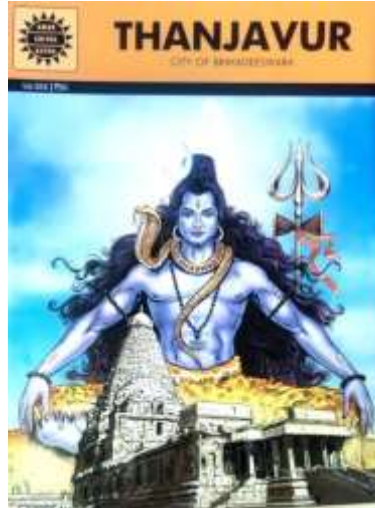


Fig.7.7: Thanjavur

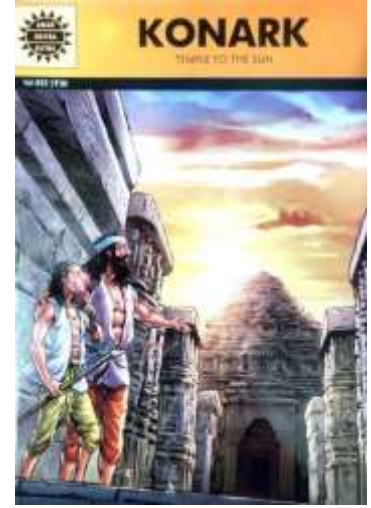


Fig.7.8: Konark

The way people process and perceive Indian comics is a subject that has not been researched enough yet. It begs the question if there are any other means by which these cultural artefacts are received by those who are not just consumers? As documented in the thesis, the spectrum of *Amar Chitra Katha* ranges from art, entertainment, fandom to religion. It used to publish western classics before moving on to Indian mythology and taking a religious stance. Future research intends to explore how producers and audience interact (if they do) and how that interaction affects the comics. As elaborated in the earlier chapters, *Amar Chitra Katha* attempts to influence the attitude and responses of the audience either by promoting reverence through organizing events in the real world or by transforming or manipulating the narrative of a popular character. The material appearance of a book also speaks a lot about the response it generates and receives (Kashtan, 2018, 11; Tinker, 2007, 1169-1182). For example, the title page of *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* shows the titular character with a halo around his head. On the other hand, the title page of *The Pandavas In Hiding- Outwiting a Wily Enemy* show a popular character in a comical position. The former would induce emotions of devotion and faith while the latter would induce humour (Fig. 7.9 and 7.10).



Fig.7.9: *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* Fig.7.10: *The Pandavas In Hiding- Outwiting a Wily Enemy*

The study of comics thus mean that readers could benefit from concepts and approaches developed from the study of believers and practitioners of religion.

IV. Imagined Faith

There are three ways in which the role of comics in the contemporary religion can be studied. These three ways correspond to three categories in the audience (Ammerman, 2007, 192). Firstly, comics demonstrate how practitioners of religion practice the imaginative aspect of religion, that is, how they envision their gods and saints, how they read the sacred stories, how they visit sacred places based on it. Since *Amar Chitra Katha* is a written medium, it relies on the imagination of the reader to put its message across. The religion created from these texts hence becomes an imagined religion, one that is different from what may be written in the sacred texts. Secondly, comics as cultural artefacts allow the readers to encounter the visual imagery and textual traditions of various religions. It cannot be denied that for many, especially for Hindu Indians living abroad or for people from other religions, *Amar Chitra Katha* provides a rudimentary insight into Hinduism. While its narrative might be alienating for certain sections of society, its impact in creating an idea of Hinduism among the population cannot be denied. Comics can be considered to be part of the artistic tradition in religions. They make up the world of imagined faith, together with paintings, tapestries, statues, and calligraphic work (Meyer, 2012, 25).

Thirdly, when people from inside or outside a religion follow a similar pattern of developing rituals, crafting patterns of meaning, or imaginary new symbolic universes, they are united along the same strand by sharing the same imagined faith. The readers of *Amar Chitra Katha* are, through sharing the same universe of imagined faith, united through the idea of Hinduism created by *Amar Chitra Katha*. They all believe in the same narratives as propagated by *Amar Chitra Katha* and they all indulge in the same existential repercussions of the texts. While this unites all the readers of *Amar Chitra Katha* on the same plane, it takes away from the actual religious diversity of Hinduism. Not only Hinduism, but reading the same texts creates new plausibility structure, connecting and uniting people who are into comics. Thus comics, like TV, cinema, literature, concerts, music, games, and festivals can be a part of fiction-based religion (Cusack, 2016, 1-16; Davidson, 2014, 16-45).

V. Summary of the Thesis and Key Observations

In this section, I would like to reflect on the chapters of this thesis and key observations gained from the same. I would also discuss the scope for future research

in the field. The Introduction chapter endeavours to explore the definition of myth. It explores the theory of Joseph Campbell to elaborate on the role of myth, its functions, and relevance in contemporary times. The study of myths can be an exciting, enriching, and life-nourishing subject and this section attempts to observe how myths are necessary in everyday life and can be transformative for a society. Religious pluralism and diversity is important when it comes to the study of myths, especially for countries where religion and myths overlap, such as Hinduism. The chapter then explores the meta-reality of *karma*, *dharma*, and *moksha*—the three pillars of Hinduism. Delving deep into the definitions of *dharma* and *adharma* and how the balance between these forms the plane for all Hindu beliefs and mythologies. Hindu mythology believes every living organism has divine potential and hence every relationship is sacred. Same-sex love flourished in pre-colonial India and the chapter maps the trajectory of how homophobia came to be introduced in Indian culture. It also maps the existence of homosexuality through multiple sacred texts. The chapter then locates the need to study Hindu texts with relation to gender and sexual variations in contemporary times. In order to do so, it draws on the theories of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Ruth Vanita, and Monique Wittig. Bringing the point of interest to popular culture, especially literature, the chapter maps how certain works of literature like the *Amar Chitra Katha* has remained elusive to gender and sexual minorities. It presents in brief the biasness of *Amar Chitra Katha* in its publications, and justifies why the Mahabharata is an ideal text for the study of the same. The chapter then delves into the various texts that have been used to study this discrepancy between *Amar Chitra Katha* and the Mahabharata. To do this the chapter recognised the various tropes through which the boundaries of gender and sexuality were broken in ancient texts, and how these representations began to be misconstrued and misused in the modern period. It locates the role of *Amar Chitra Katha* in purporting this misconstrued representation and identifies the research gap that this thesis is attempting to address. The chapter then highlights the objectives of the research, the methods that were used to achieve the same, and the limitations encountered while conducting the study. It also provides a brief outline of the next chapters. The Introduction sets the tone of the thesis and firmly locates it in its genre, creating a base for the next chapters to follow.

The second chapter begins by introducing one of the primary texts of the chapter—the *Kamasutra*. The chapter tries to break the western notion of the *Kamasutra* being considered as an erotic sex manual, and delves into the text to get a better understanding of gender and sexual identities in ancient India. The text documents the lives of people who identified as queer in ancient India including recognising the various categories of gender and sexuality. The third sex or *tritya prakriti* communities were greatly respected and revered during that time and were protected under ancient Indian laws. The chapter provides an outline of the lives led by people in these communities. It then documents the various categories of gender and sexuality in ancient India as mentioned in the *Kamasutra*. The chapter also refers to various other texts like the *Dharma Shastras*, the *Artha Shashtras*, and the *Manusmriti* to document the laws regarding the third sex communities in ancient India. It traces the acceptance of these communities not only in the *shashtras* but in sacred texts such as the *Puranas* and other texts too. It does so through the stories of celebrated and revered gods who have queer narratives or aspects to their characters. Not only the stories, the chapter also records the places where the queer forms of these gods are worshipped in order to depict how revered these forms are within certain communities. The chapter also documents the story of Virata, the story of an ally, as an integral part of the narrative. The final section of the chapter follows the reception and representation of the *Kamasutra* in post-colonial India. It traces the other translations of the *Kamasutra* in post-colonial India and how its contents differ from the original. Notable in this section are the translations by Pandit Madhavacharya and N.N. Bhattacharya. The chapter documents how the distorted translation of the *Kamasutra* by these authors negatively affects the reception of the text. The chapter tries to put forward how a text that celebrated gender and sexual diversity and freedom in ancient India, has been misconstrued and made derogatory by certain translators in post-colonial India, thus affecting the representation of these communities. It also harps on the need to re-read and re-contextualise these texts and maintain their originality in the readaptations. The chapter also endeavours to put forth the representation of queer narratives in ancient sacred texts through the stories of revered gods shedding light on the acceptance of these narrative in many places across India.

The third chapter of the thesis opens by drawing the reader's attention to this politics of distortion and misrepresentation in the adaptations of the sacred texts, especially mythological comic books. The chapter then introduces the primary subject of this chapter—the *Amar Chitra Katha*. Comparing the comics to its predecessor American comics, the chapter marks how *Amar Chitra Katha* created a benchmark for itself in the comic book genre in India. Starting from the history of the creation of this comic, the chapter follows how the *Amar Chitra Katha* became a crucial part of people's middle-class and religious identity. In the 1980s-1990s, the definition of Hinduism began to be debated upon and re-established in Indian society. This played a pivotal role in how the *Amar Chitra Katha* series was branded to the public. Although, readers actively rejected the existence of any political agendas in the comic books, they also agreed that the books helped reinforce their religious beliefs. The chapter marks how the series took the form of a revered status for its audience with the pages depicting gods even being used for ritual worship in some households. Thus, the chapter observes how these comics were not mere books but could be considered to be cultural artefacts and powerful resources for people's national and religious identity. However, to map the biasness of the series, it was necessary to dig deeper into its origins. The second section of the chapter delves into the life of the maker of the series—Anant Pai. It traces how the series came to be through Pai's efforts and how much has Pai's own philosophies and beliefs contributed into making the series what it is today. The chapter does so by tracing the trajectory of the first issue—Krishna; its making, popularity, and impact on the audience. The chapter then chronicles how the series was advertised and the effect the manner of advertising had on the minds of the readers. The advertising of *Amar Chitra Katha* was a huge success until the advent of television after which it saw a sharp decline. In a bid to recapture their old popularity, *Amar Chitra Katha* was rebranded. However, *Amar Chitra Katha* has maintained its biasness even after its rebranding. Thus, this section of the chapter observes how Pai's own understanding of a modern Hindu aligns with dominant discourses of religion and nation. The final section of this chapter documents the profound and continuing legacy of *Amar Chitra Katha*. It documents the series's attempts at breaking its formulaic pattern of creating heroes, in vain and then revert to its original content. This section of the chapter also explores the impact and popularity of *Amar Chitra Katha* among the Indian diaspora living abroad. The *Amar Chitra Katha* phenomenon greatly impacted these communities, to the extent

that it began to create a new definition of Hinduism for them. Although *Amar Chitra Katha* has faced negative feedback from certain communities, and has been a subject of many debates for various researchers, it has mostly risen unopposed and undebated among the larger audience. Its influence upon the middle-class audience has been profound. Criticism of *Amar Chitra Katha* has given rise to other works that either satirize it or differ from it exponentially. However, none of these works have gained as much popularity or stood the test of time as *Amar Chitra Katha* has, making it one of the most influential comic series in Indian literature. Thus, the chapter observes how the legacy of *Amar Chitra Katha* has carried forth in its issues and so has its biasness towards certain communities and minorities of India.

The fourth chapter of the thesis tries to understand this biasness further by comparing *Amar Chitra Katha's Mahabharata* with Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of the Mahabharata titled *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*. The chapter introduces the various tropes and patterns that emerge in ancient Indian writing with regards to representation of gender and sexuality which will be further investigated in the chapter. It refers back to some of the concepts learnt in the earlier chapters like the concept of gender and sexuality as it existed in the ancient Indian literature and the biasness of *Amar Chitra Katha* and then connects these concepts to investigate the politics of omission and distortion in *Amar Chitra Katha* better. It also provides an introduction to the Mahabharata and to several concepts used in the research conducted in this chapter such as gender bending, gender blending, and de-gendering. After establishing the major concepts used in this chapter, it moves on to analysing the various characters of the Mahabharata through the queer lens. The chapter analyses the characters of Krishna, Shikhandi, Brihannala, Mohini, Chitrangada, and Bhishma Pitamaha in details as it is presented in *Amar Chitra Katha* and Kisari Mohan Ganguli's *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*. The analysis goes beyond mere comparison in places and delves into the other queer aspects of the characters such as the possibility of a queerplatonic relationship between Krishna and Arjuna, in order to flesh the characters as gender-fluid and openly queer. The chapter ends by addressing how the Mahabharata openly advocated and believed in the universality and multiplicity of gender. The chapter observes through its comparative analysis how *Amar Chitra Katha* distorts its narrative in portraying queer characters, thus marking the biasness of *Amar Chitra Katha* as discussed in previous chapters.

The final chapter of the thesis points at the interplay between comics and religion. It does so by exploring the role religious comics play in doing religion, encountering religion, and making religion. *Amar Chitra Katha* does religion by passively participating in and influencing lived religion. It depicts traditions, rituals, stories, among others which influence people into giving it a revered and holy status. The comic series can also be a means for people to encounter the religious as for many people like Indian living abroad, *Amar Chitra Katha* is their introduction to Hinduism. All their knowledge of Hinduism comes from the comic series. Finally, by creating its own narrative of Hindu stories, the series is also responsible for making religion for certain communities. Thus, the *Amar Chitra Katha* series creates a fictional religion, an ‘Imagined Faith’, for people who are unacquainted with the original sacred texts. Alienation from the narrative of *Amar Chitra Katha*, for queer communities, hence, is not only alienation from a culturally iconic and highly influential literature but also from religious acceptance. The chapter also provides a summary of the thesis and key observations gained from the same.

VI. Scope for Future Research

The study of Hindu mythology is a vast subject. *Amar Chitra Katha* has played a key role in bringing forth a portion of this subject to the public. However, a lot more discrepancies exist in *Amar Chitra Katha*’s wide plethora of comic books. Future research shall endeavour to take a deeper dive in analysing the role *Amar Chitra Katha* plays in manipulating the religious perspective in society. It shall observe how the comic series has continued to change the landscape of religion in India through some of its new and upcoming titles. It might also attempt to look into some of the characters from other adaptations by *Amar Chitra Katha*. New avenues for research in this field can pave the path for new discourses of gender and sexual freedom leading to a more gender sensitive society. Future research shall, hence, endeavour to explore all these new territories.