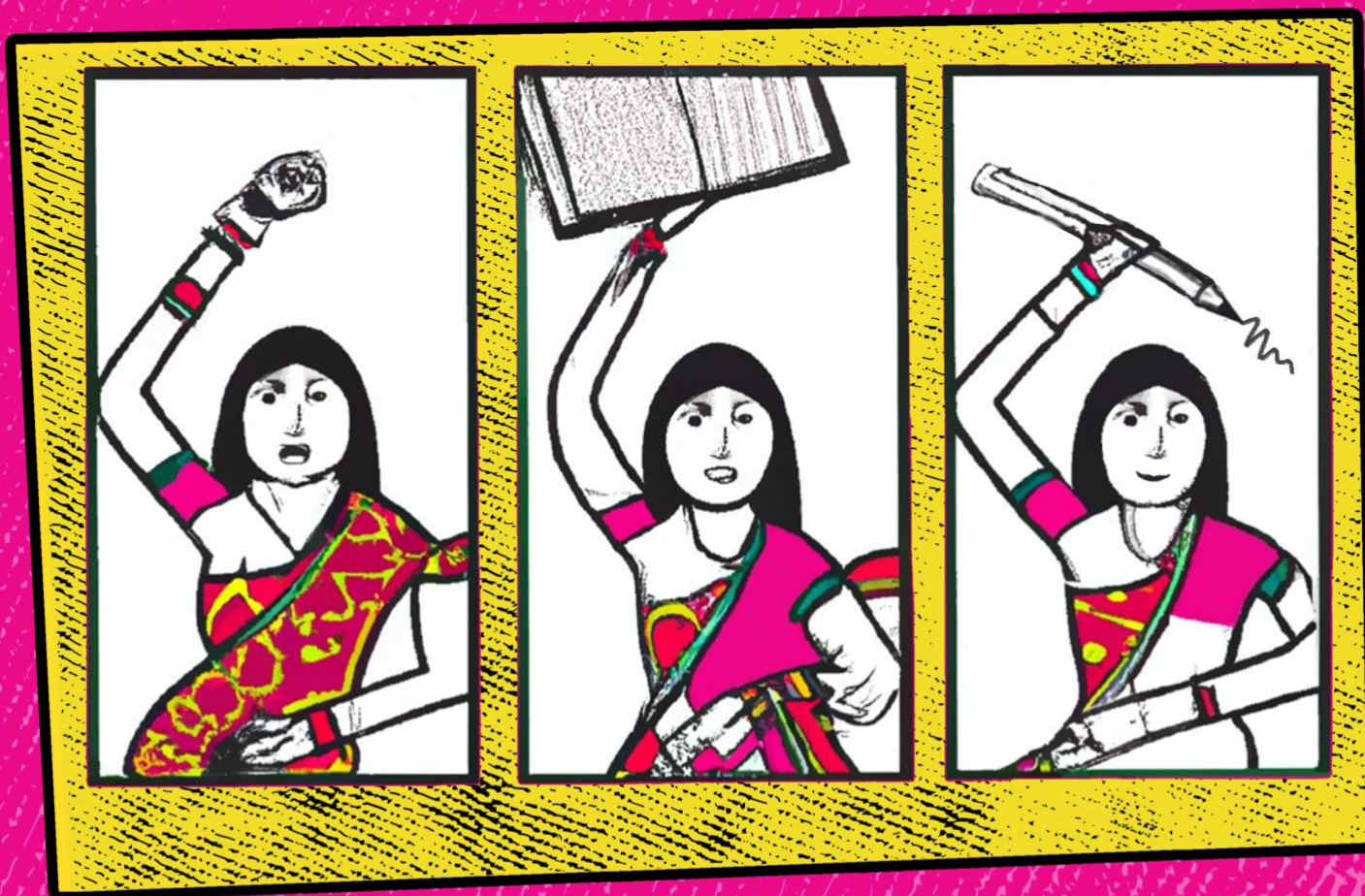


GENDER POLITICS AND NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS

Políticas de género y nacionalismo
en novelas gráficas y cómics indios contemporáneos



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Novels and Comics*

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Programa de Doctorado: Lenguas y Culturas



UNIVERSIDAD DE CÓRDOBA

Tesis Doctoral

**Gender Politics and Nationalism in Contemporary
Indian Graphic Novels and Comics**

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gráficas y cómics indios contemporáneos**

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- *Febrero 2023* -



TÍTULO DE LA TESIS: Políticas de género y nacionalismo en novelas gráficas y cómics indios contemporáneos.

DOCTORANDA: Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

INFORME RAZONADO DE LA DIRECTORA DE LA TESIS

La Tesis Doctoral de Dña. Raisa Serrano se desarrolla dentro del propósito de poner en valor, dentro del panorama de la literatura escrita en lengua inglesa, a autoras indias contemporáneas (no residentes en la diáspora) que usan el formato de la novela gráfica y del cómic para contar historias de opresión por condición de género, casta, clase y sexualidad, pero también de resistencia y liberación.

A la presente aproximación crítica del corpus seleccionado, le acompaña un enfoque metodológico actual basado en los conceptos más novedosos de la cuarta ola del feminismo y los estudios visuales; así como un extenso recorrido por el contexto político-social en torno a los feminismos del subconsciente asiático y la influencia del nacionalismo hindú en la configuración de la identidad de la mujer india.

Entre los resultados obtenidos, destaca la originalidad de la doctoranda al concluir que las autoras proponen un paso más allá de la violencia interseccional. Su análisis muestra cómo los personajes no mantienen su subalternidad al acoger su vulnerabilidad y resistir la resiliencia, no para sobrevivir sino para transformar su realidad. Las entrevistas incluidas en el apéndice apoyan este enfoque novedoso.

Las conclusiones significativas obtenidas en esta Tesis Doctoral pueden abrir el camino para tender puentes entre la teoría y la práctica, al proporcionar información de relevancia sobre jóvenes artistas y la situación de las mujeres en India, así como para ayudar en la toma de decisiones políticas y estratégicas relativas al estudio de la migración y la violencia de género por parte de las autoridades y agentes implicados. Por todo ello, se autoriza la presentación de la Tesis Doctoral.

Córdoba, 10 de febrero de 2023.

“Por mucho que sople el viento, una montaña no puede inclinarse ante él”

Mulán.

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These acknowledgements reflect my gratitude to those who have contributed to my growth and development as a researcher and have been a constant source of support and motivation throughout my journey.

Dedicatoria

Me gustaría comenzar dedicando mi tesis doctoral a las tres personas más importantes de mi vida: mi padre, mi madre y mi hermano. Mi padre Jesús, y a mi madre Rafaela, me han brindado amor cada día de mi vida, desde que nací, sin pedir nada a cambio. Papá y mamá, sois los referentes de mi vida y los pilares de mi corazón. A mi hermano Jesús, por su constante apoyo y empatía a todos los niveles.

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Resumen

Esta tesis doctoral está motivada por la investigación de la producción académica sobre cómo las mujeres han sido representadas en el discurso nacionalista de *hindutva* y por el análisis de cómo ciertas autoras de la cuarta ola del feminismo en la India están respondiendo. El movimiento feminista está impulsando a académicos y artistas independientes a abolir los estándares patriarcales predominantes en la India, respondiendo y brindando enfoques alternativos en sus publicaciones a las identidades pre-establecidas. El corpus seleccionado, novelas gráficas y cómics publicados en internet, es una muestra de cambio hacia un nuevo paradigma que contraataca el discurso promulgado por *hindutva*.

El presente estudio de investigación está conformado por el análisis de tres novelas gráficas: *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) de Durgabai Subhash Vyam, *Kari* (2008) de Amruta Patil y *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) de Sowmya Rajendran y Niveditha Subramaniam; y por tres cómics: *Priya's Mirror* (2016) de Paromita Vohra et al., *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) de Priya Kuriyan et al. (una antología dividida en catorce comics) y *Royal Existentials* (2014) de Aarthi Parthasarathy y Chaitanya Krishnan.

A través de un recorrido por la historia del país en su construcción de la nación en relación con las premisas de género y casta, por todas las fases del movimiento de mujeres en India y el papel que juegan las nuevas tecnologías en el movimiento social y producción creativa, esta tesis doctoral expone las bases para dar paso a un análisis temático, contextualizado del corpus seleccionado. Exponer la vulnerabilidad de las mujeres y transformarla en resiliencia, crecer a través de historias de sanación y resistir en su defensa por una sociedad mejor son los principales métodos que se hacen eco en el corpus analizado en esta disertación. La originalidad de misma reside en el abordaje de los temas sociales contemporáneos a la presente investigación en una obra escasamente estudiada, y la inclusión de una serie de entrevistas con las autoras de las obras seleccionadas que complementan y apoyan los argumentos de esta tesis doctoral.

Palabras clave: nacionalismo hindú, *hindutva*, movimiento de mujeres indias, novelas gráficas, cómic independiente

Abstract

This Ph.D. dissertation is motivated by the research of the academic production about how women have been represented within the nationalist discourse of Hindutva, and by the analysis of how certain women writers belonging to the fourth wave of Indian feminism are talking back. The feminist movement is driving scholars, independent artists, and writers to abolish the predominant patriarchal standards in India, responding to and providing alternative approaches in their publications to pre-conceived identities. The selected corpus, graphic novels and comics published online, is a sample of the new paradigm that is been artistically created as a countercurrent response to the ideology promoted by *hindutva*.

The selected corpus consists of three graphic novels: *Bhimayana: Experiences Of Untouchability* (2011) by Durgabai Subhash Vyam, *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil, and *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam, and three comics: *Priya's Mirror* (2016) by Paromita Vohra et al., *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) by Priya Kuriyan et al. (an anthology of fourteen comics) and *Royal Existentials* (2014) by Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan.

By means of an overview of the history of India in the construction of the nation regarding gender and caste issues, of all the waves of the Indian women's movements, and the important role that new technologies play in the social movement and creative production, this Ph.D. dissertation provides the founts for a thematic analysis of the contextualised corpus. Exposing women's vulnerability and transforming it to resilience, learning through healing stories and resisting in their defense of the movement for a better society are the main methods echoed in the corpus analysed in this dissertation. The originality of this research relays on the approach towards the social contemporary topics discussed in a fiction that has scarcely been studied, and the incorporation of interviews with the authors of the corpus, which complement and inform the arguments of this dissertation.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, *hindutva*, Indian women's movements, graphic novels, independent comics.

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Introduction

South Asian literature written by women has been described as showing strong opposition toward pre-conceived ideals of what it means to be an Indian woman. Consequently, issues related to nationalism and feminism coincide in the ongoing debate about Indianness, which started in the 19th century due to the encounter with the British Empire. This dissertation is entitled *Gender Politics and Nationalism in Contemporary Indian Graphic Novels and Comics*. It deals with contemporary feminist graphic narratives published by South Asian women authors in response to the nationalist ideology influenced by *Hindutva*¹ for the purpose of shaping a conservative society.

In our dissertation, we will focus on the literary response to the notion of Indianness by examining the works of contemporary Indian women writers who use comics and graphic novels as a channel of expression. These authors include the following: Chaitanya Krishnan, Priya Kuriyan, Aarthi Parthasarathy, Amruta Patil, Sowmya Rajendran, Niveditha Subramaniam, Paromita Vohra and Durgabai Vyam. Through their works, we will explore how these writers convey their discomfort and demands regarding the current social and political situation in India. We will delve into their creative process and the messages they aim to express through their art. The dissertation aims to provide a deeper understanding of the literary response to nationalism and to discuss the role of comics and graphic novels in raising awareness regarding important social and political issues.

Neo-Hinduization can be defined as a way of imposing the revival of Hindu nationalism in India that started in the 1980s and continued as a result of the 2014 victory of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party² in the Lok Sabha elections. The word has been used to describe the emergence of the BJP and *Hindutva* movement due to the growing popularity of Hindu nationalism and the resurgence of Hinduism as a political and social force in India. Neo-Hinduization has emerged in response to the social changes instituted

¹ According to D. S. Reddy, *Hindutva* is “a phenomenon that shapes everything from national security to gender, science and economics to secularism and identities in diaspora. It is organically linked to Hinduism, though the nature of its relationship to religious practice remains indefinite. Its politics are strategic, calculating, instrumentalist, troubling, polarizing, and seem routinely to precipitate intense debate, at best, rioting and violence, at worst” (439).

² Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the political right-wing Indian party, which promotes *Hindutva* ideology.

during the twentieth century in India, such as the growing assertiveness of Muslims and Christians, the abolition of the caste system, or the recognition of women's rights, to name just a few.

Although not in the mainstream, many independent authors have found a safe haven, thanks to the South Asian feminist movement, where they can raise their voices against the nationalist discourse of neo-Hinduization, depicting and writing about daily situations experienced by women. Therefore, in order to reveal the gender structured functioning of contemporary authoritarianism in the cultural sphere, this dissertation focuses on the discursive and visual constructions of gender, caste and sexuality in graphic narratives.

Graphic novels and comics are a format that has been effectively used to deal with social issues related to misogyny, politics, economy, and social behaviour in several ways. The narratives analysed in the corpus include seven Indian graphic novels: *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Durgabai Subhash Vyam; *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil; *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam. The corpus also includes three comics: *Priya's Mirror* (2016) by Paromita Vohra et al.; *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) by Priya Kuriyan et al. (a graphic novel divided into fourteen comics); and *Royal Existentials* (2014) by Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan. All these graphic narratives expose the problems women face when they want to escape from traditional conventions and the violence they face when challenging established social norms, including those of a political nature. The stories take a critical look at the social structures and processes that support gender-based violence as they follow women who strive to discover their voices in a patriarchal society. Our analysis is focused on women's ability to endure and thrive in the face of hardship, with examples of resilience and resistance.

The dissertation has three main objectives. The first is to outline the scholarly literature on how women have been portrayed historically by the nationalist movement and contemporary *Hindutva* discourse, incorporating an overview of the historical and social milestones in India. The second aim is to analyse how gender is aesthetically depicted in popular culture with regard to what is suggested, dictated, or implied about gender roles through nationalist discourse. The third objective is to reveal how Indian artists and writers construct countercurrent gender representation against the dominant discourse of *Hindutva*, thereby changing the status quo of neo-Hinduization

This interdisciplinary study achieves its goals by interconnecting disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, political science, visual studies, and literature. Scholar Radha Kumar, in her work *The History of Doing* (1993), and professor of Political Science Nivedita Menon's *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), provide the background for research on the feminist movement in India. This overview will be rounded out with the support of *Hindú. Nacionalismo religioso y política en la India contemporánea* (2004) by Eva Borreguero, which will enrich the identification of the patriarchal power dynamics of textual and visual reconstructions of Aryan history. Edward Said's critique of oriental discourse will also be considered by other postcolonial theorists. We will analyse the corpus in light of concepts such as vulnerability, resilience, resistance, memory, healing, solidarity, and social justice. This dissertation has been carried out in four stages: research on the contextualisation of the corpus; a gathering of qualitative data through in-depth readings of primary and secondary sources; critical analysis of the data collected; and depiction and reporting on countercurrent literary work.

Textual and visual analysis will be conducted to show the complexities of the use and manipulation of history in constructing gender identity, which serves patriarchal state authority. In addition, the research has involved extensive reading in order to identify topics that promote the nationalist and conservative rhetoric of the state; media research to identify popular imageries that target society; bibliographic research for corpus selection on the intellectual responses to neo-Hinduization; bibliographic search for secondary resources; and comprehension of the collected data and assimilation of theory, as well as textual and visual analysis of primary sources. The qualitative analysis of primary sources includes understanding the illustrations and their depiction in literary and cultural research, which involves studying specific aspects of each narrative and applying the theoretical framework to each critical analysis.

The dissertation is divided into two parts. The first chapter introduces a theoretical background to contextualise the subsequent depiction and analysis, which is divided into three main points. The first point is an overview of the history of *Hindutva*, as it is the current doctrine proposed by the BJP, which is impacting society, popular culture, the nationalist movement, and the caste system. The second point deals with the Indian Women's Movement as a response to the nationalist campaign. The third point approaches visual studies focused on graphic novels and comics, including the portrayal of women's roles in these new formats in India. At this point, the role of women in Indian

society will be analysed in order to contextualise contemporary feminist graphic narratives. The theoretical framework, which describes the state of the issue, concludes with an introduction of the authors and their literary works.

The second part of this dissertation includes the depiction and analysis of six Indian graphic narratives, which illustrate modern Indian society from the perspective of women as protagonists. The section is organised according to different topics: violence against Indian women, pointing out daily precarious situations suffered by the female characters with regard to caste exclusion, acid attacks, dowry, arranged marriages, gang rape, patriarchy, and the struggle for fairness. Also, women's resistance against oppression and alternative perspectives outside the established conventions of lifestyle, paying attention to alternative sexuality, same-sex desire, retellings of mythology, women's emancipation, and education. Finally, we conclude by stating the importance of graphic narratives as an agent of social change, and reflecting on the need to confront the nationalist discourse in order to effect social change through graphic narratives written by South Asian women writers. This multitude of empowering depictions offer an alternative space against the normative structure, with the aim of promoting social change framed within the fourth wave of the South Asian feminist movement.

The appendix of this dissertation contains eight original interviews with the authors of some of the comics analysed in the corpus, including the following: Harini Kannan, Diti Mistry, Priyanka Kumar, Deepani Seth, Ita Mehrotra, Hemavathy Guba, Angela Ferrao, and Samidha Gunjal. These women discuss the current social situation in India, their background as artists, and how they express their awareness and concerns in their work and on social networks, and the interviews we conducted with them inform and support the arguments of our analysis.

Part I. State of the Art

Chapter 1. *Hindutva*, Nationalism, and the Caste System

Throughout human history, India has been a key country because of its wealth of minerals, textiles, spices and even its location. The British Empire realised its importance in supplying Europe with products, as reported by the Indian politician and writer Shashi Tharoor (20). The origins of the East India Company can be traced back to its incorporation by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600. The company was established to trade in silk, spices, and other profitable Indian goods. To pursue its trade objectives, the company established factories and outposts along the Indian coast. Due to the establishment of British commerce at strategic points in the country, they started to support English people who settled there. By sending soldiers on the basis of Tharoor, the East India Company's expansion into Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay led to the need for military defence of its factories, personnel and trade. This involved recruiting soldiers in an increasingly unstable land, and as a result, the company's operations evolved from being purely commercial to one of conquest (20). Its trading posts were reinforced with forts, and armies replaced merchants. This transformation was driven by the need to protect the company's interests and control over the valuable resources in India.

British mariner William Hawkins of the East India Company spent part of his life trying to get permission to establish trade with England in Agra. In 1615, "Thomas Roe presented his credentials at the court of the Mughal Emperor, Jehangir, where the Englishman was a supplicant at the feet of the world's mightiest and most opulent monarch" (Tharoor 20). At the beginning of the seventeenth century, The Mughal Empire (founded in 1526 by Babur) controlled much of South Asia. However "less than a century and a half later, this Mughal empire was in a state of collapse after the spectacular sacking of Delhi by Persian Nadir Shah in 1739, and the looting of all its treasures" (Tharoor 20). There were several battles. The Mughal Empire was subsequently reduced "at the start of the nineteenth century and the backing of the British government and Parliament extended its control over most of India" (Tharoor 21).

Spanish researcher and university teacher Eva Borreguero stated in her book *Hindú. Nacionalismo religioso y política en la India contemporánea*, published in 2004, that after colonisation, India was a heterogeneous country with "communities numbering up to 2,399, excluding the untouchable caste" (22), organised by power relations within each community. On the other hand, at the beginning of the colonial period, on the authority of Wolf, starting in the late 18th century Christian missionaries began to criticise

and attack a variety of Hindu practices, many of which targeted women. These missionaries published a large number of pamphlets and tracts addressed to the British government and public, providing graphic and detailed accounts of these practices in an attempt to influence opinion and legislation (31). Their main goal was to discredit and suppress these Hindu customs, which they considered "degenerate."

The British Empire depicted India as a hostile country and used these reports to enforce their values, education and culture. In 1835, the British published the English Education Act, or Macaulay's Act, entitled "Minute upon Indian Education", a law that allowed the British Parliament to invest funds in education in India, promoting the English educational system and language. As The British Empire considered Indians to be wild, they provided the "politics necessary to illuminate the awakening of national awareness that fought against the power which engendered it. The Anglo-Saxons established an organisational model that contrasted what they considered chaos and native entropy" (Borreguero 37). For this reason, one of the missions of the British Raj was to promote and reform a new educational system with the opening of primary and secondary schools. Moreover, "Earlier suggestions or schemes for introducing compulsory primary education under the British Raj came from William Adam, Captain Wingate, and T. C. Hope" (Mondal 3). However, due to India's enormous size, no realistic projects could be funded by the British. It was not until 1870 that "a vigorous demand for laws to be enacted to make four years of primary education compulsory was declared by Dadabhai Naoroji and Jyotiba Phule of the Bombay Presidency in evidence presented before the Indian Education Commission, 1882" (Mondal 3). As Anderson states, "India was ruled by a commercial enterprise — not by a state, and certainly not by a nation-state" (90).

1.1. Deciphering *Hindutva*: Understanding Nationalism in India

Defining and searching for the epistemological roots of *Hindutva* is the starting point of this research. The word *Hindutva* does not have a direct translation into other languages. It is usually mistaken for Hinduism, yet there are large differences. The two terms were coined by the nationalistic ideologist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923 in his book "*Hindutva, Who Is a Hindu?*", a book which, according to Krishnamurti, turned Savarkar into "a vocal proponent of a Hindu-centric state, and supported militaristic defence of Hindu interests in response to his perception of an increasing Muslim threat" (118). The concept of Hinduism was created from the outsider's view, or in other words,

in Savakar's view Hinduism was used to describe the diverse religious practices of the indigenous people of India who did not adhere to Western beliefs. Savakar points out that "an 'ism' generally indicates a theory or code that is more or less based on a spiritual or religious dogma or system" (4). Following this reasoning, Smith attempted to define Hinduism sixty-four years after the term was first used. He defined it as the religion of people who use the authority of the Veda to "create, maintain, and change their traditions" (116-129).

Nevertheless, Smith acknowledges that his definition is still not perfect, and that scholarly discussions about the precise boundaries of Hinduism are likely to be ongoing. However, he sees his definition as a starting point for these discussions. Essentially, Smith asserts that the basis of Hinduism is the sacred collection of books called The Vedas³. Savarkar argues that *to comprehend the concept of Hindutva fully*, we must understand that it encompasses all aspects of Hindu people's lives, including their thoughts, beliefs, and actions. To fully comprehend the significance of this term, it is crucial to first understand the fundamental meaning of the word Hindu and how it has gained such a dominant influence over millions of people, earning their loyalty and admiration (4). As noted by Krishnamurti, Hindu nationalists have advocated a revisionist version of history, claiming that Hindus have always existed in the Indian subcontinent and were oppressed for centuries under Muslim rule. In current day India, those who support the Hindutva ideology are quick to denounce any scholars or politicians who do not support this historical narrative (8). The ideology of *Hindutva* has been promoted by a right-wing Hindu nationalist political party that seeks to define Indian culture in Hindu terms and spread Hindu values. The introduction of Savarkar's *Hindutva* in the nationalist debate created chaos, a *Manthan* (churning), which marginalised non-Hindus and women" (Vats108). The *Hindutva* ideology has exclusionary and discriminatory tendencies that promote Hindu supremacy and incite violence against minorities. According to Banaji, individuals who disagree with the narrative of Hindutva, especially high profile Hindus, are often labelled as traitors or pseudo secularists. Meanwhile, those who practice Hinduism but disagree with the narrative are silenced and persecuted (346). Despite being influenced by British oriental narratives, laws and strategies, Hindutva is a distinct

³ According to Michael Witzel, the word Veda is related to the English words *wit*, *witness*, the German word *wissen* and the Greek noun (*w*)*oida*. It implies holy wisdom. The Four Vedas, which contain religious and ritual poetry, ceremonies, and interpretations, are the oldest scriptures still in existence in India. Early philosophical concepts are also found in the later Vedic Upanishads (68)

postcolonial project to suppress, delegitimize, control, or eliminate various cultures and groups in India and neighbouring countries.

Furthermore, “Their nostalgia makes them seek a strong and ‘unified’ India that is proud of its (Hindu) traditions and heritage. He further states that if and when their demand for dual citizenship is granted, their ‘reintegration’ in India could certainly influence the identity politics within India itself” (Brar 11). It is partly a reaction to the perceived threat to Hindu values from secularism, socialism, and religious minorities—especially Muslims—in India. *Hindutva* puts the population in a quandary because its thoughts, “which dominate everyday life in India, are camouflaged in a rhetoric of pride and national security that is palatable to Western governments and audiences, and to the majority of the two hundred million-strong Indian (Hindu) middle class” (Banaji 334). Moreover, just for good measure there are groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which are operating, controlling and propagating the ideology of *Hindutva* in the streets. “In fact, a concerted campaign of infiltration into the structures of Indian political and civic life means that few municipal corporations, trade bodies, housing associations, legal networks, media outlets and educational organisations are free of RSS infiltrators in positions of authority” (Banaji 336).

Hindutva reinterprets Indian history according to its own preferences, elevating Hindu religion and mythology to the core of society. One of the conclusions of the research by N.K Wagle is that Hindu nationalists take advantage of the lack of identity felt by a large percentage of the population due to centuries of colonisation. Hindu nationalists leverage the fact that India's population has been inactive for decades in order to enlist the public's help in organising and mobilising support for their cause. The neo-Hinduization movement, on the other hand, has been blamed for promoting Hindu chauvinism and inflaming religious tensions in a secular country.

Ramasubramanian stated that “chronology is the backbone of history. For ancient India, the problem of a sound chronology continues to be a serious matter” (32), so we can infer that the historical events of India might not be clearly written in its popular culture in a conclusive way nor in chronological order. Moreover, “European scholars were becoming increasingly aware of the complexities of Indian culture due to their countries' colonial expansions in Asia. Many scholars, such as Kant and Herder, began to draw analogies between the myths and philosophies of ancient India and the West” (Shaffer 78), so it might be said that the compilation and interpretation of Indian history

by writers, travellers and British colonists, who started to compile their history from their Western views, is relatively modern; “Linguistic reconstructions were used to interpret archaeological materials, which in turn were used to substantiate the original cultural reconstructions. It was not until the mid-20th century that archaeological data were independently used to examine the validity of the Indo-Aryan concept” (Shaffer 81). Along these lines, we offer the following commentary:

The Indian has no historical sense; but the depreciation of history depends on the dominance of philosophic pessimism, [...] we cannot fully understand any of the undated literature of India without its environment, and until the Christian era, that environment was changing. These changes involve a chronology. (Smith 116)

As specified by Brevan and Hon, “before the first century of the Christian era, there are very few allusions in the literature and historical records of other nations that testify to the vigorous life of these southern kingdoms” (597). However, they claim that as in all Puranic literature, we find here a record of past events in the conventional form of prophecy. Consequently, Indian predecessors preferred to narrate the myths they considered the most important, which at the same time are the most well-known by the Western population. According to Salomon et al., there have been various instances in the past where scholars claimed to have found evidence of pre-Mauryan writing in sources that include later Vedic literature, the Pali canon, early Sanskrit grammatical treatises of Panini and his successors, and the works of European classical historians (271). However, these references are all subject to varying degrees of chronological or interpretive problems. As such, it is essential to approach these claims with caution and to carefully consider the potential issues and limitations associated with them. Despite these challenges, the ongoing search for evidence of pre-Mauryan writing remains an important area of study, as a better understanding of the origins and development of Indian writing systems can provide valuable insights into the history and culture of the region (Salomon et al.).

The notion of a chronological timeline in Indian history is different from that of the Western view, as the narrative text introduces Gods who can reincarnate themselves. Moreover, they create a hairspring through which they can come back and move closer to the Earth, where they meet with older and younger Gods, as portrayed in the myths of the Vedas in India. There has been a devotion to the veracity of the myths by the population as well as a common faith to the presence of living Gods. These ancient beliefs coexist with modern popular thoughts and new theories about their history. As shown by

Krishnamurti, the right-wing, Hindu nationalist politics of the ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), together with the different Hindu fundamentalist organisations affiliated with it, have revived communalism in India. Hindu nationalism, which is anti-Muslim and anti-secular, is gaining considerable support in India as well as among Indian diasporas overseas (112).

As they consider old myths the basis of their political party, the BJP government has taken advantage of the situation by adding the concept of modern progress, and being the dominant party, they have established *Hindutva* as their benchmark doctrine for the contemporary Indian population. As Krishnamurti has stated, in contemporary India the BJP and other Hindu nationalists are using the ideology and principles of the early Indian independence movement to further their own agenda. This manipulation of history is a form of ideological production. In today's world of advanced technology and mass communication, it can take on various subtle forms through diverse media formats (112). Savarkar retells the history of India, as he turns to mythology in order to explain historical facts and uses history in order to explain myths. For example, he employs the figure of Shahu Bhonsle, the fifth Chhatrapati of the Maratha Empire, who “had a controversial situation with Swami [the God of Sadasiva Brahmendra] on the following point: ‘What have I done, and what have you done to protect the Hindu Religion!’” (61). Indeed, he humanises a mythical divine figure and deifies the historical figure of an Indian emperor.

1.2. *Hindutva* and the Depiction of Women in Fiction

Nivedita Menon argues that feminism is not only about advocating women's rights, but also about recognising how modern societal norms and discourses shape individuals into being perceived as either “men” or “women”. Furthermore, feminism also encompasses an understanding of how class, caste and queer politics converge and complicate the concept of gender. In essence, feminism needs the acknowledgement that the category of a “women” is neither static nor unified (1).

The view of *Hindutva* as suppressed ideology hidden behind the publication of later works of arts, including literature, is crucial. For instance, in *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK), a series of educational comics by Anant Pai (an essential publication for understanding the history of Indian graphic narratives), women are often shown in subordinate roles in relation to men. According to Stoll, Pai's approach of basing comics on Indian heritage helped establish comics as a media format within Indian culture and

created national readership (317). Nevertheless, it has been observed by scholars and critics that the series exhibited a bias toward the Hindutva nationalist movement, which promotes Hinduism as the national religion and culture. This incorporation of religious themes and bias has been adopted by other comics, with many religious publishers now following suit, including the recent Sufi Comics of Islamic History and Tradition by the Vakil brothers, based in Bangalore (Stoll 317).

For example, in the comic “The Story of Savitri”, which can be found in the *Vana Parva* (pages 293-299), of *Mahabharata: Book of Forests*, the main character can only save her husband's life by making a deal with the God of Death and is ultimately dependent on him for her own happiness. This portrayal of women as secondary to men indicates a larger trend in the comics, which often depict women in traditional roles, such as wives and mothers, rather than more modern or progressive positions. This perpetuates a conservative view of Indian society, in which women are not seen as equal to men. It also reinforces harmful stereotypes about women, such as the idea that they are weak and dependent. However, this perspective implies a step backward in the development of India toward equality, as it might return the population to pre-constitutional conditions such as the caste system or the exclusion of women:

This reinvention of India through the lens of Hindutva is perceived as a threat by all minorities and underprivileged groups who fear its implications, and rightly so, for it serves to undermine the very idea of India, as envisaged by its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and his colleagues in the first Indian parliament who visualized it as an inclusive democracy, respectful of the rights of all its minorities. (Rajgopal 215)

On the other hand, “perhaps only in the post-Independence period, and especially since the 1960s, the traditional literary interpretation of women's role and status in society began to be seriously questioned” (R. Gupta 181). This has been due to the flourishing of countercurrent activists who have responded to the neo-nationalist movement, struggled to achieve women’s equality, and focused on a range of social issues, including fulfilling the population’s basic needs, educational issues, the caste system, discrimination, and violence, among others, in the country of India. Feminism applied to literature (R. Gupta 180) can take on two primary forms: firstly, it can involve a re-evaluation through the literature of the position and status of women in society and a new way of portraying women in literature that accurately depicts their individuality. Secondly, it can involve re-interpreting and re-evaluating past and present literary texts from a perspective that focuses on women.

The earliest recorded history of Indian women, as suggested by Forbes, stems from the 19th century and is a result of colonialism. British missionaries and Indian reformers helped usher in what they perceived as a new era of modern values and changing narratives surrounding women's roles. According to Forbes, “both European-inspired histories and the Indian texts they cited shared a belief in a unique female nature” (1). As attested by Beteille, “The advances achieved in women's studies in the last two decades have implications not only for a fuller understanding of the relations between the genders, but also for a deeper insight into the general problem of inequality, of which caste and race are two specific forms” (491). In the words of R. K. Gupta, “A truly heartening feature of the portrayal of women in modern Indian literature is that increasingly women are shown, not passively putting up with oppression and injustice, but actively resisting them with courage and determination, and often coming out victorious in the end” (187). This development was the foundation for the publication of the following graphic novels: *Bhimayana: Experiences Of Untouchability* (2011) by Durgabai Subhash Vyam, in which Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar’s struggle to attain human rights for the dalits is illustrated; *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil, gives visibility to queer characters and the expression of free love; *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam compares the unrealistic female ideals depicted in Bollywood films with realistic situations; *Priya’s Mirror* (2016) by Paromita Vohra et al., portrays acid attacks in India; *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) by Priya Kuriyan et al., approaches a variety of harassment situations suffered by women all over the world based on their experiences; and *Royal Existentials* (2014) by Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan, a web series retelling Victorian art through memes. Of course, “Women today have greater opportunities for creative expression and intellectual fulfilment than before, which is reflected in modern Indian literature through the portrayal of women characters, and also in the enhanced contribution of women writers to literary production” (R. Gupta 186). However, the process is slow and takes many decades to introduce social issues outside of standard literature. It is at the end of the 20th century that “love and sex are now treated with greater candour, even by women writers” (R. Gupta 186). Other authors support the same idea:

In India, as in the West, the international mandate was welcomed by a small but determined group of academics already examining questions related to women’s status. Historians among this group first turned their attention to the glaring omissions in accounts of politically significant events and only later to studying issues of greatest salience to specific groups of women. (Forbes 2)

At the heart of the change, the question of what comprises Indian identity appears. When Indian feminists and the progressive left say that there is no single Indian identity, Hindu nationalists claim that there is one and only one, which is Hindu. However, in the words of Mehrotra, “This idea of Indian identity is almost a conventional stereotype, which mass media or mass culture would like to promote, [...] the question really is whether there is an Indian identity. It's a binding constraint to think about” (appendix). The conflict also stresses the difference between the ways in which the Indian government and the Indian state are perceived. The Indian state is the central government, established by India's constitution. “The secular sociocultural redefinition of India commenced from the beginning of the 1990s and now, almost two decades later, it is more than obvious that the subcontinent has traversed a difficult terrain in order to assert its position on the global map, as an emerging global presence and identity” (Dasgupta et al.). This indicates there has been a transgression throughout the history of India, developing paths that are alternatives to the conventional during the twentieth century, trying to avoid nationalism as a form of oppression. In spite of this, “In India of recent times, the Indian third [nationalist] wave has taken a keen interest in the assertion of *Hindutva* that queer identity is an example of Mother India⁴ having been tainted by western civilization” (Rajgopal 213), which is an indicator of the need to raise Indian voices of the new generation in order to achieve gender equality, and even gender equity, in the country. As reported by Rajgopal “It is hardly a surprise that violent debates over national identity have taken place outside the home country, a factor [...] honed in on as the manner in which the diaspora attempts to assert its true *Indianness* by reverting to an imaginary authenticity” (213).

According to Vats, the current leadership in India is using symbols such as Bharat Maa and Gau Mata⁵, as well as revisiting the stories and myths of great Indian wives, to promote a *Hindutva* nation. This approach, however, reinforces patriarchal constructions. Vats argues that this reconstruction of Brahmanical patriarchy is consumed by citizens longing for a past they have never lived (97). *Hindutva* has also been used in literature to refer to a variety of works that promote Hindu nationalist beliefs. Hindus are frequently shown as a victimised community threatened by Muslims and other minorities in these

⁴ Mother India is a concept to reduce women to a reproductive role within society, so that “women’s sexuality is deployed in the services of reproducing the nation, both biologically and ideologically” (Navarro 2020: 243), becoming an instrument that serves society.

⁵ Bharat Maa as the nationalist personification of India as a Goddess Mother, and Gau Mata as a holy mother cow where Thirty-three million demi-gods reside.

works. They also promote a strong Hindu identity and the need to safeguard Hinduism against what they regard as an invasion of Westernization and modernisation. The building of a powerful nation required the devaluation of women, reducing them to either goddesses or whores and denying their human value. This dual portrayal is a way to marginalize them. This marginalisation is not limited to women: it extends to non-Hindus as well (Vats 106).

Women's prominence in ancient India is exaggerated in the literature promoted by Hindutva, which aims to elevate women's status by asserting that they had a higher standing in the past. According to Navarro-Tejero, Hindutva's objective is "to instil national pride in every Indian with the motto, 'United Hindus, capable India' [whose] final goal is to make India a Hindu nation and prove that Hindus are Vedic Aryans" (Navarro-Tejero, *Indianness* 68). This is an oppressive doctrine that punishes alternative values followed by Indian people who disagree with it. As if that were not enough, "There are those who believe that Indian culture must draw on traditional indigenous idioms for it to be meaningful and anchored, and most importantly, for it to be authentically Indian. In this sense, the women's movement has been manipulated by these guardians of tradition and authenticity" (Navarro-Tejero *Indianness* 68).

According to Vats, "women were indeed celebrated for their learning and wisdom, but they never questioned their husbands, all the perfectly carved subjects of the patriarchal nation we were becoming" (106). Therefore, in ancient India, women's fundamental rights were never denied; they were never defined or guaranteed. They were not treated as equals to men and were constantly under male leadership. Indeed, Women's status in Hindu civilisation decreased after the Vedic period. Women's rights were restricted in the Smritis (Hindu texts), and distinct regulations for their behaviour in society were set. Women were forbidden from studying the Vedas or taking part in religious rituals. They couldn't even go inside the temples. Currently, as stated by Vats, "The structures that should have represented women now became a vast space of their construction. Women in the making of the nation thus never seem to hold firm ground in the decision-making process, for they are always under the patriarchal gaze" (109). Even though the status of women in Independent India is steadily improving as a result of the efforts of women suffragists, feminist public figures, various organisations, and feminist researchers, women in India continue to confront numerous problems. In terms of literature, the publication and analysis of countercurrent Indian feminist work as a

response to Hindutva nationalist discourse will be critical in reinforcing the feminist movement and empowering women's role in society, thanks to the proposal of alternative values outside the Brahminical patriarchal canon.

1.3. The Effect of the Caste System on Indian Women

The caste system in India is a complex social classification which divides society into hierarchical groups “rooted in caste, class and gender” (Bo Nielsen and Waldrop 2). Its origins are historical and religious. As stated by Borreguero, “It is almost impossible to define the castes, although the majority of researchers accept three invariable characteristics, which are exclusion, hierarchy, and interdependence. Castes are closed groups and subgroups of people” (28). They are influenced by social and economic development, especially during colonialism, playing an essential role in the lives of Hindus, promoting reincarnation and future lives. According to American writer and peace activist Professor Joseph E. Schwartzberg, caste rules impact many aspects of life, including marriage, food, and work. They dictate who can marry whom, what is considered appropriate to eat, how to show respect to people of different castes, and what rituals must be performed (478).

These rules also determine what types of work are acceptable for certain castes to undertake. These caste rules are pervasive in shaping everyday life and decision-making (Schwartzberg 478). This system put women at a disadvantage because their role was subordinated to men. As described by Nielsen and Waldrop, patriarchal hierarchies place men in positions of power and authority over women in many areas of life. Men are often seen as the leaders of their families and the primary decision-makers in the public sphere (2). By contrast, women are typically expected to take on domestic responsibilities and take care of their families. Additionally, the behaviour of women is often seen as reflecting the honour of the family (Nielsen and Waldrop 2). This system of patriarchal hierarchy assigns different social roles and responsibilities to men and women based on gender.

This system promotes inequality among the Indian population, since the ranking takes into account psychical attributes such as race, colour and ethnicity, as well as professions and religion; “The caste structure, ritual form, and political process were all dependent on relations of power. These relations were constructed in and through history, and these relations were culturally constructed” (Dirks 60). Being born into a particular

caste also determines the life of an individual, “be it high or low, which is the cardinal rule of one’s *karma*, or in other words, reward or punishment for deeds performed in previous existences” (Schwartzberg 477). According to caste and Indian region, each individual has privileges and obligations that are different from members belonging to another caste. In order to understand the caste system, it is important to briefly study their origin.

As mentioned by M. K. Bhasin, professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Delhi, “It can’t be said for certain when, and in what circumstances, the caste system originated. However, many theories have been put forward” (255). The word caste, as specified by Azorín in his master’s dissertation entitled *Las castas de la India: posición social del brahmin según los Dharma-śāstras*, originated in the Spanish and Portuguese languages, meaning something unmixed, coming from the Latin word *castus*, or *casto* (8). The word was used by the Spanish to define race and applied to India by the Portuguese in the middle of the 15th century. This biased approach has caused some trouble in categorising Indian divisions of the population. For this reason, instead of using this confusing term, it would be accurate to speak of the concepts of *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* is a Sanskrit word that means colour; “It is generally believed that in the early Vedic period, there were no castes in Punjab. Only the fair skinned invaders called themselves Aryans, and they called the dark-skinned indigenous people *Dasyus*, *Dasas* or *Asuras*” (Bhasin 255). In the words of Borreguero, this division appeared for the first time in India around 1000 B.C. (27), so the concept of *varna* would be equal to class, not caste. *Jati* would refer to an occupation, and “is generally associated with [...] that a caste is invariably endogamous, but is further divided as a rule into smaller and smaller circles, each of which is also endogamous” (Bhasin 253). According to Eva Borreguero, “*Jatis*, or castes, are defined as a more complex system than *varnas*, and vary throughout the subcontinent, so the caste system (*jatis*) in Bengal has nothing in common with the one established in Kerala. *Jati* would be the unity of caste. On the other hand, *varna* would contain various levels of *jatis*” (28). In his book written in 1964 entitled, *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture and Practice*, Robin Rinehart expresses the following:

The sacrifice of the man’s body produced a variety of things, including the Vedas themselves, the moon and sun, Indra and Agni, heaven, earth, and the sky. Different classes of people, divided into four classes, or *varnas*, were created out of this sacrifice as well. From the primeval man’s mouth were made Brahmins, from his shoulders Kshatriyas, from his thighs Vaishyas, and from his feet, Shudras. (15)

Varna is the framework or category for dividing *the* Indian population into five social groups. The lower class is called dalit, or the untouchables, and is considered to be outside the social class system, and invisible as well). According to Professor Thomas Roger Trautmann, historian, culturist and anthropologist, varnas are broad, theoretical categories of people that are believed to have been established by divine authority and make up the entirety of civilised Indian society. The varna system exists independently of the caste system, resulting from intermarriage between individuals from different varnas (197). Manu, an ancient Indian lawgiver, stated that castes could exist without varnas. The varnas are the large and somewhat theoretical categories of people, whereas castes result from irregular liaisons between members of different varnas.

The *Varna* system originated in the Hindu text *Púrusha-sukta*, which belongs to the most ancient Indian text called *Rig-veda* (2000 B.C). Nevertheless, this categorisation has been discussed throughout Indian history within its distinguished texts, which are “the corpus of literature that collects the most important political texts of classic India, including the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Laws of Manu*, *Manusmriti*, and the *Arthashastra*, which all belong to the “remained” tradition, or *smriti* (Borreguero 25). In the modern and contemporary period, the term *varna* has been confused with caste because some classic authors have misinterpreted and speculated about it, trying to describe the origin of the caste and class system. As mentioned by Deshpande, the varna concept, as proposed by Manu, has degenerated into the caste system, where a person's inherited status, rather than their individual abilities and characteristics, became the primary determinant of their place in society (3). This period of degeneration has seen the rise of Rajas and Tamas, leading to a misinterpretation of the varna distinctions in the Bhagavad Gita. The caste system, based on heredity rather than personal merit, has replaced the original varna system. Although there is a concept of class in English, it is “by far and away, the most acceptable translation for *varna* so far put forward. It suggests the economic nature of the groups [...] yet for that reason is unsatisfactory. We should like to suggest the use of the word “order” or “estate” (Trautmann 198), as well as “group”.

As described above, the *varna* system distinguishes five social groups. The first group in the hierarchic pyramid is the Brahmans. They were the priests, teachers and scholars who read and interpreted the sacred Hindu texts in Sanskrit, the language that the population could neither read nor understand. They dealt with a difficult language, so

they had the highest educational level. They advised kings and were the closest ones to God. For that reason, they enjoyed many privileges. Another important mission for them was to write the Vedas. Schwartzberg describes this group as follows:

The priestly caste of Brahmans stands highest in the Hindu ritual hierarchy and is among the largest and most widespread castes of the subcontinent. Its distribution is explained in part by the necessity of having Brahmans officiate at a variety of rituals and partly by the fact that the Brahman's tradition of learning prepared his caste to occupy a disproportionately large share of the clerical and administrative posts, both in government and in private enterprises. (485)

Behind the Brahmans, the second group in the *varna* system was the Kshatriyas, who were the leaders in the government, exercising the power in society and the Estate. Kshatriyas belonged to the military and noble upper-class who were responsible for defending each region and its population. As attested by Pradeep B. Deshpande, "In the hymns of Book 1, found in Rigveda, the Kshatriyas are described "as having courage, strength, fortitude, dexterity, generosity, leadership, and resolve in never retreating from battle, (18.43). These are the qualities of Kshatriya, based on their nature (2). This group was dominant and had the necessary attributes and skills to manage the Indian population; "Its power to adjudicate and settle disputes comes to be unquestioned. Fissures have indeed been made in the earlier method of settling disputes. But even then, caste is the most important agency of settling disputes" (Cohn 53).

The third group of the pyramid was the Vaishyas, who were the merchants, businessmen, and traders. They were able to own land and produce goods. They were the Hindu bourgeoisie. They spread Indian culture throughout the subcontinent thanks to their business activity. "The *varna* system is also reflected today in the ceremony of initiation for Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, which enables them, as the twice-born, to begin the study of the Vedas, and often symbolizes superior status" (Rinehart 247). The expression of "twice-born" comes from *dvija*, and as stated by Borreguero, "The first three groups have this condition, which means they had a first physical birth, and then another birth of initiation to the caste" (27).

The majority of the population was categorised in the third group, Shudras, who did not belong to the twice-born condition. They were the working-class, such as farmers, servants and craftsmen. "R. S. Sharma has shown that in later Vedic times, Sudras were a small servile class of defeated and dispossessed Aryans and non-Aryans, employed in domestic labour" (Jaiswal 70). They were considered descendants of *Dasa*, the Sanskrit word for enemy, or servant, which was a non-Aryan caste who were allowed to join the

Aryan civilisation. In the view of Robin Rinehart, “Shudras may have emerged out of either unsuccessful Aryans or native inhabitants who could not adjust to Aryan domination. There were also tribal groups outside the system. They weren’t allowed to study the Vedas” (252).

The last order, classified as a group that is outside the caste system, is the untouchables, or dalits. They were an isolated group considered impure and outside the *varna* system. They didn’t have access to basic resources such as water, health, or education, nor even to be with people from other castes. They did the filthiest jobs, such as dealing with the dead, rubbish, or excrement. As Robin Rinehart affirms, they worked as village servants who hauled off dead cattle, carried death notices, cared for travelling government officials’ horses, brought firewood to the crematory, carried the village treasure to the central court, and performed a variety of other tasks of little importance (250). There were even subdivisions in the untouchable group. For instance, there were the invisible, who could not go outside their homes during the day; only at night. As stated by Cohn, “the untouchables were the greatest sufferers due to their economic plight” (24). Nevertheless, after India gained its Independence in 1947, the Constitution included a law to abolish the untouchable practice and the miserable jobs they had to carry out. In the article entitled, “Keeping Up with the Vaishyas: Caste and Relative Standing”, Carlsson, Gupta and Johansson-Stenman report that “the constitution also encouraged movement away from the caste system and any discrimination based on caste. At the same time, special treatment (especially with regard to educational and employment opportunities) were accorded to the so-called Scheduled Castes (SC), which mainly included the Untouchables” (5).

The origin of the caste system allows us to understand the inequalities of Indian society and the gender violence suffered among all the groups. According to Hugo Gorringer, “The intertwined nature of caste and gender is palpable in terms of livelihoods, social relations and the experience of—and reaction to—caste violence” (2). Nevertheless, the caste system is an ancient complex classification which contains many fundamental inner aspects whose understanding requires the study of a variety of contexts, taking into account that “the marginalisation of the non-Brahmanical perspectives and experiences in the institutionalised scholarship on caste has blurred our understanding of the relations between structural continuities and contemporary change in the social institution of caste” (Rege 2).

According to Uma Chakravarti, the core of Hindu social organization was built upon a structure of preserving land, women and ritual quality. This structure is able to maintain patriarchal dominance over women and control of female sexuality (72). This societal approach has implied many types of violence. Hugo Gorringer related that the manner of Beteille is most compelling when considering the sexual use and abuse of women, which is an aspect of the inequality of power, seen in its most extreme form in the treatment of women of the lowest rank by men of the highest (3). In her book, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (2018), Uma Chakravarti highlights the connection between gender and caste in India and “how gender is critical to the formation of caste” (11). In this vein, she states that sexuality is directly linked to “violence against women, demonstrating the ideological and material hold of patriarchy in its manifest forms” (11). Although feminist theories struggle to change the law, even though the usage of mass media and social networks, there is an inversely proportional trend of “the ideology of patriarchy in India, with its foundations still secure in caste, family, and marriage practices; where female sexuality has to be curbed, where women are violated on issues of ‘honour’, or revenge, or caste vengeance” (Chakravarti 11). On the other hand, if the caste system is eliminated, “sisterhood can emerge” (Maithreyi Krjshnaraj 12), but there is still a dilemma. If the caste system is abolished, together with the displaying of caste symbols, rituals, ceremonies, and activities in daily life, what would the Hindu identity become? As Maithreyi Krjshnaraj says in the epilogue of *Gendering Caste through a feminist lens*, “Many changes that are taking place in present-day India. There is now a conflict between the upper castes and the castes lowest in the caste hierarchy” (14). There is a diversity of patriarchal practices among the diverse Hindu castes. These rituals “can be, and are, in themselves places in a hierarchy within the larger pyramidal structure of the caste system... [with] the most valued attributes associated with the top and the least valued with the lowest rungs” (Chakravarti 86).

As mentioned by Madhok, from its origins the commitment by activists to the Women’s Movement in India is a result of the following:

The assumption of voice by the elite, middleclass and upper-caste women ‘speaking for’ (Alcoff 1995) and seeking to represent the aspirations of all Indian women, and the second constitutes the challenge posed by questions of cultural authenticity—of feminism being a Western import and an affiliative badge to be shrugged off. Both characterizations owe their theoretical and empirical origin to the nationalist anti-colonial struggles and have accompanied historical moments of intense identity, crafting both in colonial and post-colonial India. (230)

Along these lines, Navarro-Tejero's analysis of Roy's *God of Small Things*, and Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, is an example of the dual oppression of lower caste women. In reviewing Elena Oliete Aldea's work, she explains that Hariharan's novel explores the oppression of upper-caste women in an urban setting, whereas Roy's work exposes the hypocrisy of an unseen caste system within a rural Christian community that claims to be caste-free (Navarro-Tejero, *The fiction* 118). Characters who attempt to challenge traditional gender and caste norms are ostracized in this community. The novels of Hariharan and Roy both focus on the theme of caste and gender discrimination, but they present different perspectives and settings (Navarro-Tejero, *The fiction* 118).

As pointed out by S. Anandhi in her review of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's activism⁶ and his influence in the history of India, he reports how the oppression toward women throughout the history of India by the patriarchal caste system "has destroyed their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves -to men- who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity" (143), together with the belief of marriage "as a symbol of women's objection to men" (143), and education received by women "to be an efficient housewife" (142). Considering gender violence within the caste is crucial in understanding the dual discrimination suffered by women. Sexual exploitation and abuse of women, which is a manifestation of the imbalance of power, is most pronounced in the treatment of women of lower status by men of higher status. This is the aspect of the problem that has received the most attention (Beteille 491). However, there is also an ongoing focus on maintaining the purity of women in the upper echelons of society. Both forms of discrimination are rooted in the same power imbalance and require attention.

During the British Raj, the English intervention in the caste system was utterly disappointing since they introduced laws into their Act, leaving their culture aside, which might leave some part of the population in a more vulnerable position, such as the school attendance of the dalit, as illustrated in *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Durgabai Subhash Vyam, or the introduction of testamentary succession in the Hindu *Succession Act*, through which "daughters lost control upon this property, which was presumably given on her behalf, to secure her happiness in her matrimonial home" (Agnes 82). This is an example of the reason why having a daughter becomes a nightmare in

⁶ Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was the founder of the Self-Respect Movement in South India. The Self-Respect Movement supported the abolition of the caste system to achieve equality among all Indian population.

“That’s Not Fair” by Harini Kannan. Even so, during the 19th century reform in the manner of Forbes, “Women experienced these rules and prescriptions differently depending on religion, caste, class, age, place in the family hierarchy, and an element of serendipity. There were women who lived up to the ideal, but there were also women who rebelled against these prescriptions” (19).

Although women had a rigid and pre-established role within the caste to which they belonged, their previous circumstances interfered with their social role. However, in the second half of the 19th century feminist reformers and activists paid attention to “sati, female infanticide, polygyny, child marriage, *pardah*, prohibitions on female education, *devadasis* (temple dancers wedded to the god), and the patrilocal joint family” (Forbes 19), which gave rise to the subsequent Women’s Movement.

Chapter 2. An Overview of South Asian Women's Movements

In India, feminism has always been a counter movement to the *Hindutva* ideology, which promotes misogynistic ideas. As a result, the Indian feminist movement has consistently opposed fundamentalist policies that are harmful to women's rights. As Ita Mehrotra reports in the appendix of this dissertation, "The government controls the education system at present, and this is a backward turn in an aggressively patriarchal state, which is something out on the road right now" (296). The work of these feminist associations and other worldwide institutions has spread throughout the country. In the 21st century, a vast number of feminist authors are expressing and giving visibility to gender constructions outside the Indian canon imposed by *Hindutva*, demanding their place in the literary industry, and raising their voices through their literary work. There were two tasks involved: recognition of women authors; and recognising the importance of female characters, thereby deconstructing the representation of gender in the narratives.

The history of the Women's Movement in India is a response to the rise of a nationalist trend called neo-nationalism, which has removed gender issues from its agenda in order to focus on the lost Hindu identity. Such identity is inspired through nostalgic patterns from ancient times, which have subordinated and oppressed women by extolling the role of the male figure. As reported by Diego-Sánchez, "Patriarchy, colonization, and capitalism are themselves resilient, and so it is important to supplement this resilience with social justice, gender equality, and subversive agency" (89). This section of the dissertation covers the growth of the Indian Women's Movement since 1917, when the first feminist association was founded, which improved the role of women and prompted reforms to achieve gender equality. "At the end of the 20th century, the women's movement found itself at the forefront of debates on aspects of sexuality, identity, and citizenship, with sexual rights, parliamentary quotas, and guaranteed citizenship entitlements becoming increasingly important" (Madhok 333), which is why this section of the dissertation examines the end of the colonial period and the post-independence period, up until the publication of the graphic novels and comics analysed in this study, when the movement regained force.

In India, the first educational initiatives prompted by the early associations of women, together with improvements in work conditions and a certain awareness of class and caste, were produced as a reaction to the crisis of society and the Indian Estate in the

1970s. These changes have produced a type of efficient feminist partnership in order to obtain work-related and legislative improvements, which has also taken into account the idiosyncrasy of each community and the setting, which is very important in a country where the majority of the population still live in the country.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of women's associations multiplied, especially in the cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Most of the women belonged to the upper-middle class, and these women generally combined an active public life at the service of the community and the nation with the traditional role of mother and wife at the service of family obligations. Historian Geraldine Forbes conducted an investigation into the public and private life of several women belonging to these associations and concluded that the intentions of many of these women, rather than changing or subverting the family's patriarchal structure, were to try to promote certain values of class and caste linked to maintaining their positions in the elite, although they were defenders of universal education, as was the case of Lady Bose, who combined her efforts in trying to balance the fight for female education with her service as housewife and mother.

By contrast, in the 20th century associations arose that tried to get away from the European and American feminist movements, with which they did not identify whatsoever. These groups, which began in the 1970s, are comprised of women of castes and poorer classes, or in other words, "the poorest of the poor", such as the self-employed women's group known as Sewa, and the women's movement known as *Chipko*.

After India gained its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the Constitution approved by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949, granted the same rights to all citizens, and discrimination on the basis of gender was declared illegal. The Constitution, which came into force on January 26, 1950, included equal access to public posts, equal pay for equal work without discrimination on the basis of gender, and prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, and place of birth.

In this new period, many women started to hold positions of responsibility in the political arena: Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was Minister of Health in 1947; Sucheta Kripalani, served as Secretary General of Congress in 1959 and Minister of Labor in Uttar Pradesh, in 1962; and Vijayalakshmi Pandit was a delegate of the United Nations in 1947, ambassador to the USSR and United States in the early 1950s, and finally, president of the United Nations assembly in 1953. Nevertheless, the real protagonist of this period

would be Indira Gandhi, who was the Prime Minister of India between 1966 and 1977, and again from 1980 to 1984, the latter of which is the year she was assassinated.

The resurgence of women's associations since 1970 was a reaction and a response to the societal crisis and the Hindu state; the declaration of a State of Emergency by Indira Gandhi and the struggle for democratic and civil rights altered the political and social climate, while macroeconomic policies and stealthy economic liberalization in the late 1970s, which involved privatization and a reduction of State interference in social matters, was accentuated after the opening of markets in the 1990s. At the beginning of 1970, the economic crisis was already very severe; corruption, scandals, and political instability were matched by rising poverty and unemployment. The war with Pakistan in 1971 and the escalating oil prices hit industrial areas, leading students, workers and peasants to mobilize against the ruling Congress Party.

The educational improvements made in previous decades and the increased employment opportunities for women were contemporaneous, with peasant mobilizations such as the Naxalite Movement in the state of West Bengal, Bihar and Andha Pradesh, the Anti-Price Movement in Maharashtra, and student protests throughout India, the latter of which was a struggle against the lack of freedom and rights under Indira Gandhi's government.

In 1975, under the patronage of SNDT University, the first gender studies centre opened its doors in Mumbai. It was called The Research Unit on Women's Studies, which was followed by other departments and research groups such as The Center for Women's Development Studies in Delhi, The Indian Social Institute Program for Women's Development, and the Saheli Women's Resource Center in Mumbai. These centers and institutions obtained funding thanks to the help of foundations and government institutions. The Chipko and Sewa movements are two types of associations that were formed in India at the end of the 1970s. They exemplify the type of associations that is typical of a country like India. The Chipko movement emerged in April 1973. When the women of the Chamoli district saw their subsistence being threatened, and to avoid the felling of trees, they decided to embrace them (hence the name of Chipko, which literally means "the one who hugs"), and a prohibition against destruction of the forest was put into action.

Ela Bhatt created the Sewa organization (Self Employed Women's Association) as a spin-off of the Tla (Textile Labor Association) in 1972, with the aim of forming a

cooperative that would protect women from the most disadvantaged castes and classes. In addition to offering microcredit and financial advice, the union also supports health services, educational workshops, and legal counselling, while promoting the self-management of specific social services such as childcare or midwifery.

2.1. The First Phase: Organisations at the End of the 19th Century

The first women's organisations in India started at the end of the 19th century, which emerged at the same time as European associations. These early associations may have had an elitist profile, focusing their demands on promoting education and women's suffrage. Over time, however, rural women activists started struggling against their oppressive situation, thereby democratizing the movement to all woman who were seeking alternative gender constructs. As asserted by Warhol and Herndl:

The "institution" is an important category for feminist theory, in some ways more important than the more obvious categories of "the personal" or "the self." In fact, recent work on feminism has shown how concepts like "self" or "personal" are themselves constructed within institutions. Institutions establish orderliness, rules, sameness; feminism questions whether that orderliness and sameness has been gained at the expense of the differences represented by women or by women's "otherness". (3-4)

The creation of several educational institutions for the elite, such as The Victorian Institution, "originally named the Native Ladies Normal and Adult School, was founded on February 1st, 1871 by Brahmananda Keshub Chandra Sen under the auspices of the Indian Reform Association, of which he was President" (Victorian Institution College), Another was The Bethune School, which "established Kolkata's first school for girls in 1849, called the Hindu Female School" (Bethune College). It would become Bethune College in 1979. These schools, together with the beginning and development of national movements that quickly introduced women among their members, resulted in the formation of organisations between 1917 and 1927, who were pioneers in tackling issues related to education, work and juridical and legal equality between the two genders. The discourse spread by the British who lived in India denounced the precarious situation of Hindu women. Until 1930, the first organisations found support from British reformist groups, to whom access to education was the key if the women did not want to end up with the unequal and poorly situation suffered by women.

India is a heterogeneous country, which means it has changed in different way throughout history, depending on the location. As reported by Venkatraman and Kalaivani, “socially, politically and economically, the condition of Tamilnadu during the early part of the 20th century was not conducive. Different social customs and conventions prevailed everywhere. The position of women in the society was deplorable” (2). They mention some of the issues reported in the background section, such as child marriage, power abuse by upper castes against lower castes, economic poverty, young widows, or the lack of access to education for women. Due to this troubling denigration of the female population, the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 by British women’s right activist Annie Besant and Irish-Indian educationist and suffragist Margaret Cousins, together with Dorothy Jinarajdas. It was the national subsidiary of women’s organizations at the international level. The first president of WIA was Margaret Cousins, who established the non-governmental organisation known as The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in Delhi in 1927. Focusing on WIA, it was the association in which more than two thousand women took part in its 33 branches, and whose connection was the magazine *Stri Dharma*, which published the articles in English, Hindi and Tamil. As stated by Venkatraman and Kalaivani, “At the turn of the 19th century, women’s organizations and women’s movements influenced the country. Women entered public life, and through their organizations, they spearheaded attacks against the irrational orthodoxy, injustice and discrimination to which women were subjected” (3).

During the 1920s, The National Council of Women (NCWI) established their headquarters in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, specifically in 1925. The aristocrat Mehribai Tata, who was the leader of this movement, travelled to England in 1904 and got in touch with militants of different women groups, and subsequently created the national headquarters for the International Council of Women. She worked together with Lady Amerdeen, adopting the philanthropic style of the British women’s societies of the upper class, which boosted its elitist and minority attributes. While NCWI was creating the first activist networks among Indian women, the WIA association inspired them to struggle for their rights, providing a community to support and improve their conditions and standard of living. As reported by Venkatraman and Kalaivani:

Its origin, growth and development are immensely valuable to the women folk in distress. This association has made sustained efforts toward social reforms affecting the position of women. [...] It was the first organization to create an

overall awakening among women, in addition to training them to shoulder their responsibility in public services and binding them together for mutual service and for the good of the country. (4)

In order to improve women's welfare, these organisations have been setting different goals, which have changed over time. Currently, they publish their renowned growth on their public website, taking into consideration certain aims such as promoting women's literacy and education in understanding current issues, working for social reforms and legislations, organizing women for service to society, and striving for gender equality by ensuring equal rights and opportunities, among many other objectives ("Women's Indian Association"). Ten years later, as reported by Basu and Ray:

The first All India Women's Conference (AIWC) on Educational Reform was held at Poona from 5th to 8th January, 1927. It was a historic event. It brought together women from different parts of India and from all castes and communities. The main concern of all the women who assembled there was women's education, and for four days they discussed various issues connected with this issue. (54)

As specified in a brief summary on AIWC's website after the gathering, they considered educational difficulties experienced by women, as they had to get married quite early, which was one of the impediments to achieving their academic goals. After the conference, a certain "social reform was inevitably bound up with it" (6). Some of the most significant goals they have achieved include the rising age of marriage for girls, reformation of the Hindu Code Bill affecting Hindu communities and personal political convictions, and providing maternal benefits, among others.

Finally, The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was the most important of the three organizations and the last to be created. The first of its meetings took place in Poona in 1927, where women of other previously created groups took part, such as those of the WIA. The AIWC built schools, hospitals and health centres for women and children, such as the Lady Irwin College for Home Science in Delhi, which currently offers courses in several disciplines. Others include The Family Planning Centre, the Save the Children Committee, The Indian Council of Child Welfare, and The Amrit Kaur Bal Vihar Delhi, which currently teaches children with physical disabilities.

The All-India Women's Educational Conference changed its name to India Women's Conference in 1929 and focused its fight on exposing the problem of education, prohibiting child marriage, and promoting women's suffrage. From 1940 onward, the AIWC was the organization that recruited the highest number of members, and it even published a weekly magazine called *Roshni* in English and Hindi. In 1954, the most

radical members founded The National Federation of Indian Women to involve the most unprotected minorities and castes.

The WIA and AIWC associations established delegations across the country and involved more than ten thousand women in their first years. Moreover, they prompted the enactment of the following laws: *The Special Marriage Act (1959)*; *The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act (1955)*; *The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956)*; *The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956)*; and the *Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women Act (1956)*. Women who took part in these associations were previously involved in other regional movements and associations. One such woman was Sarala Devi Choudhurani, who founded Bharat Stri Maha Mandal in 1910 with headquarters in Calcutta, Lahore and Allahabad. She created a part of the League and AIWC. Furthermore, together with Gandhi, she took part in the Indian National Congress (INC) from 1917 onward. Another leader was Latika Basu, who held the post of secretary of the Bengal Women's Educational Conference in 1928 and of the All-India Ladies' Social Conference, celebrated in Calcutta in December of that year. In 1929, the Lady Hydari Club was founded by Lady Amina Hydari. It was an exclusive, elitist association for Indian and British women belonging to the upper class in the old state of Hyderabad. It was not specifically a club whose main goal was the struggle for the rights of Indian women. Instead, they provided a place for upper-class women who wanted to develop some sports activities and socialize.

With regard to Indian politician Bharati Ray, during the 1930s it bears mentioning that the leftist ideology, which made inroads into Bengal by creating contempt for traditional ideas and religious beliefs, weakened their hold on the Bengali mind (7). The leftist party was not a radical ideology struggling for women's freedom, although it defended human rights. In this decade, the struggle for women's rights was heterogeneous throughout India due to the fact that it was, and is, a country with a highly diverse population with different backgrounds and, although they addressed the recognition of women's right, their path to reach the target was non-identical. In the words of Ray:

The young women of Bengal, who are deeply influenced by these thoughts [the feminist ideology defended by previous activists], began to participate in activities traditionally forbidden to them. In the nineteenth century, only a handful of women had ventured into waged work; in the twentieth, a relatively large number and some Hindu women joined the work force. (11)

Owing to the increase of feminist awareness of women's right, in concert with Ray, "Branches in various districts worked for women's social and educational 'uplifting'; the All Bengal Women's Union lobbied for abolishing immoral traffic in women" (17). In 1932, The All Bengal Women's Union was a non-governmental organization founded by a group of women due to the increase of trafficking in women and girls, together with the infringement of children's rights, especially in West Bengal and Calcutta. The majority of members in this feminist organization, as well as in the previous organisations founded in the previous decades, were women. As reported by Ray, these associations had two main roles in the history of Indian feminism:

These women's organisations were formed and led by women and signified the transfer or leadership of women's movements from men to women... [This implied] the recognition that the responsibility of 'regenerating' women belonged to women [...] Secondly, organised women often functioned as interest groups for enacting reform legislation, such as the *Child Marriage Prohibition*, [...] their protests in favour of the Hindu Code Bill for reforms in Hindu personal laws was of an altogether different nature. (18)

During the decade of the 1930s, the population of the state of Bengal started to support the Communist Party, which allowed women to hold jobs and backed children's rights. This confrontation was essential in counteracting the consequences of The Second World War at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. In 1942, the women's self-defence association, known as Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (abbreviated MARS), was promoted as a movement to abolish the fascist system set up in the country and offer support to children and women, especially in Calcutta. As attested by Marik, supporters of this movement reflected and redefined the portrayal of women as the passive victims of profligate men, although its name, Atma Raksha, meant self-defense (102). As Marik notes, many middle-class women began breaking societal norms, interacting with women of the lower classes and working alongside men in public spaces, which was previously unallowed by nationalist feminism and traditional ideas of women's public activism (79).

Thanks to feminism, women started to actively take part in politics, especially in the party opposed to that of the nationalists, which was the Communist Party of India (CPI). The party started to promote an atmosphere of equality among its militants. As stated by Marik, "According to a March 1943 bulletin of the provincial women's front, at that time the Party had 151 female members, 72 of whom resulted from several months of open, legal activity" (102). They focused on several projects, as the Indian population was vulnerable to famine. They helped victims of poverty, providing guidance in the most

defenceless rural towns. However, every supporter of the movement contributed in a different way, due to the fact that their backgrounds and inner ideas were highly heterogeneous, as maintained by Marik:

How women worked in the MARS varied from individual to individual, and from region to region. Nevertheless, these two phases are evident: during and after the Bengal Famine. One striking feature of the work of the communist women is that while they definitely repudiated feminism (as a bourgeois and separatist ideology), their work and orientation clearly showed a kind of autonomous activism. (105)

This proves that the concept of feminism was not totally accepted and understood in the same way, neither by the population nor by the activists. Women worked as activists against nationalism by defending social issues in order to achieve equality, ignoring categories and tags. On the other hand, these words and concepts were indispensable to scholars in consolidating and studying the movement.

2.2. The Emergence of Women's Education in the 19th Century

Meanwhile, in the mid-nineteenth century, following the British conquest of the country in 1858, they found that the indigenous "education [was] not exotic in India. There [was] no country where the love of learning had so early an origin or [had] exercised so lasting and powerful an influence" (Thomas 1). Prior to the entrance of the British in India and the construction of a new educational structure, "both Hindus and Muslims had their own educational systems. Both systems gradually declined and experienced setbacks as a result of political volatility, a lack of a strong, centralized political power, and a paucity of proper patronage (Purkait 45). Nevertheless, they imposed their contemporary educational system as the dominant, colonial empire, "at the cost of the traditional, indigenous system" (Mondal 1). In this way, the 19th century was a period of constant change in which the pendulum swung between the positive and the negative. The British did not create a new educational system. Instead, they reformed the one that was already operating in the country by the native population. "As such, the social reform movement can be characterized as playing an important part in the formation of a new set of patriarchal, gender-based relations, essential in the constitution of bourgeois society" (Kumar, History 8). The British provided a scenario not only to transform Hindu education, culture, and religion, but also to contribute to the development of a nationalistic, authoritarian, "dominant reformist group under [them]" (Kumar, History 8), which would be revealed as opposing the Anglo-Saxon invaders,

thereby culminating in the Independence of India in 1947 and the post-colonial period that followed.

Thanks to the East India Company⁷, women's education did not become a social concern until the nineteenth century. It “acknowledged women’s education and employment” (Nath 44), and “some Indian reformers belonging to Brahmo Samaj, a group founded in the middle of the 19th century. The latter, among others aspects, promoted the importance of female education as a way of developing the country and gaining Independence from England” (Val Cubero 188). The British influence catalysed a turning point in Indian society, resulting in altering and revising laws and regulations. “As far as we know, the importance of educating women was first discussed publicly in Bengal by the Atmiya Sabha, founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1815; in the same year, he wrote the first text attacking *sati*” (Kumar, History 8), a sacred historical tradition in which a woman offers herself in sacrifice by being burned on her husband's funeral pyre, “yet the campaign for the abolition of sati garnered mainly British support, and was short-lived, while the women’s education movement was ‘Indianized’ over the course of the century” (Kumar, History 8). They advocated for the Indian Revival (Borreguero 54), which “opened up a new era for the Indian population, promoting the principles of individual freedom, national unity, solidarity, and social relations” (Prakash 197).

Eliminating the sati practice was a crucial advancement in the advancement of Indian reform, indeed, “if the *sati* abolition movement provided one of the reasons for progress, the movement to reform women's education was to provide another” (Kumar, History 14). Additionally, the emergence of the Indian middle class propelled the country towards development and independence. The early 19th century was a turbulent time of change, reform, and uprising in Indian society. During this period, women's efforts towards obtaining comprehensive education gave rise to a new initiative. This “is the historical context in which middle-class Indian feminist struggles arise: nationalist struggles against an imperial state, religious reform, and modernization of the Indian bourgeoisie, and the consolidation of an Indian middle class poised to take over as rulers” (Mohanty 20). The British rule served as the catalyst for the expansion of education, establishing new schools and introducing a novel approach to education for the Indian people. In the words of R. Kumar, “British and American missionaries opened new

⁷ The East India Company was a British trade company between West and East, but it eventually gained control over large territories in India. The company played a major role in the establishment of British rule in India and its colonisation.

schools for girls in 1810” (History 14). In 1891, the Female Juvenile Society released the first publication on women's education in Calcutta. By the year 1827, missionaries had established twelve schools specifically for girls. Furthermore, R. Kumar suggests that the “movement for women's education was formed by the need for a rising middle-class to adapt women to a Western prototype” (History 14). However, the enrolment of females in schools was slow, causing the educational system's growth to be less fast.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, India struggled with a stressful environment due to British tyranny. The growing concern among the Indian middle-class about losing their national identity was palpable throughout the country. It is worth noting, as previously discussed, that India is a highly diverse nation. Albeit, the assertion of a nationalistic sentiment “did not negate the fact that there were indigenous differences of class, caste, and gender; but people were able to launch struggles which blurred these divisions and stressed the commonality of national identity against the foreign enemy” (Basu 95). The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 in response to the loss of identity, values, traditions, and control over their territory. The primary aim of this political party was to reclaim their connection to their ancestral land before British rule by striving for independence. Additionally, the formation of social reform movements centred around women's issues mirrored and preceded the process of nation-building and the formation of national identity. Many reformers battled for laws that would enhance the situation of women, as it was widely held that their status in society was an indicator of “civilisation” (Basu 95).

In the early 20th century, up until India achieved independence in 1947, the emergence of women's movements took advantage of the transitional period. Indians were gaining strength through organizations such as the Women's Indian Association (WIA), established in 1917, and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), founded in 1927. R. Kumar reports that the WIA was based in Madras. It was probably joined by some ladies who attended the 1908 Ladies Congress and was described by activist and politician Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in 1932 as “the first purely feminist organization to arise in India” (71). Moreover, “WIA was the first women's organization to consider issues of women workers, such as maternity leave and benefits for women” (Kumar, History 71).

In 1927, ten years after the establishment of the Women's Indian Association, Margaret Cousins, an Irish-Indian educationist, founded the first All India Women's Conference. She sent a letter to several Indian women's organisations inviting them to the

conference to discuss women's education, with the following words: "As problems connected with girls' education differ according to province and locality, it is thought necessary that there should be a women's conference on educational reform in each province and clearly defined districts" (Kumar, History 68). In the years that followed, the feminist movement made notable progress as women began to work outside of their homes, particularly in the textile industry. These challenges were significant milestones in the movement, "the vast majority of women associated with the AIWC represented urban, upper-class English-speaking women" (Basu 95). Nevertheless, at a later stage, the nationalist movement welcomed poor and illiterate women from both urban and rural areas. In the end, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) grew and developed rapidly and became the single organization that represented the women's movement in India during the 1930s and 1940 (Kumar, History 71).

The country of India achieved independence in the year 1947. Despite the efforts of feminist organizations to promote women's education and improve their circumstances, there were still many challenges that needed to be addressed since "it was confined to a small sector of the population, so the literacy rate for women only increased from 0.2% in 1882 to a paltry 6% in 1947" (Nath 44). Although the country gained the Independence, patriarchal attitudes towards the role of women still persisted. Women were expected to perform household duties, care for the males in the home, and engage in religious practices. In 1948, a group of women started to protest against The Communist Party of India (CPI), because they did not allow women to fight in the *guerrilla* warfare and suggested they stay at home doing housework. This was the beginning of the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh. Guenther attests that the Deccan Plateau had been the scene of an ongoing struggle for a separate state since that time (21-22). Specifically, *We were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle* (1989), provides portrayals of women whose lives are not documented in conventional history books [...] As one of the first organizations in Indian history to be led by women, it battled for the rights of the Telangana people and developed a feminist consciousness and group action in the spirit of the women who had struggled for India's independence a year earlier. In 1947, the government took action to reform the educational system by appointing a University Education Commission, which was led by the prominent academic Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. The University Education Commission presented a report in August 1949, pointing out that the current education system for women was

inadequate and irrelevant to their daily lives (401). It was deemed a waste of time that left women needing to be equipped to handle real-life challenges. The report argued that the education system was geared towards men's needs and not women, causing modern, educated Indian women to feel unhappy, dissatisfied, and socially useless. The Commission suggested that the education system must be overhauled to provide women with opportunities for self-expression and fulfilment (UEC 401). Three years later, in 1950, the Indian constitution elaborated new laws which included "many vital provisions which had a direct and indirect bearing on education" (Pandey 1). The implementation of the First Five Years Plan took place in 1952. This program aimed to address India's economic and social development needs; "the Central Government set up a Central Social Welfare Board with the objective of especially assisting voluntary agencies in organizing welfare programmes for women, children, and handicapped groups" (Konwar 65). The Indian Government's planning commission specifically emphasised in their First Five Years Plan of 1952 that women should have equal opportunities with men in all fields of education but should also be provided special facilities in areas where they have special aptitudes (102). They also emphasized that women's education, especially at the secondary and university level, should have a vocational or occupational foundation wherever possible (102). Despite this apparent reform of the regulations in the educational system, "these attempts were at best partial, and for many, the years following Independence seemed to be a severe setback for feminists [as it] was heavily opposed by a number of influential Congressmen, including the president of India [Rajendra Prasad]" (Kumar, History 97). Nevertheless, the National Congress was the main political force after Independence, and even with its nationalist ideology, it was the first entity to improve women's conditions. As stated by Ratnam, "Domestic, private and personal issues of women came briefly to the foreground in a three-way debate between the Colonial State, reformists, and revivalists in the late 18th and early 19th centuries" (2). The feminist discourse became a material issue with blurred borders between nationalism and post-colonialism. As stated by R. Kumar, "In the fifties and sixties, there was a lull in feminist campaigning, and the movement that started in the seventies and eighties was very different, growing out of a number of radical movements of the time" (History 97).

During the sixties, the forest and environment started to be quite damaged in one of the northern states of India, Uttarakhand, due to excessive alcohol consumption by men. A rural group of activists, led by women, took part into a range of social movements

that started in this decade, producing “a gendered geography of resistance” (Gururani 68). It was the beginning of a series of protests and disturbances against the Indian liquor known as *arrack* and its impact among men. They were “frustrated with the state’s duplicity and the growing alcoholism among local men, so large-scale protests were organized under the banner of the Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini. Women came out in unprecedented numbers and mobilized against a common enemy: the liquor mafia” (Gururani 73). It was an example of a specific group of women fighting from a feminist approach to improve their society, whether or not they knew about the fight that feminist associations had been carrying out in India to improve education and rights. They joined efforts to change the situation, which is the way feminism has been developed in India, divided among collectives who struggle against the state and its agencies for a fairer society.

In 1967, “a second wave of the Telangana movement started, in which women were very active; and in Kerala, Maoists attempted to establish a ‘red army base’ in Malabar” (Kumar, History 99). There was a second feminist wave, according to Rekha Pande, professor and director of the Society for Empowerment through Environmental Development (SEED). Equality for women was the focus of protests in the 1960s and 1970s, not only in relation to women's political rights, but also regarding the family, sexuality, and the workplace. Since then, second-wave feminism has persisted and now coexists with what is known as third-wave feminism (16).

This group protested to separate Telangana, as the Indian National Congress were relocating the army and the soldiers became violent with the citizens, which included a “terrorist ideology that held that exemplary assassinations of individual landlords and capitalists would engender a revolutionary uprising” (Kumar, History 99). Five years later, in 1972, a trade union of women workers called The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) was founded by Ela Bhatt in Gujarat State. In the words of Kumar and Kumar, SEWA “provides support to poor, self-employed women workers who comprise the unprotected, unorganized, informal labour force of our nation... It is [Ela Bhatt’s] belief that this rigid categorization makes extending protection to the vulnerable impossible” (49). This organization started to defend the same rights that workmen had had in their jobs, and they even “extended protection to these women beyond the workplace” (Kumar and Kumar 51). During the same year of its founding there were two incredible protests in India. The first was the anti-price protest against the Mathura rape

of a tribal girl in Maharashtra resulting from the acquittal of two drunk policemen who had raped the girl. As mentioned by gender activist Shalu Nigam, these decisions demonstrated that patriarchy continued to rule and that the sexist, misogynist mentality that pervaded courtrooms remained unchanged. The decision, which was based on patriarchal, sociocultural, and sexual norms, was unable to recognize the rationality and objectivity of the concept of consent or to view it from a wider perspective (1).

The second protest was an anti-alcohol demonstration led by a Bhil women; it “continued until 1973, growing in strength so that women from one village would go to others to break liquor pots” (Kumar, History 100). Also, in 1972 a peasant women’s movement started against the extortionate practices of landlords, known as Shahada, and the “illiterate, untouchable (Harijan) and tribal women (Adivasi) took the lead in the agrarian class struggle” (Mies 61). Women organized the Shahada protests, defying the policemen who were harassing and raping them. As highlighted by Mies, the Shahada movement “progressed from the initial attempt simply to recover Adivasi land in Gujar possession to the more general demands for more relief work, higher wages, emergency inflationary measures, control of corruption, and an end to police repression” (64). The rural women’s organization fought against the patriarchal nationalist government and exploiting landlords ruling in Gujar.

Although the Shahada movement is led by women, “they are not only more militant and persevering than the men in this movement, they also seem to be more aware of the need for mass organization. They go from hut to hut and urge the men to join [it]” (Mies 64). Another issue women militants struggled against was being paid the same as men; they “work as much as men in the fields, but they only get 1-2 rupees a day, whereas the men get 2-3 rupees, and they have to feed their children and families with their own meager income” (Mies 64). Therefore, in 1973 they marched and shouted “anti-Cujar and anti-government slogans, [singing] revolutionary songs, [agitating] the masses and [leading] them to more militant and bolder action” (Mies 64).

One year later, in 1974, a group of students started a movement in Gujarat called Nav Norman Andolan. On the authority of Bhagat-Ganguly, the Nav Norman movement was a “protest against the rise in the price of food items and corruption issues, and received support from different groups from all over Gujarat” (95). Like the Shahada movement, it was a response to official corruption and their use of force with citizens. Nonetheless, the Nav Norman Andolan movement is considered to be one of the first

successful protests against the state in a short time. “Within ten weeks, it achieved two political objectives: the resignation of the Chief Minister Chiman Patel on 9 February 1974; and the dissolution of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly on 15 March 1974” (Bhagat-Ganguly 95). The Legislative Assembly was founded in 1941, when it consisted of a unicameral legislature in the Indian state of Gujarat. It represents the people, but it can be dissolved by the population if it is considered dishonest. In January, during the second week of the Nav Norman movement, not only students, but also following Bhagat-Ganguly in various regions of Gujarat, a number of area-based organizations were formed, and many of them were made up entirely of women. At various points in time and under diverse conditions, the Andolan was supported by some prominent public figures, including Ravishankar Maharaj, Purushottam Mavalankar, Morarji Desai, Umashankar Joshi, along with veteran lawyers and journalists (98).

In Telugu, “a group of progressive students from Osmania University (Lalitha. K, Geeta Ramaswamy and Rukrnini Menon) founded The Progressive Organization for Women (POW) in 1974” (Kumar-Eligedi 73). They approached social issues from a “Marxist-Leninist and feminist” (Kumar-Eligedi 75) approach. As it was founded by students, they did a good job of translating books from English to the Telugu language, and vice versa; “until the 1980s, there was absence of writing about the feminist perspective in Telugu. The feminist activists and translators who were influenced by international feminist thinking translated the feminist ideas into Telugu to motivate women against the patriarchal norms” (Kumar-Eligedi 75). Those translations encouraged Indian women to struggle against nationalist ideology imposed by government authorities, which kept them in an environment controlled by men, reducing them to a stereotype of mothers, sisters, and wives, limiting their role in social matters. Thanks to reading texts in their native language and their organization, under the leadership of women's organizations women revolted against the dowry system, domestic abuse, and sexual discrimination (Kumar-Eligedi 74). Feminist activism in the Telugu public sphere gained momentum in 1975, which was designated International Women's Year, and later, as an international women's decade (1975–1985).

Many members of POW were inspired by the situations experienced by other women and communities, and their response to the oppressive system, which had increased with colonialism. Being an official organization empowered their cause, and paraphrasing Professor Kumar-Eligedi, with the help of translated feminist literature and

the women's movements, these organizations' activities became more active. The global feminist movement and its experiences have given feminist organizations a theoretical foundation on which to approach the issue of women in Telugu society (74)

The activist translators of POW were essential for the establishment of “feminism as a serious way of thinking through translated feminist texts and indigenous feminist texts from the 1980s to the 2000s” (Kumar- Eligedi 72). When POW was being founded, the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) submitted a report declaring “1974, on the eve of 1975, [...] International Women’s Year by the United Nations” (Bagchi 11). The report was called *Towards Equality*. It was a key step for the feminist movement in India as “this notion of ‘forever becoming’, which was attached to the search for gender equality, was derived from the detailed search in the CSWI report conducted on the condition of women” (Bagchi 11). According to most analyses, the feminist movement started with fragmented female protests in Indian cities and rural towns against patriarchal nationalist discourse. The report *Towards Equality* provided support for the “search that gave an enduring foundation to both Women’s Studies and the women’s movement in India, making good on the claim once made by Vina-di (an Indian academic who is a left-wing activist, feminist, and pioneer in women's studies in India), that Women’s Studies is the intellectual arm of the women’s movement in India” (Bagchi 11). As reported by Bagchi, some of the principles adopted by the CSWI were “the necessity for women’s equality, the improvement of women’s employment, the owing of a special responsibility by society, the admission of women as economic and socially productive family members, and that marriage and motherhood should not become a disability, among other precepts” (12). Gender equality was an acclaimed concept defined in this report and captures the combination “of liberal democracy and a fairly traditional family ideology for women” (Bagchi 12). During the same year, the first university research centre for women’s studies was set up in Mumbai by the Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT) Women's University. As attested by the platform Devex in 2018, “Later, the Institute for Social Studies Trust (ISST) in New Delhi, and the Centre for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS), also in New Delhi, were started. The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) also called for further studies on the social and economic conditions of women” (1). Although there was remarkable development of the feminist movement in India, in 1975, due to an alleged army rebellion, a state of emergency was declared, lasting until 1977, and the internal crisis slowed down feminist

organizations' agenda, but even so new groups of women were formed and tried to find their place within the feminist movement. As specified by Nadkarni, "To silence [the internal political crisis], Indira Gandhi [the first and only female prime Minister of India who belonged to the Indian National Congress] declared a state of emergency [which] suspended the constitution and allowed Gandhi to rule by decree, imprison opposition leaders, and censor the press" (10).

2.3. The Second Phase: Formation and Development of Political and Social Changes

During the fifties, there were three main associations founded to respond to and cope with the new situation in India after its independence in 1947, and the election of the Indian National Congress, which was held in the country between 25 October 1951 and 21 February 1952. The first Congress, inaugurated in 1953, was led mainly by women belonging to the left-wing party called the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW).

In the words of Armstrong:

The decision to form NFIW did not take place without a debate, because a mass organization of women was seen by some in Indian communist parties as a divisive move to separate working class women's struggles from men's. [...] Many communist women held multiple roles in unions and peasant groups alongside their work organizing women into NFIW [...] The leftist women's movement, through the NFIW, took up worker, consumer, and agricultural issues across the country. (Before 34-35)

The NFIW is a political movement that was set up after two main conferences, the Conference of the Women of Asia in 1948, and the pan-Asian, anti-imperialist women's conference in 1949, in opposition to the INC, a party that did not include women's concerns on its agenda. In consonance with Armstrong, the 1948-49 conferences played a crucial role in the formation of an international women's movement focused on creating a leftist, revolutionary, and mass-based movement. They blended elements of social reform feminism, nationalist feminism, state feminism, and leftist feminism to varying degrees (Before 315).

Two years later, in 1955, the non-profit organization Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh (BGMS) was founded in India, which included an affiliation with the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), the largest association of rural women worldwide, set up in 1933. As opposed to the NFIW, the founding and spread of BGMS was not focused on women's political struggles. It was generally concerned about children's basic needs and vulnerable women. They have developed several projects such

as the following: *Anand Dham*, which is “a home for neglected and destitute elderly women, widows, the handicapped, and orphans who are aged 60 and above” (BGMS | Projects); *Santhwana*, with the “aim of assisting women who are victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual abuse and dowry harassment, with highly qualified and trained counselors in operation around the clock to provide guidance, counselling and assistance to women in distress” (BGMS Projects); and *Swadhar*, “for women in distress who are without any social and economic support, who have suffered trauma and abuse at the hands of their husbands, in-laws, and others” (BGMS Projects).

In 1959, seven women in Mumbai founded the Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad cooperative, also known as Lijjat, which promoted a space for women who needed employment to empower their inclusion in the business world. According to research from Reddy, “Over the years, Lijjat has grown into an organization that is helping more than 40,000 members all over the country in both urban and rural areas. It has grown by leaps and bounds in its approximately half a century of existence” (136). Nevertheless, this fast growth is directly linked to a religious atmosphere, since the culture of Lijjat believes the organization offers what is ethical and spiritual, according to God. As reported by Reddy, Lijjat “is a temple, a church, a mosque, a gurudwara, and any other place of worship, where a person devotes their energy not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of all. Thus, in Lijjat work is considered worship” (140).

Due to the wave of refugees as a consequence of the Bengal Partition (1947 – 1965), there were no remarkable feminist organizations founded during those years. However, it was a crucial decade, as Indira Gandhi became the first female prime minister of India in 1966, which will be described in more detail in the following chapter. It was one of the most violent periods in the history of its population. Roy makes the following comments:

Punjab created the new nation-states of India and a spatially fragmented West and East Pakistan. It involved the largest recorded population transfer in history amid horrific mass violence. Between 1946 and 1965, nearly 9 million Hindus and Sikhs moved into India and approximately 5 million Muslims moved to both parts of Pakistan. Partition as the twin facet of freedom remains an apocalyptic event within the South Asian popular imagination, reinforced by family and personal memories of violence, exile, movement, and resettlement (3).

It might be for this reason that the establishment of new feminist associations was lower during this time. Nevertheless, at that time the second feminist wave arrived in the country. According to Pande, the second wave of feminism occurred in the 1960s and

1970s, and focused on protesting women's inequality in various areas such as political rights, family, sexuality, and work (2). This second-wave movement has persisted until the present day and coexists with the current third-wave feminism. According to Phillips, the result of British politics in India during the 19th century “was the stimulation of a wave of political activism among middle-class nonconformists and working-class radicals” (98). In the article, Pande reflects on Phillips’ views about the second wave of feminism, which recognised the close relationship between cultural and political disparities. The movement urged women to view elements of their personal lives as politically charged and indicative of a biased power dynamic. While the first wave of feminism centered on obtaining basic rights like the right to vote, the second wave was more focused on achieving equality in other areas, such as putting an end to discriminatory practices (3). It could be said that during the first wave of Indian feminism activists and scholars focused on the improvement and achievement of women’s basic rights concerning rural communities with vulnerable women. In spite of this, the second feminist wave included all these previous goals and concerns in its agenda along with the presence of women in politics and the equality of their role within Indian society.

In the seventies, new associations such as The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and *Chipko* were born, in which were women from disadvantaged castes became involved with the purpose of mitigating not only inequality between the genders, but also the different social classes. In this same decade, many Hindu activists rejected been categorized was “women of the third world, or even as feminists”, which for some intellectual Hindu women was a term with clearly feminist, white Western connotations with which they did not identify. Even today, the concept of being a “feminist” (Navarro-Tejero, *Sex* 173) is still met with both strong acceptance and rejection. It remains a contentious topic in a society known for its ambiguity and moral degeneration. The question of whether one is a feminist is frequently asked within social and intellectual circles. Some women openly embrace the label, while others remain silent to avoid harassment in the workplace. And still others deny it outright, as if it were a foreign concept (Navarro-Tejero, *Sex* 173).

On the other hand, Indian activist and lawyer Ela Ramesh Bhatt, working at the legal department of the Textile Labour Association and finding a lack of security for working women, founded SEWA in 1972 in Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat. Most of the members belonging to SEWA were employed women from the working class.

However, with time this association dealt with natural disasters and their consequences on the female population. As stated by Enarson and Chakrabarti (213), SEWA has gained knowledge about how to deal with more significant crises over the course of its more than 30 years of experience. The majority of SEWA members live and work in Gujarat state, which has recently experienced earthquakes, cyclones, and other natural disasters. Nearly 20,000 people perished in the devastating Gujarat earthquake in January 2001, with more women than men making up the total death toll (Enarson and Chakrabarti 213). The purpose of SEWA has been to provide help and support to working women who have to balance their professional lives with their family. According to Enarson and Chakrabarti:

The main area where SEWA promotes a different view in disaster response is in the importance of employment. Gender is not about women, but concerns the unequal allocation of power and resources between men and women at home, in the labour market, and in all aspects of daily life. SEWA's values, activities and plans involve women as workers, with a right to self-reliance and full human dignity. (214)

Offering support also meant providing health services, especially for vulnerable women who have suffered an illness after a natural disaster and generally have never been supported by any organization, since it was a new situation for them to be part of the working world in their countries and considered equal to men. According to Enarson and Chakrabarti's testimonies, many SEWA members fell ill following the floods, and the SEWA medical team was seen as a way to improve health rather than just provide medical care, allowing people to return to work and reclaim their independence (215). Members also thought of saving money as a way to prepare for times when there might not be any work, rather than just as a way to buy consumer goods (Chakrabarti 215).

There was another key movement called *Chipko*, founded in 1972 by female peasants and craftswomen, led by two Gandhian activists Sarala Bhen and Mira Bhen. “*Chipko* (literally, cling to) was a movement to prevent forest destruction by timber contractors and was carried out largely by women who were traditionally responsible for fuel, food, and water in the family” (Kumar 358), who then became revolutionaries, as they combined the feminist movement with eco-socialism. Eco-socialism is a term that was coined during the 1970s in Europe, which has its origins in the principles defended by Karl Marx (among others philosophers) at the end of the nineteenth century. Such ideas addressed the negative consequences of globalization and capitalism on the environment and society. As stated by Marxist sociologist Michael Löwy, “Eco-socialism is an attempt to provide a radical civilizational alternative to what Marx called capitalism's ‘destructive

progress'. It advances an economic policy founded on non-monetary and extra-economic criteria of social needs and ecological equilibrium" (294). As mentioned above, the *Chipko* movement bases its ideals on eco-socialism, although these policies are developed from a feminist viewpoint, a perspective that afterward would be called eco-feminism. The term for this branch of feminism was coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, defined as a theory that would connect women's subordination to the destruction of nature. As described by d'Eaubonne "one of the two most serious threats to humanity is the current world population rate. The other, which is parallel to it, is the destruction of the environment. We will return to this in our conclusions on the need to develop an "eco-feminism" (56). This is the first time that Françoise d'Eaubonne mentions the term in her paper. Additionally, in the pages that followed, she stated the following: The new perspectives of feminism distinguish themselves from the *Mission Laïque Française*⁸, not by using a more traditional and non-underground language, but rather by accepting an early stage of organization and the concern of the female "masses", which by its overall objective responds to the charge of fragmentation (d'Eaubonne 151). Although the term has his origins in 1974, the *Chipko* movement has been spreading across rural India since it was concerned about environmental matters. Women seeking an equal position within Indian society started to support this ideology, especially those affected by the local forest policies.

According to Jain, the *Chipko* movement, which focuses on safeguarding forests and maintaining the ecological balance in the sub-Himalayan region, is a social movement that the involvement of women from the Garhwal region has significantly impacted (1788-1789). The *Chipko* workers' message resonated with women, who could see the correlation between their exploitation and the damage to the mountain slopes caused by commercial interests. This realisation made women feel a sense of urgency to support the movement to preserve the ecological balance in the area. Jain explains that the reason why men did not see these connections, but women did, is tied to their means of subsistence. (Jain 1788-1789). This interpretation of the feminist movement in India confirms once again the heterogeneity of the women's struggle due to variety in the population and the size of the country. However, part of the feminist ideology also concerns particular situations that affect the population connected to the rural world.

⁸ The *Mission Laïque Française* is a French NGO founded in 1902 that promotes French language and culture abroad.

On the other hand, another remarkable association focused on scholars and research was founded in 1973 by twelve female scientists, which was called Indian Women Scientists' Association (IWSA). According to Munshi, the IWSA carries out the following:

Regularly meetings, conferences and seminars that highlight issues that affect woman scientists, as well as scientific issues that affect women are organized. ISWA gives awards, honours, and scholarships to deserving candidates every year. Moreover, the Women Scientists Scheme (WOS-A) of the View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk, brought to you by CORE, and provided by E-LIS Department of Science and Technology, is aimed at providing opportunities to women scientists and technologists for pursuing research in new areas of science and engineering. (2)

It includes a wider range of women achieving their goals from different perspectives and conditions. While the previous organization was focused on rural women, IWSA provided a space for female scientists who had not been seriously taken into account before. The association divides their agenda mainly into two sections. The first is the Science Programs, which include a science nurture program, popular science lecture series, science refresher courses, workshops, research projects, green initiatives, conferences and seminars. The second section is called Community Programs, which includes a working women's hostel, day care center, nursery school, community health care center, library, reading room, computer center, as well as scholarships, awards and diplomas in Early Childhood Care in Education.

During the same year, Pappa Umanath founded the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in Tamil Nadu in 1973, working for women's rights and for their education, employment and status, along with issues like casteism, communalism, child rights and disaster aid. Several other affiliated State-based organizations developed, and the unified All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) was established in 1981. AIDWA has an annual membership fee of one rupee, which allows for policy-independence from donor agencies and governments. According to Armstrong, women belonging to AIDWA has carried out the following actions:

They chose to directly oppose liberalization and the explosive forces it fuelled. As a left-wing women's organization, AIDWA did not blink. The bulk of its membership was among rural and urban poor working women, and its strength in numbers was bolstered by its ideological tenets that sought to combat feudal and capitalist forms of women's oppression and exploitation. For the first ten years of its existence, AIDWA had operated with the theory that working women could unite with middle class women on common issues such as high commodity prices

and violence against women. After 1991, this theory of women's solidarity was seen to be insufficient. (Gender 2)

Moreover, AIDWA works for the welfare of women, including working women, women in rural areas, and women belonging to the Muslim and other minority communities. It also campaigns for the repeal of sexist laws and implementation of policies that promote gender equality. In the words of Armstrong (Gender 2), "The first step was for AIDWA to grow into one of the biggest women's organisations in the world. Secondly, most of its membership was made up of working-class urban and rural women. The fact that AIDWA achieved its steady growth during the height of neoliberalism, a set of economic and social principles that typically works to make mass organisation ineffective, if not nearly impossible, is even more significant" (2).

According to Navarro-Tejero, "The vast majority of women belonging to organisations which were opposed to Indira Gandhi's perspective were incarcerated, and those who had published their work stayed hidden or silent, waiting for new opportunities to arrive" (Literatura 234), despite the unpromising scenario until 1977. After two years, India realised the need for an egalitarian society, which contributed to the emergence of new groups of feminists. When the state of emergency finished in 1977, the Janata Party (JNP) overcame the Congress and popularised its nationalist ideology of traditional Hinduism. As reported by Gull and Shafi, "The distinguishing feature of the new women's groups was that many of them opted for autonomy, consisting of separate, women-only groups, rejecting any political party affiliation or conventional organisational structure, despite the fact that most of their members belonged to other political groups on the left and far left (51).

The difference among these groups of women "became clear at the first national conference of socialist feminists in India, organised by women in Bombay in 1978" (Gull and Shafi 51). In the conference, it was crucial to define some specific terms and the differences, as stated by Gull and Shafi, such as 'activist' and 'general body of women', or 'conscious-raising' and 'theory generation'. Categorising these terms would promote the growth of feminist identity in Indian society and help the population to join and support organisations that offered an alternative ideology to the traditional nationalist Hindu feeling that was arousing nostalgia for a dominant male civilisation. "With women's studies being recognized as a politically significant activity in the quest for equality, some of the pioneers got together to organize the first National Conference on

Women's Studies in 1981 at SNDT University, Mumbai. This historic conference viewed women's studies as a 'critical perspective' that needed to be integrated into all disciplines and recognised the need for universities to focus on women's issues through research, teaching and engagement in activities" (Devex). After the first National Conference on Women's studies, the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) was established as an official organisation in 1982. It allowed the development and publication of academic interdisciplinary research concerned with the feminist movement.

In the late seventies, some professions that "felt the influence of feminism were in journalism, academia, and medicine. Soon after the feminist movement began, most of the major English language dailies had assigned one or more women journalists to write exclusively on feminist issues" (Gull and Shafi 52). It was a significant change in the feminist trend, as it started with the protests of rural illiterate women yet turned to scholars at the beginning of the eighties. It would be those members who would give shape to the movement. At the end of 1978, the Stree Shakti Sanghantana (literally translated as Women's Power Organization), was founded in Hyderabad, Delhi. It was an activist women's collective that recovered elements of "women's history that have been repressed, distorted, or simply lost" (Stoltz 734), thereby re-defining it to create a sense of common identity. One of the examples of their efforts is the book *We were Making History: Women and the Telangana Uprising* (1989), in which they interview women about their experiences in the Telangana movement (1948-1951), *guerrillas*, protests, and repression by authorities.

In 1975, the Indian women's rights non-profit organisation, The Stree Mukti Sanghatana (SMS), whose name means "Women's Liberation Organization", was founded in Mumbai. The main purpose of the group was to achieve women's freedom by empowering women. It also strives to promote women's education and health, as well as to put an end to violence against women. The organisation has sought to improve the social and economic position of women in India, as well as to boost their political engagement. The Stree Mukti Sanghatana has been active in a number of activities to promote women's rights, including the development of rape crisis centers, promotion of literacy and education, and supplying health services. The organisation has also campaigned to end violence against women, especially domestic violence. As mentioned by Gaffney, "In its Declaration, SMS states that the women of India must be liberated

from economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological oppression, and therefore, the organisation seeks to address all areas through different areas of its work” (12).

Suffering by the underprivileged, especially women living in extreme poverty and squalor, inspired the establishment of the Working Women's Forum (WWF) in 1978, when a group of women who worked in several NGOs in Islamabad came together to build an organisation that could address the problems of women working in the underground economy. The organisation began with 25 women and has grown to over 4,000 women from around Pakistan. The organisation is led by a Board of Directors, who are elected by the organisation's general body. The WWF also has a number of working committees that are in charge of carrying out the organisation's mission. Since Indian banks tried to profit from the working women's new situation, the WWF was established to protect and support them. As reported by Chambers, “For those who seek to help the oppressed and excluded to help themselves, there are many lessons in the experience of the Working Women's Forum. Four factors in its success have been mentioned: putting poor women's priorities first, working only with the poor, promoting leadership from below, and exercising clout to get the poor their rights” (25).

Initially, WWF focused on providing microcredits and vocational training to the poorest women, but it quickly saw the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to women's empowerment. According to Chen, “In recognition of the potentially divisive factors of caste, religion and politics within Indian society, the Forum's founders adopted certain strong ideological positions. The Forum would be pro-women, anti-caste, pro-secular, anti-politics, and anti-dowry” (3). Over the years, WWF has expanded into a countrywide network of organisations and individuals working for women's empowerment in Pakistan. The network enables the exchange of information and experiences while advocating for women's rights through policy discourse and lobbying. Through training and technical assistance, the WWF also seeks to strengthen the capacity of its members and partners. The last outstanding association set up during this decade is the Association of Theologically Trained Women of India (ATTWI). As attested by Prakasha Rao and Lipp-Nathaniel:

It is common knowledge that patriarchy has profoundly shaped the theology regarding the place and role of women in society in major world religions, especially Hinduism, which placed women lower than men in the natural order of living beings. Thankfully, this low regard of women in India is increasingly a thing of the past. Independent India has recognized that the development of the country

depends on the participation and development of both men and women in its social, cultural, political and economic fields. (258)

ATTWI is a religious organisation for female theologians. It was started in 1978 in Chennai with approximately 350 members. ATTWI aims to advance the professional growth of women theologians in India and to guarantee that their voices are heard in the church and society. ATTWI hosts an annual conference that serves as a place for theological reflection, networking, and professional growth. *Women and Theology in India*, a periodical published by the organisation, is also available. Nowadays, The Asia Pacific Forum of Theological Education and the World Council of Church's Commission on Theology and Justice are both members of the ATTWI.

The eighties were a very active decade for the feminist movement, in which there were several campaigns against violence toward women, focusing on dowry and crime. These protests were essential in creating new legislation and promoting social justice. As affirmed by Flavia Agnes, an Indian women's rights lawyer, "The amendment to rape laws enacted in 1983 was the predecessor of all the later amendments that followed during this decade. Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code, which deals with the issue of rape, had remained unchanged in the statute books since 1860" (20). The Mathura rape case sparked protests against rape during the eighties in the previous years, so the public protests focused their attention on redefinition of the concept of *consent*. Flavia Agnes expresses that "the Mathura judgement highlighted the fact that in a rape trial, it is challenging for a woman to prove 'beyond all reasonable doubt' that she did not consent, as required under criminal law, [so] the major demand was that the onus of proving consent should shift from the prosecution to the accused" (20). However, the other main demand was that "in a rape trial, a woman's past sexual history and general character should not be used as evidence" (Agnes 20). These demands were taken into account by a Law Commission, which included them due to the anti-rape campaign, although "the bill which was presented to the parliament in August 1980 did not include any of these positive recommendations regulating police power" (Agnes 20). It was more proof that the Indian feminist movement was still a progressive struggle to achieve equality, which had been trying for centuries to abolish injustice in a nationalist and, in some cases, corrupt patriarchal system. The [anti-rape] campaign has not succeeded in developing a new definition of rape beyond the parameters of a patriarchal value system. In fact, the

same old notions of chastity, virginity, the premium on marriage, and the fear of female sexuality are reflected in the judgements of the post-amendment period (Agnes 23).

At the beginning of the 1980's, the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) was founded in India. This is an independent public policy research center in India dedicated to women's empowerment. CWDS is a feminist organisation that believes in the transforming power of women's collective action and strives to build an egalitarian society. It is one of the country's few institutions that focuses solely on women's issues and concerns. During its formative phase, one of CWDS' commitments was to be a catalyst toward advancing the constitutional values of women's equality and women's full and equal participation in public life (Centre for Women's Development Studies – An Autonomous Research Institute Supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research). CWDS conducts research, lobbying, and networking in order to influence national and state policy and practice. It also offers training and assistance to women's groups and networks around the country. CWDS is headquartered in New Delhi and has a countrywide footprint.

Mahila Milan is another federation of women's collectives founded in the early 1980s in Bombay, India, which helps its members with their savings and credit needs. In addition, the group engages in income-generating initiatives, leadership development, and collective organisation. Its Hindi name translates to "Women Together" in English. As stated by Sheela Patel, some of the schemes designed to support women involved in the network of distinguished collectives are, among others, "The formation of a cooperative, Milan Nagar, to seek an alternative land site for their housing, the opening of bank accounts and saving money for new homes, ensuring that everyone has a ration card, and dealing with crises, such as providing emergency loans or helping with problems from the police" (10).

Basically, the organization was created in response to the growing economic instability of the city's underprivileged women. The group provides a forum for women to share knowledge, resources, and support. Mahila Milan has also been involved in campaigns concerning violence against women, access to education, and food security. A year later, in 1981, a group of lawyers launched The Lawyers Collective, an organisation dedicated to empowering and changing the condition of marginalised groups through the practical application of the law in India. Two of its originators are Indira Jaising, a senior advocate at the Supreme Court of India, and her husband, Anand Grover, who is a public

health specialist and the UN's director of the HIV/AIDS unit. According to their website, The Lawyers Collective actively employs the legal system as a tool to address pressing issues like domestic violence, workplace sexual harassment, matrimonial and family-related issues, crimes against women, especially sexual assault, and reproductive rights, as well as rights of the LGBTQ community and access to medicine and healthcare. Our goal is to use the law to raise the voices of disadvantaged groups (Lawyers Collective). The declared goals of the organisation are to empower and transform the position of marginalised groups through the effective use of the law, as well as to advance human rights and the rule of law in India and abroad. Since its inception in 1981, the LC has been actively engaged with the entire legal regime in addressing the rights of marginalised groups. Between 1981 and 1982, Indian activist Ela Ramesh Bhatt (founder of SEWA) established the Friends of Women's World Banking (FWWB), an organisation dedicated to the following:

It was created to focus on the need for women's direct access to financial services and to recognize women's role in building the nation's economy, [promoting] direct participation by poor women in the economy through access to financial services. FWFB was created to extend and expand informal credit support and networks within India to link them to a global movement. (FWWB)

According to Krause, the main inconvenience about approaching this kind of non-profit organization, which provides help and support for the unorganised sector in the country of India, is that they have been working in India since the twentieth century. However, "The experiences from these insurance schemes are rarely documented and therefore not available. There is a need to explore and evaluate other active insurance schemes in order to draw upon their experiences" (Krause 3). However, most of these organisations provide enough information on their social networks and official websites, created during the second decade of the twenty-first century. Some of the strategies covered by the FWFB are "building the capacity of promising and committed people's institutions to play a leading role in providing financial services to the poor" (FWWB).

In 1984, the mother's association called The Naga Mothers' Association (NMA) was created, and nowadays it is considered as one of the most prominent groups in the region. It is a network of mothers' clubs in northeast India that advocates the Naga people's rights. The organisation has been successful in drawing attention to the Naga people's problems, such as a lack of infrastructure, education, and health care in the region. The NMA has also been effective in advocating improved access of the Naga

people to government services. Furthermore, Ghosh (1754) mentions that one can detect resistance in the metaphorical *crying eye* of Naga motherhood. It is a gaze that directs its attention back to the intentionally male-dominated space of conflict. Thus, the NMA criticises a volatile environment that appears to have become lost in the maze of violence through the emblem itself.

To achieve its goals, the NMA has used a range of techniques, including public protests, lobbying of government officials, and advocacy campaigns. In the words of Narita et al., “Northeast India has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal values and norms, so the NMA extended their traditional role as peacemaker in the region” (1). The NMA's most important initiative, however, has been the development of local mothers' groups. These groups enable the NMA to establish links with local communities and better understand their needs. The NMA also uses local groups to spread information about the organisation's activity and to recruit new members. K.V. Stanley and M.L. Parashuram founded Odanadi Seva Samsthe in 1984, a social and non-governmental organisation based in Mysore. Odanadi provides a range of services, which include the rescue and rehabilitation of trafficked and sexually exploited women and children, counselling and psycho-social support, education and vocational training, HIV/AIDS prevention and support, and legal aid and advocacy, among others. In addition, this NGO has been working for the reintegration and empowerment of these trafficked and sexually exploited women and children. According to The Guardian, “when we first started, it was commonplace for women and children to be openly abused in the streets – even by the police. But we challenged those practices and our work has resulted in a real change of attitude” (Duncan).

Another notable non-profit organisation is Sabala, founded in 1986 by Mallamma Yalawar, which is dedicated to empowering women and children in the arid district of Bijapur, India. Sabala is dedicated to the empowerment of women, and committed to all women's concerns. According to its website, “Mallamma Yalawar gathered a team whose passions were aligned with women's empowerment. The Sabala team strives to further their cause through all stages of life by educating and providing opportunities” (Sabala Heritage Home). If women can achieve opportunities in the Indian educational system, they will be independent to make their own decisions. Sabala teaches vocational skills to girls and women so they can earn a living and support their families. Sabala also encourages the dalit and backward groups about women's traditional arts and crafts, as

well as Muslim traditional arts. This not only provides them with a sustainable source of income, but it also aids in preserving their traditional art and culture. Sabala also aims to improve the socioeconomic status of women and children, advocating gender equality and women's empowerment.

The last notable establishment founded during this decade is the non-governmental organisation known as Sanlaap, set up in 1987, which considers sex trafficking as modern-day slavery and offers plaintiffs a way to recover and be independent. Sanlaap is concerned with the importance of research and professional training. Consequently, it fights against sex trafficking with facilities and programs to train and educate its members. The organisation performs the following activities:

Sanlaap is recognized as a competent Training Institution and carries out regular training programs for the Police Training Academy, Judges Training College, the Border Security Force, and for ICDS Anganwadi workers and CDPO's. In 2006, Sanlaap started its first formal school, a unique venture and the first of its kind globally. Police officers were trained on Trafficking and Child Protection issues from the districts of Darjeeling and Kolkata (Sanlaap India).

Sanlaap has been working with migrants, refugees, and other underprivileged groups in India since its foundation. It adheres to the principles of equality and social justice and works to advance the rights of the most vulnerable people by providing them with chances for education, livelihood, and empowerment. Sanlaap's work is based on the principle that every human has the right to a dignified existence, with access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, health, education, and a means of subsistence. Sanlaap believes that every human being has the potential to contribute to society's progress and that every individual has the right to basic resources and opportunity.

In 1988, in ten districts of Uttar Pradesh, the Government of India approved an educational program to empower women and provide them with tools and skills to have access to education. The program was called the *Mahila Samakhya* (MS). In the words of Jandhyala:

Although it started in Gujarat and Karnataka during 1988-89, [it] has grown into a large-scale programme and is currently being implemented in 60 backward districts in the country covering over 9,000 villages in 10 states. It is estimated that over two lakh women are actively mobilised and organised by the programme with a much larger number being impacted indirectly (1)

In other words, The *Mahila Samakhya* (MS) initiative of the Gujarat state government aims to empower rural women and assist them in participating in the state's development. Women receive training and support in areas such as health, education, and

economic empowerment through the program. It also assists women in forming self-help organisations as well as gaining access to government programs and services. According to Kandpal et al., “the program provides literacy camps, adult education classes, and vocational training. The program also creates support groups on issues of social importance, such as domestic violence and alcoholism” (3). It can be assumed that this program approaches educational issues from a different perspective, pointing out the importance of culture and knowledge in achieving gender equality. As seen by Kandpal et al., the literature identifies political participation, physical mobility, and access to outside employment as three crucial elements of gender empowerment (2-3). These factors represent a wide range of areas where a program like *Mahila Samakhya* can empower women, including in the economic, social, and domestic spheres (Kandpal et al. 2-3). The *Mahila Samakhya* program of the Gujarat state government has three main goals: to empower rural women and assist them in participating in the state's development process; improving the quality of life for rural women by providing training and support in health, education, and economic empowerment; and to assist rural women in gaining access to government schemes and services. The *Mahila Samakhya* program has been a huge success in terms of accomplishing its goals. Due to a lack of feminist government intervention in previous decades, it can be said that it has assisted tens of thousands of rural women in gaining access to government schemes and services, as well as improving the quality of life for many women through training and educational support.

Regarding anti-dowry campaigns, there was “the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, [...] consisting of only eight sections, which were full of contradictions and loopholes” (Agnes 24). It implied that the limits toward dowry were blurred, and that parents could still contribute to the husband’s family in kind, such as with presents, property, clothes, etc. “Most cities in India witnessed public protests against dowry deaths, which received wide media coverage” (Agnes 24). Dowry deaths are murders or suicide of married women due to a constant violent atmosphere and harassment by their husbands. According to Agnes, in June of 1980 there was a bill introduced in parliament, and “the findings of the committee were that the definition of ‘dowry’ was too narrow and vague”. However, in 1984 a bill introduced in parliament did not consider “the suggestions of imposing a ceiling on gifts and marriage expenses” (Agnes 24). Regarding domestic violence, “until 1983 there were no specific provisions pertaining to violence within the home. Husbands could be convicted under the general provisions of murder, abetment to

suicide, causing harm, and wrongful confinement” (Agnes 25). As attested by Agnes, “it was really difficult for a woman to prove she had suffered violence by her husband, as the harassment is committed at home there are no witnesses; for this reason, a law was necessary to guarantee women’s welfare even before a crime is committed” (25). During the anti-dowry and anti-rape protests “a large number of women came out of their cloistered silence and started seeking help to prevent domestic violence. Since the police refused to register their complaints under the existing provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), a demand was issued for a special enactment” (Agnes 25). Thanks to women activists complaining against dowry deaths, there was a reform of laws against violence, and criminal acts were amended two times, in 1983 and 1986. However, the new reforms did not guarantee women’s protection concerning domestic violence, as “placing dowry violence on a special pedestal denied recognition and legitimacy to the need for protection against violence by all women under all circumstances” (Agnes 25).

The last decade of the twentieth century began with the foundation of two controversial associations, since they were formed by women, although their history shows evidence that they were anti-feminist. It is interesting to consider them in this study, since they might become an example of *trompe l’oeil*. The first is called Durga Vahini, an Indian Hindu women's paramilitary organization. The right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) created the organisation in 1991 with the objective of defending Hindu women and promoting Hinduism. Several episodes of violence against Muslims and Christians have been linked to the organisation. The Durga Vahini has over 10,000 active members and is headquartered in Varanasi. According to Rao, “the Hindu ideology that the Durga Vahini espouses is that a girl becomes a ‘real woman’ by getting married and having children, or in other words, reproductive heteronormativity” (133). It runs training camps around India, where young Hindu women are taught how to wield rifles and other weapons, as well as Hindu values. Durga Vahini supports Hindutva ideology, instilling it the girls during their training in the camps. The other controversial organisation is the National Commission for Women (NCW), a statutory body of the Government of India established on January 29, 1992. It is assumed that the NCW is tasked with defending and promoting women's rights in India. It is also in charge of monitoring the Government of India's implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The NCW is led by a chairperson, Mamta Sharma, and consists of ten members. The President of India appoints the chairperson, while the federal government appoints its members. The NCW is expected to dispel the worries of the Indian population, particularly women's worries. Nevertheless, as reported by Arya, the organisation has been in the mass media throughout its history due to its failure to fulfill its main purpose, as the NCW has expressed its patriarchal ideology instead of providing an alternative path to support feminism:

Many women activists and organisations [...have complained about...] the conduct of the commission for many successive years, highlighting the manner in which the NCW has obscured systemic injustices to women, trivialised their rape, and reduced the dignity of the institution, indicating an institutional collapse of this national body. Citing many cases, the women's organisations have asked in their letter to safeguard the political autonomy of this nodal women's rights institution by replacing the current nomination system with a transparent, democratic and non-partisan selection process. (112)

Article 14, an online journal especially concerned with the injustices in India, published an article concluding that the NCW had failed to make meaningful progress in preserving women's rights and well-being when addressing issues such as violence against women, maternal mortality, and education, as its chairperson has avoided the real problems that women have to face in their daily lives in the country:

Highlighting the “welfare” of women is far-fetched in a state that is unable to guarantee protection of the most basic rights for its women. Even though Uttar Pradesh holds the record for the highest number of crimes against women and girls in the country, Sharma failed to draw the Chief Minister's attention to it and carefully deflected the real issue. Earlier, on 20 October 2020, Sharma had a meeting with the governor of Maharashtra to discuss rising “love jihad” cases, placing it among other crimes of gender-based violence, such as rape, even though the organisation she heads has clarified that “no specific data under the category of complaints related to love jihad is maintained by the NCW” (Chander).

These organisations represent the patriarchal ideology of the country. Even in the contemporary period, the population is exposed to a conservative nationalist ideology hidden within new women's foundations that perpetuate oppressive and ancient conduct toward women, even though the organisations themselves are managed by women.

2.4. The Third Phase: Advancement in the Legal Rights

The first organisation concerned with the achievement of equality during the nineties was Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM), a non-profit organisation

that works primarily in six areas in southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka to empower underprivileged populations. According to its website:

SANGRAM is unique in being a women-led, rights-based group that seeks to change community norms and tackle gender inequities at the grassroots level. These inequities include gender-based violence (GBV), access to resources, and rights in terms of protection, property, and power. SANGRAM also works at a deeper level by addressing male norms. (SANGRAM)

The organisation was formed in 1992 in Sangli by activist Meena Seshu after witnessing people in the nation dying from HIV in the 1980s. As specified by Pillai et al. “working with a modest budget, Seshu hired a small staff, and in 1992 SANGRAM began working with 16 women involved in prostitution and sexual work” (315). Meena Seshu started SANGRAM to promote the empowerment of sex workers, vulnerable women, and unprotected minorities who lacked access to adequate assistance services, as well as to improve health and social welfare conditions. SANGRAM is India's first and only sex workers' collective. On January 25, 1993, the Maharashtra State Commission for Women (MSCW) was founded. The Maharashtra State Commission for Women is a statutory entity established under the Maharashtra State Commission for Women Act of 1993. The Commission is tasked with investigating and examining all issues concerning women's development and empowerment, as well as recommending corrective actions. The Chairperson of the Maharashtra State Commission for Women is assisted by two members. The Secretariat of the Commission is located in Mumbai. As reported on its official website:

The main focus identified by the commission is the eradication of violence against woman. As soon as any incident related to exploitation, molestation, or atrocities against woman comes to the notice of the Commission, immediate steps are taken to intervene with the respective governmental and police authority in order to ensure that proper investigations are conducted and the offenders prosecuted. (MSCW)

The Commission's specific roles include the following: reviewing the governments' and other agencies' existing policies and programs related to women's advancement and empowerment and suggesting amendments or new measures for their effective implementation; investigating legal and administrative barriers to women's advancement and empowerment and making recommendations for their removal; and reviewing the operations of the various statutory and non-statutory agencies. MSCW is extremely concerned with women's mental health, as mentioned by Maitra in her report:

The Maharashtra State Commission for Women was very keen to understand the conditions of women in mental hospitals, [...] Domestic violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, early marriage, unwanted pregnancies and abortions, marital discord, etc., are known to contribute to high levels of emotional distress in women. The Commission [MSCW] considered this very important for a thorough study of the status of women in mental hospitals in the State.

The Maharashtra State Commission has developed several studies focused on matters related to the improvement of women's conditions by reviewing existing unbalanced laws that subjugate them. Vanangana, a non-governmental organisation of rural community-based women's rights collectives, headquartered in Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh, has been operating since 1993 and is harnessing the power of storytelling to shatter the silence around sexual violence and encourage women to speak up and seek justice. Dalit women are one of the groups most impacted by illiteracy. Therefore, being exposed to the NGO's activities is extremely beneficial to them. The origin of Vanangana comes from "women with particular technical skills [who] came forward to form collectives through the efforts of the Mahila Samakhya Program" (Kukreja and Khan 153). The Mahila Samakhya Program has been successful, since many of the women involved have gathered together to create a formal organisation to help more women in the city of Uttar Pradesh, and later, in 2003, in the city of Banda. As stated by Kukreja and Khan, "since 1994, a system has slowly evolved of reporting these cases to the authorities and systematically reacting to cases of violence. Slowly, women have started approaching Vanangana for help and support, and thus, violence has become a major concern of Vanangana's activities" (154).

Thousands of rural women and girls in Bundelkhand have worked with Vanangana to end sexual abuse and promote gender equality. Traditional songs, stories, and dances are used by the collective to raise awareness about women and encourage them to tell their stories and denounce their conditions when they are victims of domestic violence. Nevertheless, creating a debate after each performance was essential to be able to recognise the problem and violence suffered by abuse. As mentioned by Srivastava:

The play was followed by an open discussion in the villages. Since there had been recent incidents of violence in these villages, there was tension and some acrimony. However, Vanangana activists were able to contain this situation because the objective was to initiate a debate, create awareness and build public opinion against it. (454)

In such cases, the use of performing arts could prove to be a powerful tool in breaking the silence around taboo subjects and empowering people to complain and

reflect on their situation to take action through the organisation. Established in Kerala in the same year 1993, Anweshi Women's Counselling Centre is a non-profit, women-only organisation dedicated to the development of women's and girls' lives in India. The Hindu word *Anweshi* means "seeker", which is one of its main objectives, looking for women and girls who have experienced violence and abuse and providing them with therapy and assistance from the organisation. As described on their official website:

Anweshi, through its various activities, attempts to address the issue of gender-based violence in the state of Kerala. Our strength lies in the commitment towards gender justice and women's rights. Our services are used by women from all economic classes, castes and religious communities, especially from the poorer and marginalized sections of Kerala. (Anweshi Women's Counselling Center)

It also offers gender-based violence training and awareness programs to professionals, service providers, and the general public. Anweshi also advocates and educates the public on the prevention of violence against women and girls. Self-help groups are encouraged by Anweshi. It also conducts research and documentation on women's concerns and promotes the implementation of policies and programs that meet women's needs.

After the Fourth Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995, as stated by Guru, "an independent and autonomous assertion of dalit women's identity was first expressed in the formation of the National Federation of dalit Women (NFDW) in Delhi on August 11" (2548). NFDW is an autonomous organisation of grassroots dalit women in India that was created in 1995 and is dedicated to advancing the rights of dalit women and girls. The NFDW aims to empower dalit women and girls to participate fully in society and achieve gender equality. It seeks to strengthen the capability of its member groups to successfully fight for dalit women's and girls' rights by advocating legislative changes that address discrimination and violence against dalit women. However, although the caste factor was supposed to be abolished after the independence of India, NFDW complains about this situation, since dalit women are one of the groups who suffer more sexual harassment in the country. According to Guru:

The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against Dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude. This differential experience was expressed by dalit women activists at the Delhi meet and previously at a conclave organised by Satyashodhak Mahila Aghadi in Maharashtra. However, these activists lament the situation of the caste system. (2548)

Creating a platform so women could report on the real situation and share their experiences in order to empower them was essential in abolishing the decadent situation they were involved in daily within their communities. As in Kannabiran's testimony, the state has abandoned democratic governance, there is a rise in religious nationalism, fundamentalism, and caste chauvinism, and globalisation has had disastrous effects on the poor (almost exclusively the dalit), and the situation of dalit women is particularly troubling (4).

For that reason, The NFDW was essential in the growth of India's dalit women's movement. The federation was successful in getting a chapter on dalit women included in the National Policy for Women, as well as special provisions for dalit women in a variety of government projects and programs. The NFDW has also worked to improve awareness of dalit women's and girls' issues, as well as to strengthen the capability of its member groups to successfully advocate for dalit women's and girls' rights. According to Anandhi and Kapadia, “many dalit women writers have risen to prominence more recently, lending a voice to dalit women through their literary creations. They include Bama Faustina Soosairaj, whose autobiographical novel, *Karukku* (1992), was the first Tamil dalit text on a Christian Catholic dalit community” (69). Focusing on women's labour conditions, thanks to NFDW their work has started to be considered part of Indian culture and was to become a benchmark during the next decade thanks to the struggle for their rights.

In 1996, The Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) collective was founded by sex workers who saw the need for a voice and representation in the face of prejudice and abuse. VAMP is a membership-based organisation dedicated to sex workers' empowerment via advocacy, capacity-building, and human rights-based initiatives. VAMP's work includes creating a safe and welcoming space for sex workers to meet, organise, and share resources, advocating the recognition of sex work as a legitimate kind of work and sex workers' rights, and providing services and support to sex workers who have experienced violence or abuse. As stated by Pillai et al., VAMP is the “sister organisation [of] Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM), [since both] programmes reach deeply into the rural communities around Sangli, extending to ten administrative districts in the states of Maharashtra and northern Karnataka” (315). VAMP is a safe and accepting environment where sex workers can meet, organise, and share resources. They also give sex workers a chance to be involved in decision-making

that affects their lives. VAMP is a proponent of recognising sex work as a valid type of employment and sex workers' rights. Nevertheless, VAMP and SANGRAM consider some terms differently when approaching the cause. According to Pillai et al.:

Through this process, SANGRAM's peer education programme was also transformed, and women's experiences began to influence how outreach work was conducted. For example, VAMP, the collective which resulted from the early work of SANGRAM, prefers to use the concept of 'responsible sex' as opposed to 'safe sex' in its own work to emphasise that 'people in prostitution and sex work' (PPS) value themselves, and owe it to themselves to use a condom every time they have sex. (316)

While offering alternative opportunities to sex workers, it is essential to know that both SANGRAM and VAMP fight against some feminist groups (The Veshya Anya Mukti Parishad), as they oppose a specific school of feminism that collaborates with the far right and supports the anti-trafficking narrative, and which sees prostitution as a form of violence against women. These discourses analyse the sex trade using a limited framework and frequently come from those in privileged positions of class, race, or caste. In their struggle against the violent patriarchal atmosphere of sex workers, they claim that their goal is to create and consolidate a shared identity among women who work in the sex industry, allowing them to express and enforce their full range of rights while also protecting themselves against HIV infection. In the same year, 1996, Nanhi Kali was established. Nanhi Kali is a non-governmental organisation in India that provides poor girls with the opportunity to complete ten years of schooling and beyond. This organisation started "Project Nanhi Kali" in 2005 for the purpose of breaking the cycle of poverty by empowering young women to build a better future for themselves and their families. The program has served nearly 1 million girls since it was started by Anand Gopal Mahindra and has been recognised as a national pioneer in girls' education. As stated by Bordoloi et al.:

Students who are selected for Nanhi Kali receive both financial and academic support that allows female children to access quality education, attend school with dignity, and reduce the chances of dropping out. For providing such support, Project Nanhi Kali is working with 19 NGO implementation partners at the grassroots level. The girls attend special classes to learn math, science, and language. (10)

The initiative operates in 15 Indian states and has over 1,500 partner schools across the country. Breaking the cycle of poverty and empowering girls to create a brighter future for themselves and their families are among the program's goals. Other

goals include providing girls from disadvantaged backgrounds with quality education and opportunities for empowerment and leadership, as well as supporting girls throughout their educational journey and assisting them in transitioning into successful young women.

Another vital organisation during 1996 was The RAHI Foundation, an Indian non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the lives of women survivors of incest and child sexual abuse and their families. They describe their initiative as “a feminist group that has created a supportive environment for survivors. It goes beyond ‘breaking the silence’ and has developed a powerful voice that strives to mainstream the discussion about Incest and CSA in India, and includes it in social dialogue” (RAHI Foundation). RAHI also provides services and assistance to people with disabilities and their families, emphasising rural and neglected populations. RAHI also promotes inclusive education and job opportunities for people with disabilities and campaigns for their rights. They are considered to be consciously involved in the feminist movement. “While firmly located within the feminist movement in the country, RAHI also straddles the different strongly related areas of women’s rights, child rights, mental health, trauma, and sexuality” (RAHI Foundation). The organisation uses new and successful approaches to run programs and workshops. It offers information, tools, and referrals while cultivating a network of hand-picked partners.

Sister Lucy Kurien, a social worker and women's rights activist, launched Maher, an interfaith and caste-free Indian non-governmental organisation, in 1996. The organisation works in India to promote peace, social justice, and human rights. Maher's work includes supporting children's rights, interfaith communication, ending violence against women, building homes for children and women, forming support groups, and encouraging women's empowerment. As described on their homepage, “*Maher* means ‘Mother's Home’: a haven of hope, belonging and understanding. Our mission is to help destitute women, children and men from all over India exercise their right to a higher quality of life, irrespective of gender, caste, creed or religion” (Maher Ashram India). She committed her life to campaigning for social justice and human rights after witnessing injustice and violence in her community. In the early 1990s, Kurien began working with women's organisations, and in 1996 she launched Maher to address the realities society was avoiding and violence against vulnerable groups. According to their description, their mission is to do the following:

Identify and understand the root causes of violence and despair experienced by women and children in India. Develop and deliver services to address these root causes and their effects in villages and slums so women and children can be healthy, happy and self-reliant. Where possible, support family reunification, providing services, personal and spiritual counselling, work training and more, as needed, in order to support healthy and stable homes. (Maher Ashram India)

In 1997, the local self-government of Kerala, through The State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM), carried out a program called Kudumbashree, which “in the Malayalam language means ‘prosperity of the family’” (Kudumbashree). According to Devika and Thampi, the well-known Kudumbashree initiative of the Kerala government is characterised as a women's empowerment program for eradicating poverty as one of its primary objectives. This goal is actively promoted in the media (34). Kudumbashree places women from BPL households at the centre of the state's efforts to eradicate poverty. The program began as a collaborative initiative of the state government for the purpose of alleviating poverty by giving underprivileged women the opportunity to work for themselves. The formation of women's self-help groups, supply of credit and training, provision of livelihood opportunities, and social security and welfare assistance are the four main components of the program. As reported by Devika and Thampi:

This framework combined programmes for gender awareness and feminist political mobilisation with micro-credits, and identified gender equality and women's right to be equal citizens as major goals. In other words, it would stress a combined strategy of bringing in-depth change to the larger development agenda, explicitly encouraging women to challenge gender power at more local level. (37)

Kudumbashree has been successful in providing disadvantaged women with chances for self-employment, hence assisting in the reduction of poverty in Kerala. Kudumbashree was established as a result of recommendations by a task force committee chaired by Dr. T.M. Thomas Isaac, Kerala's former Finance Minister. The task force advocated the development of women's self-help groups as a technique for eradicating poverty. Therefore, it was established, and it has been assisting vulnerable communities since then. Nevertheless, there are authors analysing the results of the Kudumbashree program, explaining the weak points of its implementation, attested by Williams et al.. However, the establishment of federated groups of women presents a welcome challenge to gender norms, as it is evident that group membership, let alone leadership, is still difficult for some of the poorest and most marginalised women (16). Additionally, they understand that Kudumbashree's underlying model of poverty relief as economic

empowerment through entrepreneurship is not appropriate for everyone. As has been proven in previous socio-historical analyses, there is no single way to achieve equality for everyone, since India is a heterogeneous country (Williams et al. 16). That is to say, there are many critics in the Kudumbashree program that have demonstrated it is not 100% effective, and it should be revised and improved.

Co-founded in 1998 by Indian social activist Prema Gopalan and activist and academic Sheela Patel, Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in India that supports female entrepreneurs in fields such as agriculture, health, and sanitation. SSP works in Maharashtra's and Rajasthan's rural districts. According to Purushothaman "SSP actually increased the visibility and participation of poor women, enabling them to bargain for resources and change state policy, while simultaneously protecting the autonomy of the organization involved" (109). Within the organisation, delegating management tasks to women in order to develop inner tasks for other women is crucial in effecting real social change. As asserted by Purushothaman, "there is a need for effective and flexible forms of organisation in mobilising resources for poor women and facilitating their participation in the development process" (109). In a case study, Haribhau Walvekar concludes, "Government and NGOs assisted women by taking several corrective measures, i.e. various schemes and developmental programmes to bring them from margin to mainstream" (6), referring to SSP. The organisation supports women with training, mentorship, and financial resources. Over 10,000 women have benefited from SSP's assistance in starting their own businesses. Organisations such as the United Nations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the World Bank have praised SSP's efforts. Commensurate with Haribhau Walvekar, "SSP is playing a vital role for various types of training programmes and finding solutions in order to overcome obstacles to women's empowerment" (6).

Finally, the last organisation set up was CREA in 1999, a global south based, worldwide feminist human rights organisation with country programs in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, as well as a regional program in South Asia, headquartered in New Delhi, India. CREA depicts its organisation as a group that "empowers women to articulate, demand and access their human rights by enhancing women's leadership and focusing on issues of sexuality, sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women, and women's rights" (2). CREA also offers a global sexual and reproductive health and rights initiative.

CREA's aim is to help women and young people in the global south improve their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The work of CREA is based on the concept that everyone has the right to make choices about their own bodies, sexuality, and reproductive health. CREA works to provide women and young people with the knowledge, resources, and power they need to exercise their rights. CREA attests that “advocating for the rights of adolescents so they can have improved sexual and reproductive health is a delicate issue, one that raises strong emotional responses from adults in general” (1). Promotion and policy work to build an enabling environment for sexual and reproductive rights and health are among CREA's primary tactics. They study and deliver program interventions based on scientific evidence. Its main purpose is to spread information about sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Chapter 3. Gender Issues in Contemporary India

3.1. The Evolution of the Women's Movement and its Agenda

The feminist movement's agenda has "addressed issues such as healthcare, violence, LGBTQ rights, etc., and has seen wide participation from politicians, rights advocates, artists and the media" (Saxena 3). Doctor Vibhuti Patel and Radhika Khajuria published a book entitled *Political Feminism in India: An Analysis of Actors, Debates and Strategies* (2016). Their analysis addresses current feminist actors, organisations and debates around gender equality and feminist perspectives in India, stating that presently, there is resistance against feminism, as the significant breakthroughs of women's activism have failed to change rigid ideas about gender roles and traditions (Patel and Khajuria 2). In fact, some of these traditions have experienced a resurgence due to market forces and cultural conservatism. There is a gap between theory and practice: research groups and human rights advocates seem to operate in isolated spheres, unlike in the 1970s when there was more communication between the women's movement and women's studies (Patel and Khajuria 2).

The feminist movement is challenging the Indian population to spread their cognition beyond the heterosexual, patriarchal system, offering alternatives to the norms and giving freedom to individuals to identify themselves as wish. "Feminism today is the constant questioning of the world we perceive and the boundaries we encounter" (Patel and Khajuria 3). In the following year, 2018, there were several events that transformed the feminist field. On February 19, Officer Avani Chaturvedi became the first woman pilot to "fly a solo 30-minute sortie on a MiG-21 Bison at Air Force Station Jamnagar" (Konde 44). In 2015, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar and Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha, Chief of the Air Staff, decided to include women pilots in managing army aircraft and helicopters in the Indian Air Force. However, the theory turned into practice three years later. In the following two months, the Tata Institute of Social Science's (TISS) Queer Collective founded the first gender-neutral hostel in Mumbai with the motto "a safe space of simply 'being', discourse and advocacy". In the words of Punita Maheshwari, "their efforts range from demanding equal rights for gender minorities to suggesting potential solutions to the administration" (1).

During the same month of April, there was a protest in the streets of Hyderabad headed by Indian actress Sri Reddy in a semi-nude pose outside the Telugu Film Chamber

of Commerce. She complained about the sexual harassment and exploitation she had suffered in Tollywood. As claimed by *The News Minute* daily (2018), Sri Reddy stated, “We have to do naked video calls. We have to take photos of our breasts and private parts and send them. Don’t you seniors feel ashamed to send messages like that?” (1).

On May 18th, an Adivasi school teacher named Soni Sori won the Global Front Line Defenders Award thanks to her work defending the Adivasi community’s human rights. Soni Sori was arrested in 2011 for helping the Communist Party of India to overthrow the Indian government. In prison, she was sexually abused and tortured by the Chhattisgarh police. After a time, she went to the hospital because she was the victim of an acid attack. The Indian digital intersectional feminist media organisation Feminism In India (FII) reported that “during her time in prison, she was sexually and physically assaulted in a brutal manner by the police authorities. Soni Sori mobilised women prisoners and demanded prisoner rights, and has been fighting for justice for Adivasis ever since then, despite repeated attacks and threats to her well-being” (1). In the middle of 2018, Kerala’s retail women workers organised a protest to struggle for their rights for better working conditions as they were had an exploitive work schedule without breaks. “On 4 July, the Kerala government said that it would amend labour laws to grant workers the right to sit while working and take breaks. The protest was led by a women’s trade union called Penkootam, founded by Viji Palithodi” (FII 1).

Another step forward was achieved in July with the elimination of the tax on sanitary pads after a feminist campaign in New Delhi. As specified by assistant professor Bora Amlanika, “taxing a woman for using sanitary napkins is more likely taxing her for being a woman, and this is ex-facie discriminatory and unconstitutional, akin to a human rights violation” (1). The Feminism In India magazine published that “protests were hinged around the argument that sanitary napkins should not be considered a ‘luxury item’, but rather a necessity, and should be made more affordable to the 355 million people who menstruate in India” (1).

On 18 August 2018, Namita Bhattacharya, the foster daughter of BJP politician and writer Atal Bihari Vajpayee opened a new path for Indian girls, breaking with the previous patriarchal tradition of gender roles by lighting the fire of the pyre at the funeral of her father, which is “a role traditionally reserved for the eldest male” (FII 1). This tradition has been performed by men until recently, considering that women had to fulfil the sati procedure and sacrifice themselves on their husband’s pyres. Undoubtedly,

obviating gender roles was a challenge from the Hindutva perspective, although it was an impressive example for Indian girls, not only because the mass media was covering the event, but also because she went against the nationalist traditional patriarchal ideology her father defended all his life.

On September 6th of the same year, the Court revised Section 377 of the IPC, 1860, which criminalised homosexual acts, declaring it unconstitutional. Attested by BBC News (2018), a bid to repeal section 377 was initiated in 2001 and was battled between the court and government until 2009, when the Delhi High Court ruled in favour of decriminalisation. Several political, social and religious groups then mobilized to restore the law, and in 2013 the Supreme Court struck down the High Court ruling. In spite of this, the feminist fight against section 377 struggled to abolish a law that incriminated the queer community. In addition, as Navarro-Tejero reports, “the constitution prohibits anything that might offend religious sensitivities, and those who push the boundaries in sexual or religious morality are banned by Hindu nationalists as anti-Indian” (Navarro-Tejero, Sex 2), which may create many problems for the vulnerable part of the population outside the establishment.

Nineteen days later, on September 25th, 2018, there was a protest across the country against the illegal *manual scavenging* practice, which perpetuates the caste system. It consists of manually cleaning and handling human excrement in an unsanitary latrine. The slogan used was *StopKillingUs*. According to Rajitha Sanaka, a former journalist who covered development related issues extensively in India, the protest was led by “Bezwada Wilson, founder of Safaai Karamchari Andolan, a movement aimed at eradicating the occupation completely, [alleging that] at the current time, when there is technology to solve almost every problem in the world, it is shocking that India is not interested in creating or finding technology that can help eradicate this occupation” (68). Indian sociologist and social anthropologist Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, in her ethnological work *The Remembered Village*, concludes that this job has been illegal in India since 2013, yet lower castes still do the work, and that “across the country, there is a hierarchy of occupations where every caste is assigned to a different job. This originates from the Hindu religious philosophy, where aspects of culture, diet, rituals, and occupations were considered either superior or inferior to the other, and hence the order” (75).

According to Sanaka, “the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (roughly translated from Hindi to sweepers, cleaners, manual scavengers, and sewer line cleaners), shows that 576 people died between 1993 and 2018 due to asphyxiation” (67). The protest caught the mass media’s attention and focus further movements on the Indian caste system. The #MeToo movement took off in India the next month. #MeToo is a viral movement that originated in 2017 through a campaign on the social network called Twitter by using the #MeToo hashtag to report sexual aggression and harassment as a result of charges against producer Harvey Weinstein. Although the #MeToo slogan was popularised on Twitter by actress Alyssa Milano, whose aim was for internet users to retweet in order to denounce the hidden misogynistic practices in the entertainment industry, it was US activist Tarana Burke who founded the movement that created the slogan and started to use the phrase in her social networks. A large majority of public figures have responded on their social profiles by joining #MeToo, thereby influencing their followers and the mass media. The protest opens a debate about the current sexist attitude present in the entertainment world, and the response by feminist artists against the dominant discourse have been historically represented, as well as their denouncement of unfair working conditions of women inside the artistic professions. #MeToo also struggles against the limitations female actresses have experienced, to the point that they have been beset in their careers. As affirmed by Doctor Manjushree Ganapathi Naik and Professor Padma Rani on October 7, 2018, Indian actress Tanushree Dutta made accusations of sexual harassment against actor Nana Patekar, describing her experiences while working with him on a film in 2008. The #MeToo movement helped bring attention to her allegations, and as a result, several prominent individuals, including former Union Minister M.J. Akbar, were forced to resign when similar charges were made against them (78). These complaints were broadcasted on a private channel as part of the #MeToo movement in an interview. In the report by Naik and Rani, “the newspapers *Hindu* and *The Times of India*” (78) spread the news.

In November, there was controversy once again on Twitter due to a photo posted by its US CEO Jack Dorsey with Indian television journalist Barkha Dutt. He was holding a letter with the slogan, “Smash Brahminical Patriarchy”, which means eradicating the patriarchal caste system in India, starting with the Brahmin, the highest religious caste since the Vega Age. The letter was a gift from dalit women’s activist Sanghapali Aruna. Many upper-class caste Hindus felt offended, since “Mr. Dorsey, surrounded by eminent

activists and journalist Ms. Barkha Dutt, seemed to be insinuating that Brahmins and their attitudes are constraining and oppressing Indian women” (Dey 1). The debate was opened on Twitter, which allowed the democratisation of the discussion, as it was available to everyone. It created an awareness of the roles of gender and caste and the discrimination and inequality suffered within this patriarchal hierarchy.

Another remarkable event on November 30th, 2018 was the Kisan Mukti March. In this event, Indian farmers went “to Parliament Street, demanding a special session of Parliament to implement the Kisan Mukti Bill on Liberation from Debt and assured remunerative prices, in New Delhi” (Shroff 1). Each year this march is repeated, as “the government is of course not complacent towards this important sector of the economy, and a host of measures have been directed at this sector, which have increased in number from independence until today,” (Shroff 2). The remarkable data from the 2018 march was that a high number of women farmers attended Delhi to support the cause and support the crop sector due to their demands. As Sumedha Pal reports, “thousands of female farmers [...] walked the streets of Delhi, some with blistered feet, some with wounds from the violence in their fields, but all with the commitment to make their stories heard, as their stories, by virtue of their realities, are intertwined with the destinies of their men” (1). Although the government only allowed widowed women to cultivate the crop, feminist activists raised their voices to support the male crisis. Women are not acknowledged as farmers, as attested by Sumedha Pal, but only as cultivators, as they farm alongside their husbands. Nevertheless, they persist in doing so even after their husbands have passed away. Current policies only recognize these women as farm workers, making it extremely challenging for them to secure the title of 'farmer' following the death of their spouses (Sumedha Pal 1).

At the end of the year, the female students of Panjab University abolished the curfew regulation, which didn't allow them free entry twenty-four seven in their rooms, while males were permitted to enjoy this. “The syndicate held that the same rules that were applicable at the Chandigarh campus should apply to the Hoshiarpur regional center” (P. Gupta 1). The news was covered by several Indian newspapers such as *The Times of India*, *The Quint*, and *The Tribune*. The goal was achieved after the election of Kanupriya as the first woman president of the Panjab University Campus Students' Council (PUCSC). “The election of Kanupriya as the PUCSC president is laudable, as it

represents a step towards women's empowerment. She was elected on the platform of student welfare, transparency in the system, and academic issues" (Mohali 1).

Since 2019, the BJP has been the largest party in the national parliament in India, being the ruling party. Its political agenda is based on the doctrine of Hindutva, which approaches governance from a traditional, conservative patriarchal view. Its doctrine implies a step backward for the feminist movement, since it does not support gender equality. As reported by Arijeet Ghosh and Diksha Sanyal (2019), on 5 August 2019, the Lok Sabha passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019 (hereinafter the transgender bill, 2019), and the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2019 (hereinafter the surrogacy bill, 2019), without due deliberation. These bills, which reinforce patriarchal, hetero-normative, and casteist values of the "great Indian family," could soon become a reality if passed by the Rajya Sabha. It is discriminatory to the non-normative population, as the government limits their freedom and self-expression. It also affects mass media and education, showing the young population a narrow life perspective. The graduate teacher's assistant Sujatha Subramanian suggests that "a look at the use of social media by the BJP reveals that ideas of masculinity and nationalism that circulate within the Hindutva discourse are no less violent, although they operate in covert and insidious ways" (1). It is a period of response to the new Hinduization, offering alternative culture through independent authors, whose collections are analyzed in this study.

3.2. Gender Equality, Leadership and Training Programmes in the Early 21st Century

Breakthrough (human rights) is a human rights advocacy organisation located in India and the United States, formed in 2000 by human rights campaigner and former attorney Mallika Dutt. The objective of the group is to put an end to violence against women and girls. It began as an experiment in harnessing media for social justice, culminating in public education and awareness campaigns that included the creation of print and multimedia materials, as well as the planning of events and speaking tours. Mallika Dutt started the campaign by releasing *Mann ke Manjeeré*, a feminist album and music video, which stayed on the Indian music video charts using pop culture and went on to win the 2001 National Screen Award in India for best music video. It is one of the first organisations created to eradicate violence against women through the spread of culture. As stated by its Dutt, its founder:

We use cultural expression to influence and frame the public agenda from a human rights perspective. Our goal is to cultivate open and democratic civil societies that invest in sustaining core human rights values. We envision a global culture where all human rights for all people are respected, protected and fulfilled [...] In this world, no one is abused, poor, marginalized or oppressed. In this world, individuals and communities are able to participate fully in the processes and policies that ensure their well-being, while respecting the diversity and pluralism of their communities. (3)

Workshops, technical support, and leadership development programs are all part of training and capacity building. The drafting of policy papers, submitting comments to government agencies, and forming coalitions are examples of policy advocacy. Breakthrough has developed initiatives in South Africa and the United States in addition to its work in India and Bangladesh. Moreover, its approach is essential since their starting point was transforming Indian culture into a tool to communicate and offer an alternative path for those who were not represented by the conservative gender structure. As stated by Dutt, in various regions globally, women from marginalized communities have employed culture as a method of resisting the control of dominant groups by advocating for the acknowledgement of pluralism and diversity (10). Although using culture can be a source of empowerment, these women often face a dilemma when attempting to assert their rights in relation to male leaders within their communities who utilize culture and tradition to maintain patriarchal power dynamics (Dutt 10).

Two years later, The Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP) was set up in 2002, being the flagship program of The Rajiv Gandhi Charitable Trust (RGCT), a recognised non-profit organisation whose mission is to improve chances for the poor and deprived. The RGVM is responsible for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Uttar Pradesh, India. The RGMVP is a state-wide initiative that aims to improve women's socioeconomic condition by providing them with quality education, job opportunities, health care, and social safety. The Rural Development and Self-Employment Training Institute (RGMVP) operates in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, as reported by Boef et al., with low human development index scores and has a robust reputation for organizing and empowering poor women through the use of self-help groups (SHGs) in India (3). Besides, the objective of RGMVP is to tap into the collective strength of women, enhance their quality of life by addressing health, livelihood, and income issues, and boost their self-esteem and sustained ability to act independently (Boef et al. 3). As RGMVP states on its official webpage, its activity is focused on the creation

of self-help groups that serve as unifying forums for a varied group of women to show strong links of shared concern. Its model empowers women to break down fundamental hierarchies, which we believe are at the root of poverty, inequality, and marginalisation. Women gain enhanced self-confidence and sustained autonomy, in addition to the effect on their health, livelihood, and earnings. Furthermore, Boef et al. states that the RGMVP utilises a network of community resource persons, or local volunteers, to provide capacity-building support to Self-help groups (SHGs). These volunteers assist the SHGs in efficiently managing their finances, accessing financial services, improving livelihoods, protecting legal rights, and accessing entitlements (3). Due to intervention by the National Federation of dalit Women (NFDW) in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and thanks to the support of the Vanangana NGO in 2002, The dalit Mahila Samiti (DSM) was set up in order to address the rights of dalit women, who have been vulnerable and marginalised for hundreds of years in that place. The stated goals of the organisation are to work for dalit women's empowerment and to promote their socioeconomic and political rights. DMS also attempts to promote gender equality and women's and girls' rights. According to Andharia and the ANANDI collective, “dalit feminists have articulated the three-fold oppression of dalit women as dalits oppressed by upper castes, agricultural workers subject to class oppression (mainly at the hands of upper caste land owners), and women facing patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own castes” (2).

Since 2002, DSM has been active in a variety of dalit women's empowerment programs and activities. The dalit Women's Rights Campaign, the fight to abolish manual scavenging, the movement to end caste-based discrimination, and the campaign to end child marriage are just a few of these efforts. According to Andharia and the ANANDI collective, “Dalit women leaders have engaged in focusing their goals and structures, and the formal naming of dalit Mahila Samiti took place in 2003” (2). DMS also participates in projects aimed at empowering dalit women, including awareness-raising and capacity-building. Training programs and workshops on a variety of issues, including human rights, gender equality, leadership, and advocacy, are among these activities. Despite its concern for disadvantaged women in Uttar Pradesh, as stated by Andharia and the ANANDI collective, DSM has untied its links to Vanangana because their agendas differ, entitling the leaders of DMS (6) to establish the guidelines for the organisation. They determined that the main members would be dalit women and that men would be

considered supportive members. A membership fee was set, and over time it was decided that membership in a Self-Help Group was not required for joining DMS (6). DSM has continued with its mission of challenging caste-based discrimination and violence against dalit women, improving the socio-economic conditions and campaigning for their rights. On the 31st of October, 2003 a group of grassroots women with a background in previous feminist organisations mentioned in the section founded the first national political party whose core issue on its agenda was all women and their concerns. As reported by Vibhuti Patel:

Many spokespersons (who have been community workers, trade-unionists, NGO activists, researchers and field-investigators) of WPI have been foot soldiers and street fighters of the varied social movements for over a decade. At present, WPI does not have any godfather or godmother. Culture of summer-camps, training programmes, small group discussions, demonstrations, rallies in the social movements, formal education and computer literacy have given its members a great deal of confidence in dealing with a complex and violent political scenario in local and state level politics. (9)

In the beginning, the group was called the Womanist Party of India and was worried about feminist empowerment in spite of the precedence of each woman and their economic situation. In India, the majority of political organisations have focused on upper-class women and their improvement, and this is one of the first political parties that advocates women's emancipation, even though they do not have a profitable economic status. Nevertheless, its president, activist Varsha Kale, does not consider the party to be feminist, since she believes that the word is directly linked to upper-class or wealthy women, a part of the population with more privileges than others. Based on an online report by Singh, Varsha Kale stated the following in a conference in Mumbai: "we are not feminists; we are 'womenists', and we believe in womanism [...]. Every day there is so much violence against women, and the mentality of most of the men has not changed" (Singh). Although she refuses to be a part of a feminist group, the objective of achieving gender equality and supporting women is the same.

The Confederation of Women Entrepreneurs (COWE) is a social-level organisation of women entrepreneurs that was founded in 2004 in Hyderabad, India, with the goal of providing a national forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences among women entrepreneurs, promoting the development of women, and acting as a catalyst for the growth of the feminist business sector. The phrase "Gearing women's power" symbolizes the democratic nature of COWE, as explained by Bobade and Prashant, which

is dedicated to and run by women for the benefit of women. The goal of COWE is to create a community of women who are economically empowered and recognized as valuable members of society by utilizing the skills, knowledge, and resources of women with hard work and determination (9). COWE has also been striving to empower women entrepreneurs from various sectors by providing knowledge and help on starting and maintaining a business. Its global focus includes women's training and development, financial access, networking opportunities, and business development services. According to its website, "COWE has emerged with a truly national body members, including Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal".

Sampat Pal Devi, who has been the group's leader since 2019, created the Gulabi Gang in 2006. The Gulabi Gang, translated as "The Pink Band" is an Indian vigilante group that wears pink saris and fights for women's rights, particularly against domestic violence. The organisation is thought to have 50,000 female members. The Gulabi Gang is dedicated to ending violence against women, especially domestic violence. The organisation also advocates women's rights in general and strives to enhance women's access to education and health care in rural areas. As reported by Miller, "as a low caste woman herself, she had not completed schooling and suffered many hardships throughout her life. Pal Devi had a long history of helping victims of injustice, and as the number of people asking for her help grew, she formed the Gulabi Gang, from which she could continue to help those most in need" (2).

Detractors have accused the Gulabi Gang of being a vigilante group that utilises violence and intimidation to achieve its goals. For instance, according to Miller "an NGO worker accused Pal Devi of unfairly charging poor people to help them fill out free government forms. She replied that while the NGO worker receives grants, the Gulabi Gang works for free, and they charged the fee money only in order to cover the associated costs" (61-62). According to Jändel, "the work of the Gulabi Gang is related to the widespread corruption in their society and is a counter reaction to the neglect of women's issues on the political agenda" (22). On the other hand, supporters claim that the organisation is important in safeguarding women who have no other means of combating domestic violence. Commensurate with Longinotto, "police and other politicians refused to hear Pal Devi's claims in the beginning, but eventually she forced them to listen and to act, thereby gaining many supporters". The Gulabi Gang has attracted international notice

for its vigilante tactics, which include protests and marches through communities, as well as confrontations with abusive individuals. Men who they believe are guilty of domestic violence have been beaten up by the gang.

Founded in 2007 by Zakia Soman and Noorjehan Niaz, the organisation Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) is a rights group aimed at empowering Muslim women in India. BMMA is a national organisation that promotes Muslim women's empowerment through legal advocacy, legislative reform, education, and social mobilisation. According to Kirmani, "Zakia Jowher [...] is critical of those who take a narrow approach to Muslim women's rights" (12). It is one of India's few organisations dedicated solely to Muslim women's issues. According to Kirmani, Muslim Women created this organisation in order to "negotiate their multiple identities in the context of complex power matrixes based on gender, class, caste and religion in ways that challenge the categorisation of Muslim women as a victimised group, and to help them assert their political agency" (2). The work of the organisation is based on the concept that Muslim women are capable of prompting change in their families and communities and that their empowerment is critical for the Muslim community's general development in India. According to Kirmani, "BMMA also campaigns on the issue of matrimonial rights, and for a reform of Muslim personal laws, although this is not its only focus" (12). BMMA has worked with the government and other civil society organisations to promote policy reform that benefits Muslim women, such as running awareness campaigns on Muslim women's rights and issues, conducting training programs related to legal rights, financial literacy, and health and hygiene for Muslim women, and working with the government and other civil society organisations to promote policy reform that benefits Muslim women.

In 2007, The All India Federation of Women Lawyers (AIFWL) was created as an Indian national organisation of female attorneys. It is based in Bangalore and strives to promote girls' access to and opportunities in the legal profession within the Indian system and advocates for women's rights in the country. AIFWL is also a member of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), which was founded in 1944 in Mexico and expanded abroad ten years later. The organisation also offers training and assistance to female lawyers and encourages members to share knowledge and ideas. However, they also address achievement of a fair justice system that offers the same opportunities to all populations, particularly for vulnerable and poor groups who do not have enough resources. On the occasion of the 2nd AIFWL National Conference, held on

the 28th and 29th of December 2008 Mahalakshmi expressed that the process of accessing legal services was unnecessarily complicated, and the Legal Services Authorities required individuals who were poor and illiterate to draft their own legal documents before they could receive assistance (43). Without simplifying the process of obtaining legal aid, those who were marginalized would be unable to defend themselves against unjust legal actions and would not be able to use the law as a means of achieving social justice (Mahalakshmi 43). The debate was started when AIFWL received several complaints about working women's situation and their lack of legal aid. As reported on the AIFWL website, the 2008 conference “brought some insights into the plight of working women, who are being harassed and exploited in the workplace. Many action points were shared by the speakers and delegates with the law makers and upholders of the law, and the proceedings of the seminar were sent to the Law Commission”.

The year 2007 was a prolific time for the establishment of Indian feminist institutions. The third one to be considered in 2007 was a local non-profit organisation known as Mahila Shakti Samajik Samiti, founded in Uttar Pradesh with the slogan, “Voices of Women for Social Justice and Equality, which strongly stands united for supporting the needy by tackling societal issues” (Mahila Shakti Samajik Samiti LinkedIn). Mahila Shakti Samajik Samiti is a women's society in India made up primarily of housewives. The samiti's 2014 president was Rupa Gupta and the vice president was Aarti Sharma. As specified on their official website, the organisation fights for free medical camps in various sectors, the collection of donations for flood and national calamity-affected areas, assistance to poor families for daughters' marriages or children's education, and the resolution of various domestic violence and grievance issues through counselling, among other things (Mahila Shakti Samajik Samiti). Although this organisation was created and is mainly composed of housewives, they try to offer as much as they can to society in order to make it a better place for everyone to live.

The last project launched in 2007 is called *Appan Samachar*, a rural women's news channel broadcast in India and run by a vulnerable collective. Founded by social activist and journalist Santosh Sarang, which covers all the social issues concerning the poorest villages in Bihar, denouncing women's marginalisation, the lack of sanitary health, and gender abuse, “these girls visit various areas in their village as well as nearby areas on bicycles carrying a tripod, camera and other necessary equipment to cover news. [...]

Villagers gather at a common place and watch the news bulletins with keen interest. And there is praise from the villagers for the excellent coverage of the news” (OneIndia).

Nevertheless, members of *Appan Samachar* have basic training in producing and broadcasting a programme; “after an initial introduction to journalism through a workshop, the young women learn on the job” (Jaffer). This is a great breakthrough in prompting the conservative rural population to identify the needs of women in the twenty-first century, and to recognise the feminist struggle that women have been developing for centuries; “Sarang knows of girls who are refusing to marry under parental pressure these days, and those who are fighting superstitions even as they study and work hard to become technologically savvy” (Jaffer). The program has had many editions since it started and has been considered a project of high impact by the mass media, such as the BBC. “The first edition of this fortnightly news programme was broadcast on a projector and featured issues such as witchcraft, empowerment of women, poverty and farm problems. For their second edition, *Appan Samachar* chose to do stories on education for the female child” (Tewary). In the opinion of the staff working for the newspaper *Business Standard*, everyone has been inspired by their well-conceived strategy of empowerment, which they devised themselves. These young women are brilliant examples of having the same feelings, sending out good waves not only in Bihar, but across the country.

According to Shilpi Jain, “India, as is well-known, is not a safe place for women”, so one year later, in 2008, the Sakha Consulting Wings was set up as a response to the high level of insecurity and abuse toward women in India. This is a women-owned and operated business that provides safe transportation alternatives for women. This is a much-needed service for women, and all the drivers are female. As stated by S. Jain, “[its] taxis are driven exclusively by woman for women passengers. It also provides facilities to book a cab through calling, through their website, or through their mobile application” (62). In India, they are the only transportation firm owned and controlled by women. They are known for being a safe, dependable, and economical mode of transportation for women, focusing on safety, affordability, and convenience. As reported by Jain, “the taxi service was initiated by the Azad Foundation, and ensures training in all related subjects for the women drivers in the metropolitan area of Delhi. It also encourages an understanding of women’s rights, especially in protection from violence in public and personal spaces” (62-63).

Thanks to the Sakha Consulting Wings initiative, many women have been able to break the social boundaries about the negative idea of women driving a vehicle. These women “engage in non-traditional work using strategies they have employed to negotiate with or disrupt systemic gender norms through their engagement with a livelihood that historically has been performed by men” (Dhawan 6). It may imply a deconstruction of gender roles and a reflection of gender equality. The second Indian feminist organisation established in 2008 is Sakhi for Girls' Education, or SHAKI, led by slum change maker Aarti Naik in Mumbai. According to Naik's online profile:

When I was a female school drop-out, there was no one to help me, so I felt that girls from my slum area would face the same situation. So, in 2008 I started my social venture, SAKHI for Girls Education, to create quality learning spaces at the community level so that every girl in the slums of Mumbai, India, will get an opportunity to continue her school education with confidence.

According to SHAKI's website, their objective is to build high-quality learning spaces at the community level, so that every girl in Mumbai's slums and rural areas of Osmanabad, India, can confidently continue their education. SAKHI refers to a female friend of girls who encourages, mentors, and supports other girls for the greater benefit (SHAKI). Its main program gives girls from underserved communities access to high-quality educational resources, mentorship opportunities, and leadership development activities. They concentrate on obtaining educational tools such as textbooks in order to encourage girls to learn. Some of its programs include girls learning centres, audio storytelling projects, a girl's bank, and a girl's book bank. Furthermore, its educational proposal includes learning both official languages: Hindi and English.

The end of the decade was notable for the establishment of the non-governmental organisation called Centre for Equity and Inclusion (CEQUIN), based in New Delhi, by social worker Sara Abdullah Pilot. The Centre for Equity and Inclusion “promotes gender equity and women's and girls' right to lead a violence-free life, develop their capabilities, have ownership and control of resources, and participate and be included in decision making” (CEQUIN). The work of CEQUIN is guided by the values of equity, inclusiveness, and human rights. Its goal is entirely focused on gender equality, with a special focus on marginalised women and dalits in terms of HIV/AIDS health care. In addition, “CEQUIN is aiming at distributing 10 rickshaws a year to women. The vehicle would charge 10 per person. According to Singh, the benefits of electric rickshaws include less manual labour and environmental friendliness. Women can drive it easily”

(Zee News). In other words, CEQUIN may be considered an eco-feminist NGO, despite the fact that it does not mention this in its agenda. They advocate the use of green modes of transportation. In order to achieve environmental justice, it has distributed environmentally friendly automobiles to communities that need to commute from one village to another.

The first institution to open the decade was Bhumata Brigade, a Pune-based social activist organisation that participates in social activism with an emphasis on women's rights and empowerment. It was created in 2010 and is not affiliated with any political party in India. The Brigade's goal is to use marches, rallies, and other kinds of public engagement to campaign for women's empowerment and defend their rights. The organisation also works to raise public awareness about a variety of social issues and to promote a more gender-sensitive society. "They are most well known for their protests against the banning of women from places of worship, including the Shani Shingnapur temple in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, and the Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai, and in Maharashtra" (S. Jain 66). Trupti Desai, a Pune-based social activist, founded the Bhumata Brigade. In a demonstration for women's rights, Desai made the following statement: "We had requested the Shirdi Sai Sansthan several times to remove the board as it violates the fundamental rights of citizens as enshrined in the Constitution. Despite our final December 31 deadline, they refused to remove the board." (Express News Service).

The organisation's early focus was on fighting women's discrimination and violence in India's patriarchal society. Since then, the Brigade's focus has expanded to encompass other forms of social engagement, such as increasing public awareness about different social concerns and trying to make society more gender-sensitive. As reported by Ratnam in the Mint online journal on March 31st, the Bombay High Court ruled that women should have equal access to places of worship where men were allowed. Following this ruling, Desai has taken her movement to other shrines, including the Mahalaxmi temple in Kolhapur and the Kapaleshwar Temple in Nashik. On both occasions, Desai was physically assaulted by local individuals. As confirmed by Trupti, after Desai's mobilisation against the denial of entry of a Hindu woman to a temple in January 2016, the Bhumata Brigade organisation is now very concerned about the exclusion of low-caste women, even though they are thought to have died out more than 60 years ago, as shown in the article, yet they are still alive among the Indian population.

Focusing on the next entity, the Bikerni Association of Women Motorcyclists is a women-only motorcycle club. Urvashi Patole and Firdaus Shaikhs started the club in Pune, Maharashtra, in 2011. The Bikerni is India's first all-women motorcycle club, with the goal of encouraging women to ride motorcycles and providing a support network for female riders. The Bikerni club was not founded to fight for women's empowerment, although it is recognised as supporting female riders. Once again, the concept of feminism might be controversial for a part of the population, even though they defend the independence of women and encourage their improvement in society. As mentioned by Romy and Dewan, "As such, women bikers have developed their identity with the activity of the motorcycling lifestyle and relationships connected to motorcycles. This identity is further ignited through external recognition and audience attention" (872). Over 18 chapters of the Bikerni Association of Women Motorcyclists exist in India. The Bikerni participates in motorcycle rallies, charity activities, and group rides. The group also wants to encourage women in motorcycling by providing training and instruction for female riders. As maintained by Romy and Dewan, "Most of the women find it comfortable to ride in a women's group, as they relate to each other. Manoeuvring a machine through diverse and difficult terrain, through challenging traffic on the road, or speeding up on an empty road involves steady cognition" (875). According to The Bikerni official website:

Members of The Bikerni have several records to their name and are well respected in the biking community as the front-runners of the women's motorcycling movement. Bikerni encourages members to take road-trips and connect with fellow members. It also treats them like family and participates and volunteers in motorcycling events and social causes.

3.3. The Crossroads of Technology, Gender and Sexuality

The feminist movement continues to have a strong presence on the Internet, with official websites such as Point of View, a feminist non-profit organisation based in Mumbai, which supports the human rights of all people, regardless of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. They started an initiative in 2013 called The SexGenderTech program, "a national workshop that explored how technology shapes gender and sexuality, and vice versa" (Point of View). Furthermore, their online magazine delves into the intricacies of sex and gender in digital settings, including anonymity and access to pornography and sexting. Point of View's aim is to ensure that "girls, queer, and trans

persons can freely navigate the interwebs, with a sense of belonging" (Point of View). It has three main workshops called "Porn Panic Ban, Tangled Like Wool" and Connect Your Rights. Point of View believes that everyone should be treated equally and have the same rights, regardless of gender, caste, religion, or race. Providing education and opportunity for women and girls, promoting gender equality, and combating violence against women are just a few of the projects that Point of View supports.

Bharatiya Mahila Bank is an Indian bank that caters to women. It is a public sector bank that was established in 2013. The bank's headquarters are in Delhi, India. Savings and checking accounts, fixed deposits, loans, and debit cards are among the goods and services offered by the bank. It was sponsored by the government in an attempt to improve accessibility for Indian women. In the words of Tiwari and Bureau, "the Government has been working toward the empowerment of women in the country. The flagship programs for rural employment and universalizing education and healthcare provide equal access for both men and women in order to help the cause of women's empowerment" (2). Although the Bharatiya Mahila Bank was established to support women's entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and empowerment, some experts have criticised the creation of this kind of bank concealed as a feminist gesture, saying it is actually a political strategy as a reply against the harassment and sexual violence women still suffer in the streets of India. According to Gopalakrishnan:

Ghosh is of the view that the Indian government has been embarrassed by multiple violent rape cases that have recently shaken the country, and for that reason it wants to give the impression that it is trying its best to empower women. The expert considers a women-only bank to be a political gimmick to appease female voters ahead of next year's parliamentary elections.

On 1st April 2017, the State Bank of India merged with Bharatiya Mahila Bank, opening its target members to the general Indian population. It might be said that instead of being an advantage for women, it was a way of isolating them, since the whole inner structure of the bank has been controlled by the conservative government since 2014. As mentioned by the DH News Service website, the Vodafone Foundation announced a Red Rickshaw Revolution in 2013 to raise money for NGOs that seek to empower women, including Laura Turkington (director of the Vodafone Foundation in India), Carina Deegan, (Foundation supporter), and Sunita Choudhary (Delhi's first woman auto-rickshaw driver), as the representatives of the campaign, with a journey of nearly 1,500

kilometres in a red auto-rickshaw over nine days from Delhi to Mumbai, as part of the initiative. As reported by Perappadan:

Meanwhile, to carry out the initiative, the Foundation has linked up with three non-government organizations: Breakthrough (which works in five states to build a culture of human rights and promote safety and security for women); Community Outreach Programme (operating and working with slum dwellers in Mumbai for poverty eradication); and Apne Aap Women's Collective (working in one of the most underprivileged and isolated sections of Mumbai-Kamathipura, Asia's largest and oldest red light area).

In the words of Sunita Chaudhary, "The 'Red Rickshaw Revolution' is a great campaign, and it inspired me to contribute by creating awareness about women's empowerment. While we celebrate Women's Day, not many people are aware of their rights of being a woman" (Mag).

The Women of India Leadership Summit (WIELS), or the Women of India Summit, was founded in 2013 in response to the lack of safety faced by women in India. Actor Kaizaad Kotwal has stated that "there is too much violence against women and girls. It's a global pandemic. To me, it's the number one national emergency in India, a far greater threat to national unity than terrorism or other external threats" (D. Mohanty). The Women of India Summit is an annual event produced by the Indian School of Business (ISB) in collaboration with the Goldman Sachs Foundation. The summit gives women leaders an opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences with the next generation of leaders. The summit also highlights the achievements of Indian women in numerous professions and the difficulties that still need to be addressed. The gathering was intended to create a safe venue for women to discuss the subject of harassment they face on a daily basis. However, as the violent episodes were always carried out and started by men, they departed from their methodology and created a space for discourse between women and men, or what they dubbed "men who love and respect women" (Malik). Furthermore, the Women of India Summit defends art as having an important role in the education of the population, an affirmation that created a path for young generations to express their emotions and reclaim their role. According to Deebashree Mohanty:

Art can play a very important and life-changing role. Currently in Mumbai we have received small grants to partner with SNEHA, an anti-violence NGO working in the basti's of Mumbai. We are doing a series of 11 performances of The Vagina Monologues in Hindi for women from these basti's, followed by educational and informational sessions.

Nevertheless, India still has a conservative patriarchal system where the role of women is undervalued. According to Mehrotra, government affiliated schools rely on government approved textbooks, which she believes have regressed in the current system. While there are some excellent alternative schools run by activists, NGOs, and artists, these schools are often located in rural areas and are relatively few in number. The majority of the education system is still using these outdated textbooks, resulting in a lack of progress in education (appendix).

Although previous organisations focused on the empowerment of women, especially rural females with fewer resources, educated women with a degree also have to put up with their colleagues needing to be more patronising and underestimating their capabilities, even while having the same educational background and certification. As summarised by a former judge of the Supreme Court of India, Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai, “a woman has to work more to prove herself” (Mathur). For this reason, the platform Women in Law and Litigation (WILL) was established in 2014 in New Delhi, under the supervision of the Supreme Court of India and a Supreme Court Justice to promote and advance the interests of women in the legal profession and in the legal system by supporting and encouraging women's professional development in law and litigation, providing a professional space for the exchange of information and ideas about women's advancement in law and litigation, and promoting public education. WILL also provides “advocacy skills and counselling for the development of women litigants and lawyers. WILL aims to build on the innovative ideas of young professionals and share and learn from the experience of senior practitioners” (Women in Law and Litigation). Justice Desai states that “the litigating public still prefers to deal with male lawyers than women lawyers, [while] women are responsible for a disproportionate share of housework, including childcare and senior care” (Mathur). In another report, Justice Desai claims that “a lot more women have joined the fraternity and have broken the barriers of gender discrimination: WILL was a platform to build the confidence of women and address problems they face in this profession” (Zee News).

Along these lines, in 2015 in India, humanitarian Dr. Harbeen Arora formed an international women’s institution for well-being and co-working, or All Ladies League (ALL), to encourage and connect female leaders worldwide. This non-profit organisation holds an international platform for women, although it started in India as a response to the lack of recognition of their work. Although they do not declare themselves to be

feminist institution, they offer a space for women to develop their entrepreneurial careers in all fields. They operate through All Chapters, a network connecting regions for charity and self-help groups. As stated by the ALL Ladies League, “each chapter is like a lighthouse, beckoning and being there as a source of empowering energy for all women who need support and networks. With a tribe and vibe of sisterhood, and using social media platforms, each chapter helps connect positive and inspiring women around a given region or sector”. During the same year of 2015, the Myna Mahila Foundation (MMF) was founded by activist Suhani Jalota as an Indian organisation to empower women by encouraging open discussion of taboo topics like menstruation, sex, and childbirth, as well as providing education and job opportunities through a women's network. According to Puvvala and Charlotte:

The Myna Mahila Foundation [has made it] clear that perseverance, persistence, and patience, mixed with respect for the community and its residents, is the most comprehensive and just way to gain the trust and support of individuals who have been barred from such treatment. It may take weeks, months, or even years, but like any new or unusual entity, it is critical that we remain an organization with underlying values of care and respect, projected in each action we take. (6)

As the organisation is concerned about the lack of attention given to menstrual hygiene, one of its top priorities is the production of high-quality, low-cost sanitary pads for isolated communities in Delhi and Mumbai. As specified on its official website, its operations start with the production of high-quality, low-cost hygiene products (sanitary pads and maternity pads) for women. Thanks to these sales, they help slum communities and promote access to healthcare institutions, creating employment among women (Myna Mahila Foundation). They reach out to more than 10,000 women per month in the outskirts of Mumbai, and they rely on their online sanitary products shop, as well as sponsors or others who want to be involved with their society.

At the end of 2015, SheSays India was founded as a Mumbai-based NGO dedicated to ending violence against women and girls and achieving gender equality among Indians. Trisha Shetty, a lawyer and social activist, founded the institution. In her words, “SheSays aims to end gender-based discrimination and advance women's rights in India by engaging with youth and activating them as agents of social change to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals” (SheSays). The workforce at SheSays India focuses on three important areas: preventing violence against women and girls; promoting gender equality; and fostering an inclusive society. According to Bahirwani:

There is pertinent information on identifying acts of sexual abuse recognized by our constitution and presented in a simplified format. Information mentioned includes step-by-step procedures when going to a hospital or police station, having lawyers assigned to you, briefings on court proceedings, and addressing sexual harassment at the workplace.

SheSays India works with a variety of methods to achieve its goals, including educating young people about gender equality and violence against women and girls in schools and colleges, collaborating with the police and judiciary to improve the response to violence against women and girls, and working with local communities to change attitudes and behaviours. They have launched several campaigns along the lines of The Myna Mahila Foundation (MMF). Not only is it important to create sanitary pads and demonstrate against taxes for these kinds of products, it is also essential to understand that “despite this being the biological and hygienic requisite of more than half the population, current legislation systematically discriminates against women by taxing basic commodities such as sanitary napkins” (Shetty).

Later, in 2017, The Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) was created as a start-up by NITI Aayog, the National Institution for Transforming India. The WEP aims to empower women entrepreneurs by giving them access to technology, cash, markets, and networks, as well as encouraging them to start businesses. As reported by Bagh:

The start-up culture is now being strongly promoted in India, and women also have shown a lot of interest in this culture. According to the government, almost 14% of start-ups in India are run by women. If we compare this figure with the last decade, this is a big increase, but it’s quite low compared to developed countries (6).

The WEP is a public-private partnership with active engagement from state governments, industry, and civil society. The WEP works with the Pradhan Mantri Uda Yojana, the Stand-Up India Scheme, the Digital India Program, and the Startup India Program. The WEP works in three stages: identifying women entrepreneurs; providing technology, capital, and markets; and creating capability and mentoring. In the words of Bagh:

Young female entrepreneurs should share their success stories in the world of e-commerce to speed up the entrepreneurial movement in India. Women entrepreneurs will be better understood and encouraged by studying and focusing on their social and cultural background, including the family system, religion, caste, and location where they live. (8)

Another remarkable institution in India is the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an all-female filmmaking group established in 2017. As Mathew and Mariya Isac report, “The WCC resulted from the chaotic situation of an unfortunate incident. This was the beginning of a resistance movement against the existing and persistent gender problems in the Malayalam film industry” (150). The collective comprises female filmmakers, technicians, and other film industry professionals who desire to work in an environment free of sexual harassment and gender discrimination. “In 2017, an established actress was subjected to a heinous incident of sexual assault in Kochi, and she courageously spoke out for justice. A collective of eighteen women from the Malayalam film industry started to come together to stand by this survivor” (Women in Cinema Collective). The WCC is aiming to make Indian cinema more inclusive for women by offering a forum for networking and mentorship, as well as advocating for more women in decision-making positions in the business. The WCC is also dedicated to promoting gender equality and increasing awareness about gender-based violence. As attested by Mathew, “according to various feminist theories, space itself offers resistance to gender hierarchies. The collective’s initiative is not only to create a platform to resist oppression, but it aims to ensure dialogues that address the issues pertaining to women in cinema, supporting victims of sexual abuse or abuse on social media. (154)

Finally, the last crucial feminist institution from the second decade of the twenty-first century is the National Women's Party India (NWP), started in 2018 in New Delhi and in 2019 in Mumbai by Meet Swetha Shetty. The organization was established as a response to the low number of female seats in the government. Bose quotes Shetty’s words:

The key areas where women lag behind is in education and then employment. Policy makers don’t think of women and girls while making policies because not enough women are policymakers [...] Every woman’s experience is different. If we had more diverse women lawmakers, women’s problems would be better represented in Parliament” (Bose).

NWP demands real authority inside the governmental system in order to change its agenda in relation to women; “While women arer 49% of the population, the percentage of women in Parliament is only 11%” (Pallavi). Ensuring a new order of priorities based on half the population in India, who are women, is completely necessary to achieve a real transformation of society. Nevertheless, NWP is a very specific organisation, which may focus on a very specific sector of women. According to Pallavi,

“Describing itself as a ‘party of mothers’ is dangerously close to emphasising the role of women as homemakers, implicitly, and primarily mothers explicitly”. In spite of this approach, it is a crucial step on the feminist path to achieving gender equality.

On the other hand, the literary postcolonial works of scholars and researchers about feminist theory have contributed to including gender issues in their approach to South Asian literary criticism. Instead of embracing the Western feminist theory⁹, numerous authors made authoritative pronouncements on the dogma of South Asian feminist literary critique, since it had been perceived as a culture with a “lack of progress in non-Western societies” (Rajgopal 198), establishing its principles during the 1990s. Traditional criticism has frequently represented women as “being white, heterosexual, and educated. It has sought identity in relationships rather than autonomy; and has been conscripted as a player in the mother-daughter plot” (Gilmore 13). According to Peggy Kamuf:

The feminist criticism of cultural institutions, including literature, has in large part proceeded from the evidence of woman's traditional exclusion and has therefore implied either that those institutions must be expanded to include what has been excluded (for example, by "mainstreaming" women's literature) or that they must be abandoned in favor of distinctly feminine-centered cultural models. (43)

However, Kamuf suggests self-reflection on the feminist criticism based on Michael Foucault's conclusions about humans' power relations and his male decentralisation proposal, since “the objectification of ‘man’ [...] has a much more recent history, only since about the end of the eighteenth century in Europe. Thus, it is a rather novel epistemological invention that ‘man’ [...] occupies the center stage of inquiry” (Kamuf 43). For that reason, Kamuf suggests that the feminist criticism should avoid making the mistake of repeating what Foucault criticises: the centralisation of the man. In other words:

Foucault's own conclusion, however, about the necessary displacement of a man-centered or (in less exclusive terms) human-centered epistemology might also give feminist scholars reason to pause and wonder to what extent their efforts must remain a reflection of the same form of nineteenth-century humanism from which we have inherited our pervasively androcentric codes of thought. (Kamuf 44)

⁹ The Western feminist theory focuses on “decolonization movements around the world, ... [although] the focus on questions of subjectivity and identity that is a hallmark of contemporary feminist theory has also had some problematic effects in the area of race and Third World / postcolonial studies” (C. Mohanty, *Feminism* 106)

Nevertheless, Foucault's humanistic theories were a starting point for feminist theory and criticism, as "both his polemics and his methodological breaks with traditional social theory make him interesting for feminists, whose political and theoretical projects converge at important points with the provocations of Foucault" (Martin 3). As maintained by Bidy Martin in her article "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault", by adopting the difference, labelling it resistance, and subsuming it under the "Identity of Man", feminist criticism must be involved in articulating the amount to which our culture's phallogocentric meanings and truths have necessarily suppressed multiplicity and the possibility of actual difference (3). As asserted by Martin:

Unlike many male critics, feminists are quite consciously involved in systematically articulating the extent to which the woman has been situated very differently with regard to the "human," to "Man," than has man; and feminist analyses demonstrate ever more convincingly that women's silence and exclusion from struggles over representation have been the condition of possibility for humanist thought: the position of woman has indeed been that of an internal exclusion within western culture, a particularly well-suited point from which to expose the workings of power in the will to truth and identity. (13)

An earlier theory that influenced feminist theory was postcolonial criticism, which is the critical study of ancient colonial discourse whose intention was its revision and differentiation from the subsequent ideals in history, contextualising "encounters in the language of the marketplace, with meanings being negotiated as if the negotiators held equal power in the negotiations, each side seeking maximum advantage (Dirlik 6). With the help of postcolonial criticism, Third World women¹⁰, also known as South feminists according to Mohanty (10), and other women of color, have found a way to challenge hegemonic and universalised notions of gender. Class relations could also be analysed using the same epistemology, though it is much less common (Dirlik 6). "Feminist movements have historically lacked inclusivity, often growing within a limited Western upper-class psyche, based on their own challenges and needs" (Shruti Jain 1). Indeed, the question of skin colour is relevant, as it was a characteristic used to differentiate the population and classify within races, creating a relation of power. While darker-coloured people were associated with subordination, "the salience of whiteness [was connected] to the formation of nationhood, class, and empire in the United States and in the European

¹⁰ Third World is a category for those people who belong to countries with a colonial past, in the worlds of Dirlik, "it is probably fair to say that the term [postcolonialism] presents itself as a substitute for what was called the Third World after World War II, and colonial/semi-colonial societies for the half century before that" (8).

colonial enterprise” (Frankenberg 2). Fair skin is a trend in contemporary society, as illustrated in the comic “That’s Not Fair” by Harini Kannan, within *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). The nations of the Third World have one thing in common: either they have directly experienced violence and dominance from imperialist powers seeking to establish themselves in the area, or they have been subtly persuaded to do so.

Although this social struggle is important for feminist theory and criticism, it becomes especially relevant for Third World women, together with other basic social issues, which started to diverge in Western countries, “demonstrating the multiplicity of perspectives and approaches called feminist literary theory and criticism” (Warhol and Herndl 9). In South Asian countries, the feminist theory has developed differently and even “the contemporary, post-colonial Indian nation-state may be bound territorially, but is characterized by multiple policies, institutions, and discourses” (Puri, 1999: 11). Furthermore, “the rise of the post-independence women’s movement in India is historically different from the emerging feminist politics in the United Kingdom and the United States” (C. Mohanty, *Feminism* 63). For that reason, there are many women who do not identify themselves as feminist because it is a term of Western origin. Reading Waho and Herndl on Tsitsi Dangarembga, they write that a high number of African women have the following views:

They disapprove of, or simply eschew, the word “feminist” because of the implications that they suspect are inherent in such identification. Tsitsi Dangarembga has also stated in an interview that “white Western feminism does not connect with my experiences at a certain point, the issues of me as a black woman. Black US female writers touch more of me than the white ones. (120)

South Asian women might not identify with the same struggles and realities. For example, “in India, the middle-class women’s movement essentially attempted to modernise earlier patriarchal regulation of women and pave the way for middle-class women to enter the professions and participate in political movements” (C. Mohanty, *Feminism* 63), while in Western societies women struggle mainly for gender issues. On the other hand, according to S. R. Rajan:

Though the success of the women’s movements in South Asian countries in recent decades, and especially the impact of the International Decade for Women (1975–85), has resulted in gains for women through better laws and increased opportunities, these have not significantly improved the basic indexes of women’s status (literacy, wealth, life expectancy, employment and physical safety) (101)

South Asian feminism grew in status during the 1960s thanks to the Women's Movement. As stated by Roces and Edwards (2010), Asian women activists' enthusiastic presence, as government representatives or NGO leaders, for example, meant that they were able to export Asian feminism to the global stage as feminists from all over the world gathered together in special forums to discuss the woman's question and global patriarchy (16). Therefore, it is typical to categorise the Women's Movement in India into three phases or 'waves' (Menon, *Gender*). However, only after Independence was the movement accorded the respect and consideration it deserved. According to Madhok, in analysing Menon's book *Gender and Politics in India*, he states the following:

The first of these 'waves' encompassed women's participation in the anticolonial, nationalist-led movement; the 'second wave' witnessed the emergence of women as activists in the late 1960s within large class-defined mobilizations taken to the streets in protest alongside other political formations; the 'third wave' of the women's movement in India occurred with the emergence of the 'autonomous' phase of the women's movement a decade later. (333)

In addition, many scholars are researching the 'fourth feminist wave' in India as a result of digital modernisation. "Although the term 'fourth-wave feminism' originated in the West, it emerged in India almost at the same time due to the widespread use of social media" (Shruti Jain 3). Indeed, "the 2012 anti-rape movement in India launched a new phase of feminist politics that embodied a rights-based discourse of gender, specifically, against every day, generalized misogyny, sexual harassment, and violence, in a way that had not been seriously taken up by the mainstream Indian Women's Movement" (Kurian 17) previously, which was the inspiration for the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) by Priya et al. She comments on Indian youth:

They assert their constitutional right to shape the future of the country's secularism that they fear is currently under threat by the Hindutva forces of regressive nationalism. The promise of the 2012 feminist movement, therefore, is this connection, and is a critical breakthrough that has the potential to lay the groundwork for what I claim to be the fourth-wave of Indian feminism for broader class-based struggles. (16)

Riding of the fourth wave of feminism in India will be the framework for the analysis of this dissertation within an interdisciplinary perspective on cultural studies and feminist theory, after analysis of the complexities of neo-nationalism and the Women's Movements, which is represented in the different graphic novels and comics of the corpus, including gender violence, castes, acid attacks, dowry, arranged marriage, gang rape,

harassment, and the struggle for fairness. The different literary feminist discourses against heteropatriarchal, neo-colonial social structures will include women's resilience, alternative identities, changeable living spaces, retelling of mythology, women's emancipation, women's education, sisterhood, and deconstruction of mainstream references. These multiple empowering portrayals present an alternative space against the regional heteronormative structures, promoting the social change framed in the fourth feminist wave of this South Asian country.

Chapter 4. Women's Graphic Novels and Comics

4.1. Visual Studies: An Overview

Cultural studies have a broad interpretation of culture and encompass a wide range of disciplines, examining all aspects of culture, including thoughts, expressions, and shared meanings that we experience and create on a daily basis (Storey 2-3). Indeed, Storey claims there is a negotiation between power and culture since the human being provides the world with a “right” meaning, while inevitably, the texts tend to be chaotic (Storey 3). For this reason, “cultural studies argue that popular culture is [...] an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups (Storey 3-4), becoming an area of interest for understanding the meaning and having control. Moreover, Angela McRobbie views cultural studies as a crucial tool for understanding the ways in which culture and power intersect and how cultural practices shape societal norms and values. Moreover, she criticises dominant representations of gender and race in media and popular culture:

Feminists have used the notion of fragmentation both sociologically and psychoanalytically to describe the state of distraction created by the ‘women’s time’. This distraction has been identified in formats of popular culture associated with women, such as soap operas, which existed long before fragmentation occurred in the late 1980s, couched in terms of postmodernity. (27)

Mukerji and Schudson believe that a common question regarding the study of popular culture has been its worthiness of serious examination. However, in recent years there has been a significant increase in interest toward the study of popular culture in the humanities and social sciences. This newfound interest is partly due to Marxist scholars, who believe that popular culture plays a crucial role in influencing political activism (Mukerji and Schudson 47). In this sense, cultural studies have started to pay attention to all kinds of disciplines related to population, including visual studies and popular literature. As stated by Mukerji and Schudson, “modern culture was thought the main province of sociology; mass culture was viewed as the pattern of popular culture that is most powerful in this era; and the growth of mass culture was associated with nineteenth-century industrialization” (51). The necessity of reviewing the definition of visual studies has been at a constant peak ever since the object of its study developed with the appearance of comics, graphic novels, television, and advertising, among others, which are ways of expression with cultural meaning and discourse. The issue of pictorial

representation has always existed, but now it is pressing irresistibly and with unprecedented force on all levels of culture, from the most sophisticated philosophical speculations to the obscenest mass media productions (Mitchell 16). Traditional containment tactics no longer seem effective, and global criticism of visual culture seems unavoidable (Mitchell 16).

Professor William John Thomas Mitchell states that “it’s useful at the outset to distinguish between visual studies and visual culture as, respectively, the field of study, and the object or target of study. Visual studies are the study of visual culture” (166), while visual culture is “a specific domain of research whose fundamental principles and problems are being articulated freshly in our time [...] the visual construction of that which is social, not just the social construction of vision” (Mitchell 170-179). On the other hand, José Luis Brea slightly modifies this definition by stating that visual studies are “studies about the production of cultural meaning through visibility [...] the effect of the sign within the context of a sensorial and phenomenal capability behind the condition and construction of a specific symbolic framework” (7-8), implying the sight of the individual and perception of visual messages, which represent aspects of life. Furthermore, British anthropologist Lucien Taylor points out that “Visualizing Theory is more heterogeneous, as many academic tomes, addressing topics that range from the significance of mass-produced tourist art in Africa, to the panoply of chiasmic gazes in National Geographic photographs, and to the "fractalization" of gender identity in Melanesia” (11). In other words, delimitating the boundaries has been an arduous task for scholars. However, art historian and critic James Elkins insists on the distinction of three types of studies that appeared during the twentieth century with origins in the USA and England, which spread worldwide years later: cultural studies, visual culture, and visual studies. As mentioned by James Elkins, cultural studies are an interdisciplinary field of research that started at the end of the 1950s in England, which studies the combination of historical writing and sociopolitical novels (1-2). He continues defining the visual culture as a US movement, a branch of cultural studies, mentioned for the first time in 1972 by Michael Baxandall and approaching visual works of art from a cultural, historical and social perspective (2-4). Finally, as James Elkins points out, visual studies appeared in the early 1990s. According to him, they are “the field of visual culture [which] might grow to be: the study of visual practices across all boundaries” (6-7), including media, art, history, the process of seeing, culture and other disciplines.

However, visual studies are interpreted in many ways since they are a field of research considerably recent and taught by International Universities. James Elkins asserts that interest in visual culture has expanded outside of England, Canada, and the US. The Sarai Program and the Centre for the Study of Social Sciences both have visual studies centres in India, but other than those two locations, visual studies is only done as part of film studies or cultural studies (10). In line with this definition, visual studies are essential for the research of humanities and fields related to them. “Visual studies have also been defined as a field that springs from semiotics, poststructuralism, anthropology, sociology, literary theory, and even translation studies” (Elkins 25). As a branch of visual culture, which approaches “feminism and women’s studies, queer theory, political economy, postcolonial studies, performance studies, anthropology and visual anthropology, film and media studies” (Elkins 25), among many others, visual studies might focus on the research into all visual works, which intrinsically state all the theories mentioned before.

According to McLain, “while all of these Indian comics are in need of further study by scholars working in a range of disciplines, including anthropology, media studies, political science, and sociology, they would especially benefit from further study by scholars of religion and visual culture” (606). Taking into account the theories mentioned before and the interdisciplinarity and proximity between visual studies and visual culture, it might be deduced that comics and graphics novels are visual elements, since they contain images and they can be seen and read, but they also belong to a cultural dimension, as they are directly connected to a social side due to the significance of their signs and messages, the depiction of an event or time, fictional or non-fictional, the fact is, they are produced by an author and the reader reads them. Nonetheless, comics and graphic novels “are not a genre, they are a format and a technique for telling a story or conveying information” (Syma and Weiner 1), so as a new reading format containing images, they could be studied by visual culture and comprehended by visual studies. As demonstrated by Talvin in 2005 and Thomas in 2011, popular visual culture started to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century with the popularisation of television, the cinema, newspapers and consequently, the graphic novel, although the graphic novel was not considered a piece of art culture since it was introduced as an attempt at comic sophistication (Kwon 34). However, “the tradition of the press comic born in the United States is perhaps the most important seed among all worldwide traditions of comics from

the twentieth century, or the common antecedent, in a manner of speaking” (García 266). Hopefully, according to Lanier, it was thanks to the introduction and development of visual culture by scholars during the 1960s when graphic novels started to be an object of research and interest in the departments (Kwon 34). In addition, García claims that “the tradition of the graphic novel started to emerge in the last quarter of the twentieth century based on the tradition of the underground comic” (266). Indeed, “the term graphic novel was first coined in English in 1964 and was popularised by the American legend Will Eisner” (Parvathy and Devi 4835). In agreement with Gravett and McCloud, comics, literature, and art are all combined in graphic novels, looking like comic books but lengthier, having a book-like binding, and dealing with more serious topics. Traditional comic books combine societal critique and personal reflection, incorporating pop culture imagery into sophisticated language and imagery (Graham 10), representing final democratic works accessible for a wide range of readers although “not generally viewed as an art form because they are so readily available to everyone. Often, when people think of great art, they think of museums or the homes of the wealthy; but, actually, great art can be found in comics” (Milstead 157).

In addition, Weiner and Eisner point out the aesthetic conception of graphic novels since “the manner of their creation has evolved from a work written and drawn by a single individual to a wedding between writer and artist. This has established a creative process that employs the skills of an accomplished writer and an artist of great sophistication. All of this has attracted critical approval and elevated the standards of the medium” (10), claiming the process behind the result as artistic and interconnecting the disciplines of literature, design and painting in a hybrid masterpiece, a breakthrough for the field of art study, and confirming the need for visual studies to research and analyse visual art, its representation of social situations and demands, and its influence on society. As Bucher and Manning affirm, “graphic novels are useful vehicles for giving voices to minorities or others with different viewpoints [and] have the potential to positively portray and deconstruct negative stereotypes” (Short and Reeves 426). Supporting this perspective, Seelow claims that “graphic novels motivate reluctant readers, engage powerful social issues, and present rich opportunities for multiple literacies” (62).

Moreover, Baetens and Frey highlight that both graphic novels and comics, “alongside the attacks and later self-regulation, [they] were starting to tackle serious historical subject matter in publications such as *Front Line Combat* [a war comic book

anthology] and in the satirical magazines that provided powerful parodies of contemporary society” (40). In this vein, Syma and Weiner state that “comics are a form of social history that can be used to impart knowledge about a particular era” (1) and could be used as an educational tool. “Teachers in secondary and elementary schools, professors in universities, and instructors of all kinds are using comics and graphic novels to illustrate points about gender, history, sociology, philosophy, mathematics, and even medicine” (Syma and Weiner 1).

It seems that “suddenly, reading comics is elegant among intelligent adults. Of course, it is neither the first time that the comic has developed an active role within society, nor the first time in which its artistic value is recognised” (García 22). Afterwards, it was found that “comic books have the ability to both shape and reflect the changes in society” (Dunne 9). Kwon adds that “the ever-growing popularity of visual culture provides students with easy access to the graphic novel” (41) and after combining a project about the creation of a graphic novel in the classroom, she concludes that “students reflected that the graphic novel provides a comfortable space to incorporate their voices and experiences (Kwon 41). Following this approach, Short and Reeves concur that “the graphic novel is a relatively new graphic format that has only in recent years been embraced as a legitimate medium for student learning [...] the graphic novel provides contemporary content delivery in line with recent trends and purchasing patterns” (416).

In addition, Graham agrees that “the graphic novel is an excellent candidate for inclusion in the art curriculum. Graphic novels tell stories about things that high school students are deeply interested in, including moral dilemmas, fears of abandonment, and feelings of estrangement borne of differences of race, gender, or disease” (12), although Thomas goes on to state that “to relegate comics to just being a way to motivate reluctant readers because they are easier to read or appear more interesting is to only use a fraction of their potential. Comics are more than illustrated words or captions for images. The sum is greater than the parts” (70).

As specified by García, “Will Eisner, whom many people considered as the father of the modern graphic novel, insistently affirmed that the comic is literature, an idea followed enthusiastically by many people including contemporary diligent scholars” (25). However, it is necessary to distinguish the fundamental differences between comics and graphic novels for the purpose of this dissertation; “the term graphic novel includes fiction

as well as nonfiction text with pictures - "comics" in book format. [...] Graphic novels offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals" (Schwarz 262). "A graphic novel is a visual novel composed of comic strip panels. More specifically, "graphic" denotes its use of cartoon drawings, and "novel" describes its depiction of fictional or non-fictional stories" (Kwon 36) so a graphic novel is a narrative story that is presented to the reader in the form of a collection of comics. Similarly, when a comic series is a best-seller with a large following, it is frequently adapted into a graphic novel. A comic book is a magazine that contains a series of comic strips. "The component "novel" in the term "graphic novel" connects comics explicitly to the larger category of literature" (Kukkonen 85), so graphic novels might typically be thicker than comic books since they might have more pages and free size. They're also printed on a special comic paper that looks and feels like a comic book but with a different cover and a standard size of 6-5/8 inches wide by 10-1/4 inches high.

According to Kukkonen, comics publishers have started adopting high culture production methods by releasing special editions of their most popular comics in an expensive hardback format, keeping titles accessible in trade paperback formats, and compiling and republishing old stories in archive editions. This is in addition to the cultural valorisation of comics, which is exemplified by the rise of the term "graphic novel" (85). It implies that two readers may have different covers from the same comic, which is a marketing technique to encourage multiple purchases of the same tale. Similarly, graphic novels tell stories that have a beginning, middle, and end with no advertisements in between, although comic books may include promotions or publicity within their pages.

In fact, since comics were published in newspapers during the twentieth century, "newspaper comic strips were always recognised as something read by everyone, but from the beginnings of the new medium, comic books were perceived as a format for children" (Weiner, 24). For all these reasons, "comics are generally considered to be less "literary" than novels: they seem to be less ambiguous, they seem to represent less cognitive complexity, and they seem to offer a more straightforward and less perplexing reading experience" (Kukkonen 85). Notwithstanding, García points out that "the search of the 'right' roots is a habitual way of legitimising the present time, so it is not weird that the figure of Töpffer [a caricaturist and cartoonist considered the father of comic strips]

has been reclaimed with force in recent years, to be more consistent with the highbrow image of the current graphic novel” (28).

Based on Weiner, “early comic book magazines consisted of genre stories told in comic book format, including mysteries, adventure, and romance. To provide publishers with fresh stories for this burgeoning medium, companies sprang up, employing teams of artists and writers to create the stories as quickly and cheaply as possible” (22); so, before comics started to be popularised, comics “were initially reprints of newspaper comic strips. But quickly comic book publishers realised that there was a market for new stories and sought out fresh material” (Weiner 22). Some decades later, when graphic novels emerged, they brought in a variety of formats, including paperback and hardback, depending on the publisher, while comic books continued being unique in that they are not particularly long; in fact, they still are usually rather short, although the duration varies depending on the publisher, with variant issues and sub-series offering readers a variety of covers. However, Paul Williams points out in an interview that at the beginning of the twenty century, “there was not really a trade paperback or graphic novel market. There was a back issue market, which was a big part of the economy of that time for comic stores. But with back issues, once they are sold, they’re gone. You can’t buy that comic any more” (Williams and Lyons 47).

On the other hand, after the “breakthrough of the graphic novel in 1986–1987, [with the successes of authors such as] Spiegelman, Moore and Gibbons” (Baetens and Frey 74), graphic novels could be purchased at bookstores, but comics were offered exclusively at comics shops or comics stores with a high percentage of comics, where customers could sign up for specials and save money. As claimed by Short and Reeves, “for a graphic novel to be an illustrated work involves a more mature audience in which a dramatic arc is followed where content is presented with a definite beginning, middle, and end, as opposed to comic strips that appear weekly, or comic books in which a cast of characters has infinite ongoing plotlines” (416), which is why limited editions or special editions of various comic books are created by publishers to promote collections and encourage readers to compile these collections.

In fact, Sabin reports that “certain comics became sought after because they contained popular characters or because they represented the work of desirable artists, and they began to be sold second hand through comic “marts,” conventions, and mail-order businesses” (Williams and Lyons 4), enabling the retail and second hand market to

reach a new height, since weird and special comics can be sold for a high value after some years. Moreover, the time and attention paid to graphic novels and comics may vary. According to Thomas, “comic books offer a unique way to tell stories because they are temporal in nature. Comics create a sense of time passing through the juxtaposition of images. Each framed image in a comic is referred to as a panel” (68), allowing them to be read in an average of 20 to 30 minutes (depending on the comic story and what the reader is looking for), while graphic novels, on the other hand, need a greater level of concentration from the reader because they indicate a narrative story told through strips of considerable length.

In the middle of the social change developed during this century, graphic novels and comics became popular among youth (although they were read by all ages). In the words of Debroy, “parents and teachers in India often objected to comics on the grounds that they reduced language skills and even powers of concentration and were light and frivolous in tone and content” (34), although with the publication of *Amar Chitra Katha*, “they realized they had educational value” (34), and they started to be used by the scholars and teachers as a medium of education. “The term graphic novel was first coined in English in 1964 and was popularised by the American legend Will Eisner. In India, we welcomed the world of comics that started with *Amar Chitra Katha* in 1967” (Parvathy and Devi 4835), while the graphic novel “radically [repositions] the comic medium and brings it into the 21st century” (Parvathy and Devi 4835). Graphic novels written in English and arriving in India were adapted to Hindi to be accessible to the lower and middle classes. The graphic novel consists of texts with a comic strip image format, but published as a book, although the first comic strips were published in India in the middle of the 20th century when “Indian newspapers began to carry reproductions or translated versions of comic strips such as *Tarzan*, *Phantom*, and *Mandrake*” (Debroy 33).

At this point, the importance of the research of graphic novels and comics should be understood, as pointed out by Yadav, who analyses *A gardener in the wasteland* (2011), a graphic novel adaptation of the first anti-caste book Phule’s *Gulamgiri*:

Visuality offers a unique approach in the understanding of caste in contemporary Indian society [...] narration in graphic novel form reconfigures (or resembles) the original text [referring to Phule’s *Gulamgiri*]. Lastly, does the graphic novel help or hinder in conveying the holistic understanding of the problem of caste from Phule to present times. (87)

It means this new literary format covered by visual culture, and ultimately by visual studies, has become indispensable for the expression of countercurrent artists and writers tackling national social issues, as well as a tool for offering an alternative education. “A lot of children in India and in other developing countries for first generation learners just don't fit into the mainstream education system. In these spaces, when you go in with creative media, visual storytelling, theater with games, they work really well (appendix). In fact, this illustrative format, if well done, makes injustices visible thanks to its images. As Yadav points out, Gardner in the Wasteland appears to be carrying on Phule's belief by enlightening the populace through the graphic dissection of Brahmanical myths. This emphasis on voicing out an old issue in a fresh way is an effort to raise awareness of the issues the dalit population face while also offering solutions (59). These would be the goals of the corpus depicted and analysed in the second part, which contains Indian graphic novels as well as comic books.

Although graphic novels and comics were a fresh visual format, when present in the US versions, women were twice as likely as male characters to be shown in a domestic setting and were more likely to have parenting duties. This has often been attributed to the conservative stance of male creators, syndicates, and publishers (Lefèvre 96). However, the same thing happened in India; as Siddiqui and Naz claim, in their early days, the representation of women in these mediums was heavily influenced by the Indian cultural context. The number of female characters was limited, but their depiction was authentic and reflective of reality (10). This conception changed, together with the social reforms achieved by feminist activists that increased in each decade.

4.2. The Representation of Women in Indian Graphic Novels and Comics

The characteristics, target readers and purposes of graphic novels and comics have changed since these new formats first appeared, together with the representation of women within the pictures. The representation of women in Indian comics underwent a significant transformation in the latter years of the 20th century, as explained by Siddiqui and Naz. There was an increase in the number of female characters and greater recognition for women in the comics industry. These characters were no longer confined to stereotypical roles and were instead portrayed as stronger and more independent. The comics of this period were heavily influenced by Western comics, adopting not only their themes but also their ethos (Siddiqui and Naz 11). As questioned by Baetens and Frey,

“what was strikingly different from today’s graphic novels? First, there were women artists at work on comics, but they were hidden inside male-run offices” (52), due to the cultural development of society, since these formats are linked to cultural awareness, a fact that makes graphic novels and comics grow abreast with human beings:

The underground artists addressed topics that would become subjects of graphic novels in years to come; notably, autobiography and introspective strips about creators’ lives and outlooks (original exponents being Crumb and Justin Green [American underground cartoonists], as well as women’s underground strips that didactically asserted selfhood and gender interests in counterpoint to the sexist objectifications in much of the male-produced work. (Baetens and Frey 56)

At the end of the 1980’s, graphic novels and comics’ “more recent production [focused on] history and reportage, autobiography, women creators, and the revival of genre-driven works” (Baetens and Frey 74), while “the superhero genre proved especially challenging, since many of the most celebrated works in the genre are written and drawn by men and do not address the frequently problematic representations of women in the genre (Hollis 251), becoming a difficult task to use in the classroom and creating a necessity of reinventing and deconstructing the gender values depicted along the pages, even if in the opinion of Davies these formats “may provide a more evenly balanced and less biased method for content delivery than traditional textbooks, which traditionally have shown women overrepresented in domestic roles and underrepresented in occupational and leisure roles” (Short 425). However, summarizing Robbins, as a cartoonist she noticed two increases and decreases in comics dealing with strong women, drawn by women, and depicting positive female roles, from 1960 to approximately 1970, and after 2010 with the publication of her article, but even nowadays “girl cartoonists combine feminist anger with a contemporary “girly” energy, and despite their often strong political messages and sometimes depressing autobiographical subjects, such as rape and incest, they often include paper dolls in their books” (Robbins 8). According to Dunne’s research, women were largely “invisible” in comic books and American society in the 1950s, but they became very active in the 1960s. This demonstrates how closely related real-life and comics are. Comic book characters, however, challenge convention and replicate offensive stereotypes, making them a near-perfect analysis of the roles that were available to women and other minorities at the time (9).

Due to the extended attribution of the graphic novel as a highbrow format of the comic in order to reach adults readers in its takeoff during the eighties, the differences of drawings between men and women relating to gender is not relevant since its social,

educational and literary purpose is intrinsic from the very beginning, as it mostly deals with serious topics. Results from Deborah Chavez's research (1985) show that in the United States Census from 1978, 69% of women were in the labor force, in contrast with the 4% illustrated in comic strips from the same year. Also, there was a difference in the careers carried out by women, who appeared as bank tellers or secretaries, in comparison to men who developed all sort of occupations.

Nevertheless, Kyra Nelson explains the foundation of the regulatory agency Comics Code Authority, which gave an approval rating to comics according to their sexual and violent content due to the depiction of women such as Sheena or Phantom Lady, who appeared hypersexualized. According to Kyra Nelson "early women of comics were scantily clad, impossibly proportioned, and overly sexualized, whereas the more demure women of the post-World War II era generally did little more than fall into the damsel-in-distress role" (74). Broadening the horizons about representation, Robbins maintains that while in the past females were drawn with exaggerated body proportions focused on their breasts and waists, males were also illustrated with magnified muscles and necks, and nowadays the trend has changed, particularly in indie comics, in which both are drawn similarly regardless of the gender of the artist or character. In her thesis, in relation to new femininities and masculinities of superheroes depicted in contemporary comics, Volintine uses the concept of 'visionary gender' (appraised by American society and culture) as an alternative type of hegemonic identity, which is not constructed on the basis of male or female, so all kinds of qualities can be attributed to men or women.

As a consequence of their popularization due to the inclusion of images, there is has been a gradual progression in emergent writers who lead women characters, empowering and highlighting their morals and rights, and prominent queer characters who question their identity and love relationships. A growing number of feminist graphic novels are being published, and they provide a critical and frequently intersectional viewpoint on women's experiences. Although the history of the Indian graphic novel is considerably brief, and the format is contemporary, from the beginning Indian male authors focused their comics and graphic novels on mythological heroes, with little support of women, monopolizing the mainstream industry. Even the first exceptional publisher, India Book House, made sexual and violent content against female characters, although it was softer. Conversely, feminist theory has drawn attention to gender violence to show the complexities of the use of history in constructing feminine and masculine

identities that serves the patriarchal state authority and raise awareness of vulnerability, resilience, resistance, memory, and healing (Varughese and Dudrah 1). Based on “the graphic narrative, with its verbal-visual and critical literacy, the medium India needs to address contemporary concerns and provide a politically edged cultural critique (Nayar 8). From the point of view of Menozzi, readers of graphic novels should be aware of the background and make a close reading to understand their narratives, references and correlation between images and text:

In the context of contemporary South Asian graphic novels and visual narratives, such reading can suggest a few points, which are still open questions in postcolonial literary studies. First of all, graphic novels by dalit, tribal or ‘other backward classes’ artists should be approached as works of art, if their authors want to be recognised as such. There is no point in trying to do justice to the voices of subaltern artists without taking their works as seriously as critics and readers would take a novel by Salman Rushdie or any other internationally recognised creative writer. (15)

Menziozi’s reflection implies a previous deconstruction about the act of reading, forgetting about consumption and understanding the narratives within their inner cultural expression. “For this reason, the act of reading South Asian graphic novels needs to achieve both closeness to the text and the awareness of global capitalism as the material horizon, paying attention to the problem of material work in world literature” (9). Indeed, readers should detach the Western trend to interpret these texts as a supposed ‘call to action’ to struggle for an unfair situation. In the manner of Menozzi, “reading graphic narratives, indeed, should contribute to a rethinking of world literature in postcolonial contexts, by focusing on inequality, injustice and exclusion instead of the reifications of diversity or identity” (16). In the same way, from the South Asian population’s perspective, “the advent of such globalizing influences from around the world, spreading new ideas about gender development and empowerment narratives with regard to women’s social, political and economic positioning, shifts the focus on the local realities” (Zubair 2), so the exposition to graphic novels implies a global democratization where everybody can read any text and examine the similarities and differences with their own culture, understanding the narratives as a window display of the author’s reality, and the readers are free to become influenced by the literary expression. As stated by Zubair:

An essential aspect of the development of narratives in the media is connected with global imagery or images that transcend the local. The images and themes spreading through electronic media such as cable channels and the Internet include, among others, Western styles of dress, ideas of romance and courtship, pre and extra-marital love affairs as opposed to arranged marriages,

representations and discussion of erstwhile taboo issues such as divorce, women's employment, sexual harassment, rape and prostitution. These images pertain to several facets of women's lives, reshaping and repositioning their social and familial identities. (2)

Due to the format of mass media and graphic novels in South Asia, "such visual images are increasingly viewed and received with keen interest by millions of literate, illiterate and semi-literate populations across the entire country, the majority of whom are women" (Zubair 2), a revolutionary fact never experienced before by population, especially for those who are illiterate. However, "Indian graphic narratives have come a long way from solely idealising the Hindu/Vedic past to contemporary digital comics where individual stories are shared" (Nayek 1). According to Landis (2016) the influence of American comics at the end of the twentieth century is seen in those of South Asia. This author comments:

Indian comics, in style and structure, clearly draw from the Western superhero genre; however, they also craft specifically Indian and Hindu stories and characters in order for their readers to make sense of their history, their culture, and themselves. And not only are they read on the subcontinent, they are also recognized, consumed, and at times repurposed by South Asians in diasporas. (38)

Nevertheless, after fifty years of familiarization with these new formats, graphic novels and comics have evolved, together with the social development of each region, and every community has shaped its style and conventions according to the background of the author and purpose. To this statement, Dawson Varughese and Dudrah add:

The post-millennial years, however, have brought about a sea change in the way India recognises and indeed defines its comic and graphic novel production. The growing number of independent comic and graphic novel presses, the diverse and challenging array of narratives, as well as the quality of production and print, have meant that Indian graphic novels (and comics) are unrecognisable when compared to the [...] works of the 1970s and 1980s. (3)

Nevertheless, focusing on the mainstream, "the imagery used in television advertising continues to cast women in traditional feminine roles, which are restrictive, reductive, and sexist, focusing primarily on women's bodies and how they are controlled through patriarchal marriage, as well as women's reproductive and nurturing roles as wives and mothers" (Zubair 11). Landis suggests that any reader may feel inspired and identified with a superhero. "Furthermore, *Ms. Marvel* [the first Muslim superheroine appearing in Marvel] invites South Asian/American readers to do the same through engaged, participatory, and (dis) identificatory fan practice" (33). Even though the

character comes from a mainstream market encouraging people to consume its products, “such cross-racial identification may allow for a complex and politically powerful form of subject formation through (dis) identificatory reading and consumer practices” (Landis 33).

In some South Asian countries, such as India, governments have great control over national mass media campaigns and channels, a step backward for the feminist movement and women’s empowerment. For this reason, independent, underground, alternative or ‘indie’ comics and graphic novels started to emerge, in which “comics creators exhibited an autobiographical impulse, and their works established some of the conventions of the genre—conventions that the undergrounds played with and built on and that current creators continue to use and challenge” (Kunka 44). According to Cook, the origin of alternative comics is inaccurate:

The scenario of underground comics (or comix, a nod to their often x-rated content) was at its height from the mid-1960s to the mid to late 1970s. Like the larger countercultural revolution of which it was a part, much of the action took place on the West Coast—San Francisco in particular. But underground comics were created wherever cartoonists, disillusioned with mainstream comics, wanted to do something less constrained in terms of content and form. The underground comics scene was diverse and nonconformist, and its edges intersected with other art forms—in particular, psychedelic rock posters and music fanzines. Thus, identifying the first underground comic is difficult. (136)

However, Cook explains that underground comics have been shaped along the twentieth century in response to three key events. In the first place, “the earliest such precursors are the illicit comics known as Tijuana Bibles. Popular during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Tijuana Bibles depicted popular comic strips and animation characters, movie celebrities, and other high-profile individuals engaged in sexual acts or other salacious situations” (132). Secondly, as a response to the “institution of the Comics Code Authority of 1954” (133) mentioned before, an organism in charge of approving or censoring the content of comics. Thirdly, there was the wiliness of *Mad* magazine in changing its format from a comic to a magazine to avoid censorship (Cook 134). In addition, “mainstream publishing and mainstream media nowhere in the world encourages women's work in telling hard-hitting realities of misogyny and oppression” (appendix). On the report by Cook, “*Mad* focused on clever parodies of popular culture and biting satire addressing current social issues of the time, and featured contributions from both legendary comics creators, [...] and up-and-comers” (134). Underground comics have been accepted by a part of the population and official institutions since they

are considered incorrect, albeit they just show alternative responses to social issues, as maintained by Cook:

Unsurprisingly, underground comics attracted controversy and were regularly accused (by those not in the “movement”) of glorifying promiscuous sexuality and irresponsible drug use. These charges are, in retrospect, unsurprising, given the positioning of the underground comics scene at the center of the larger “free love” and “enlightenment through pharmacology” countercultural movement. (138)

As stated by Debroy, “comic strips remain very popular in India and are strengthened by the recent emergence of the “graphic novel.” Undoubtedly inspired and influenced by developments in other countries, they have Indianized the Western influences on them and successfully grown into a truly Indian product” (37-38). Although the influence of US comics has been clear among the Indian population, it hasn’t happened to worldwide readers the other way around, as stated by Stoll:

Indian comics remain relatively obscure in those same countries [US, Japan and Europe]. When they are recognized, readers and reviewers tend to either focus on transnational publishers or frame comics on the subcontinent as novelties. This not only distracts from the vibrant comics world in India, but also holds the works created therein to outsiders’ standards, which have tended to celebrate educational content or corporate publishing. (309)

As depicted and documented by Stoll, the concept of comics in India comes from the heritage of visual storytelling (311). While in the rest of the world the comic started approximately at the beginning of the twentieth century, in India, according to Hasan, “the first identifiable comics in India are generally seen as the *Avadh* or *Oudh Punch* of 1877 to 1956, or the 1850 to 1857 run of *Delhi Sketch Book*” (Stoll 312). According to McLain (2011), “India’s history of political cartoons dates to the 19th century, when political cartoons were published in major Indian newspapers and vernacular publications such as *Urdu Punch* and *Hindi Punch*” (606). This indicates that this countercurrent format appeared as a response to the British Raj, as “such magazines laid the foundation for a critically aware and regionally diverse comics world in India. They specifically provided a strong precedent for linguistic diversity that would support publication in multiple dialects [...] and enabled regional comics publishing” (Stoll 313). Afterward, Indian comics and magazines reached a new height at the national level in the 1930s, on the basis of Venkatachalapathy, and “with increasing British and Indian magazine publications [...] many cartoonists had become celebrated artists by the 1930s.

During this period, the medium became increasingly popular” (Stoll 313), living through its golden age from 1970 to 1980, a period in which “Raj comics were the first

to capitalize on the superhero genre in the mid-80s” (Chandra 58), concurrently with the American publications described before. While Raj comics had the influence of the English colonisers and framed their strips within a secular society, the subsequent Indian graphic narrative mythicised an ancient Vedic discourse (Kaur and Eqbal 65). The role of women in Raj comics might be considered as modern and transgressive in comparison to the dyed-in-the-wool conservative representation of women succeeding Indian ones. Nevertheless, in Raj comics, “female characters are mostly heroic handmaidens tending to the needs of the superhero when he is in dire straits. With the exception of the superheroine, Shakti, women do not come centre-circle in Raj Comics” (Kaur and Eqbal 66). *Shakti* is an outstanding series belonging to Raj comics, which illustrates a woman outside of the Indian physical standards described until that moment, highlighting her long hair, superpowers, and her sense of justice against the murders carried out by her husband. As claimed by Kaur and Eqbal:

Shakti became a ‘proto-feminist’ inspiration for girls growing up in orthodox families. We use the prefix ‘proto’ with some reservation, not implying that the superheroine indicates a pre-political feminist phenomena. Rather, she represents a distinctive figure with which to imagine new powers for Indian women on the basis of a reinvigorated vernacular and mythic prototypes combined with hypermodern visions. (80)

Albeit, the Indian tradition would not follow this trend until the nineties. In keeping Nayek “the journey of graphic narratives in India began in 1967 with the publication of the first issue of the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comic, with protagonists based on mythological tales” (1). In the words of Stoll:

In some ways, India’s comics culture was greatly transformed by the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, but these changes grew out of the larger social context of visual culture. In particular, imported comics were entering the market much as imported culture had through British influence. Yet, ACK offered something relatively new: locally created comic books. (316)

ACK combined religious mythology and history in the series of comics, concentrating on narratives from religious literature and ancient epics like as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (Kaur and Eqbal 3). Even more, McLain complains about the fact that “scholarship has focused on India’s most prominent comic series, *Amar Chitra Katha*, drawing out the connections between the heroes featured in these comics and Hindu nationalist ideology (605), while other comics haven been out of their attention, maybe because they dealt with alternative themes, indeed ACK “reinforced gender prejudice and conventional gender roles of a society where women are only

portrayed as demure beings in a patriarchal framework” (Nayek 1). McLain also adds that “following in the footsteps of *Amar Chitra Katha*, the majority of Indian comics continue to utilize epic Hindu mythology for their character and storyline development” (606), although since the comics’ reached their new height, on the report of Chandra:

The struggle with the nationalist rhetoric continues to haunt the comics as a distorted and abject face of a heroism that can neither be accepted nor totally rejected. The current enterprise of Indianizing the superhero comic for the new domestic market, through random mythological references or vernacular chic, is a symptom of losing that struggle, given the global span and inherent possibilities of the genre. (76)

In the first comics and graphic novels, Indian society was reproduced, meaning that “women were given characters with mere importance. All the dominant characters including titular ones were assigned to men” (Siddiqui and Naz 10). Since education was oriented to male and comics books had a pedagogical purpose “the few women characters present in these comics were supporting characters and were used for the development of the plot. This concept of misusing the women characters was later termed by comic book writer Gail Simone as ‘Women in Refrigerators’” (Siddiqui and Naz 10), a term coined to depict women as filler contents in such stories. As reported by Siddiqui and Naz women were portrayed mainly as secondary characters, doing the house chores, as beneficiaries of the male characters.

On the contrary, modern mainstream comics in India “register another pulse on young people’s imaginaries by marvellously addressing historical, religious, mythical, social and ethical discourses along with commentary on new developments in science, technology and politics” (Kaur and Eqbal 5). After the inculcation of the role of women as handmaids hidden behind a fake modern image in Raj Comics and the glorification of traditional mystic female characters in their support to the main male hero in Indian postcolonial comics, in the 1990s there is restyling in the depiction of Indian women, appearing as superheroines, with superpowers and not necessarily in the company of a male character. Nevertheless, unlike male figures, the majority of heroines are covered by a mask to hide their identity but also, as specified by Kaur and Eqbal to perpetuate:

A sense of *purdah*, a means of physical separation or veiling, which entitles them to have an active public life while not altogether abandoning the screen of gendered expectations. So the superheroine is at once modern, and simultaneously, one that is framed by traditional ideas about womanhood attendant with restrictions on their appearance and movements. (86)

Fortunately, “during the past decade there has been a turn to graphic novels in India that has yet to receive academic attention, with the rise of independent graphic novel artists” (McLain 606). Furthermore, “while *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comics overtly sexualised and fantasised Vedic women, contemporary Indian graphic novels have made a space for the everyday woman and her struggles” (Nayek 1).

As believed by Rajgopal, “in this sense, truly, the idea of India [...] may yet buck the onslaught of the conservative forces and grow closer to the mindset of previous, precolonial eras, as a true space of diversity in all its myriad shapes and forms” (216). Focusing on Indian authors, “although women creators have long been a minority in the comic book industry, they have made a notable impact since its very beginning; and more and more female artists gain recognition along with the maturing medium” (Parvathy and Devi 4835). As claimed by Nayel “from crudely objectifying female bodies to encouraging women to speak up, Indian graphic narratives have come a long way since their beginnings, [and] they have not only made a space for female characters but also opened up the scope for female writers and illustrators” (9). Supporting this research, Ferrara considers that “at the social level, young female writer-artists have found in the graphic novel genre room to express their voice through a simple but resonant language, speaking through very popular characters” (140). On the report of Parvathy and Devi:

Women creators have worked every genre- from superhero works, romances, westerns, wars, crime stories, horrors etc. Their modes of expression and subjects of discussion have expanded as women’s role in the society has changed, [...] especially the shattering of gender stereotypes through the complex female characters is stemming out of the need to make their voice strongly heard in the contemporary world. (4835)

Graphic novels and comics, through the “Indian Writing in English (IWE)” (Nayar 7) have allowed female artists to give visibility and struggle against the Indian traditional conventions in a literature which has always been dominated by male authors. As an example, “transgender community in Southern India claims a link of more than 4,000 years of recorded history to one of the most ancient and sacred of epics of Hinduism, the Mahabharata, with Lord Krishna himself as their initiator” (Rajgopal 213). Commensurate with Nayar:

Graphic medium as a narrative form adds to the variety of forms of representation available in IWE to discuss child abuse (*Hush*), violence against women (*Drawing the Line*), caste discrimination (*Bhimayana, A Gardener in the Wasteland*), traumatic memories (*This Side, That Side*). It adds a new dimension to narrating such events, contexts and conditions – the visual – so that multiple ways of telling

are available on the same page: the documentary and the aesthetic, the satiric caricature and the traumatic realist. (7)

There has been breakthrough in the depiction of the role of women in Indian graphic novels and especially in comics, where their representation has become more significant thanks to the feminist agitation in the patriarchal vision of society, on the report of Siddiqui and Naz:

For decades the women have strived to find their identity in the comic industry. Even after being recognized, there exists an impediment in their portrayal. The comic industry in India has been greatly successful in improving the portrayal of the women characters. The women are now portrayed much strongly as compared to the past. But at the same time, one should not ignore the pitfalls. Showcasing strong personalities of women can't be a compensation for their provoking portrayal (12).

Indian authors start to challenge the young and adult readers introducing essential and real situations faced by women and framed within the Eastern culture. The flourishing of a reconciliation with ordinary circumstances lived by women since forever and the abolition of taboo issues has become the next step towards an Indian feminist body of work. The representation of gender violence, including trauma, castes, acid attack, dowry, arranged marriage, gang rape, patriarchy or fairness among many others, starts to be commonplace in the Indian literature, as well as addressing unconventional behaviour, way of living and self-identities such as alternative sexualities, same-sex desires, mythology retelling, women's emancipation and education. The mentioned topics are analysed and depicted in the corpus of the dissertation, in order to demonstrate the paradigm, shift in contrast to the traditional ideology researched in the first chapter.

4.3. Challenging Patriarchy: The Indian Women's Movement Reclaims Women's Presence

There is an enormous development in the Indian educative system, as well as, in the increasing number of women's organizations assisting gender equality. During the second decade of the twenty-first century, these organizations, together with scholars, independent writers, filmmakers and artists, would offer an alternative response to the new – hinduization supported by official governmental authorities under the traditional ideology of Hindutva. The feminist movement was really conscious of the unreal image

media was promoting among Indian women, so “the bill against an indecent representation of women was introduced in the Rajya Sabha in August 1986 by Margaret Alva, supposedly in response to the demand raised by the women’s movement against derogatory depiction of women in the media” (Agnes 29). This demand could be controversial, women activist complained about sexuality expressed by women in films and advertising, besides “this reinforced the notion that anything sexual is obscene and that respect for women is equivalent to treating them as sexless” (Agnes 29). This complain could be understood as a reinforcement of the patriarchal discourse about the concept of women’s purity, controlling their sexual acts, clothes, etc., on the word of Agnes, “the puritanical notion of women as sexless beings did not in any way help to liberate or empower women” (29).

This campaign would affect Indian sex education, the exploration of women’s sexuality, which is essential for the empowerment of girls and some educative material would be considered obscene, so they would be banned from the classroom, but “when women were depicted in servile stereotype roles, these images were not attacked as indecent. So, the campaign did not help to clearly distinguish between ‘indecent representation’ and ‘obscenity’ as defined in the IPC” (Agnes 29). It would open a debate that would last until nowadays in India, where an alternative sexual education is being introduced by independent Indian authors in order to open and enrich their view towards sexuality. In 1985 the Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development extended its activity establishing The Department of Women and Child Development in order to specifically improve women and children’s conditions.

During the eighties there was a famous controversial lawsuit called Shah Bano Case; “the name Shah Bano has become synonymous with this struggle. In the Shah Bano case, the Indian Supreme Court departed from traditional interpretations of Muslim Personal law, appealing to a more egalitarian Islam” (Mullally 671-672). Shah Bano was an Indian woman married with her husband. The matrimony was also Islamic. In 1978, when Shah became 62-years old, she decided to get divorce from her husband, requiring a maintenance beyond the *iddat* (the period a woman must reflect before continuing her life after the husband’s death or divorce. It can vary, but for divorce it uses to be three months), since she was in a vulnerable position. At the beginning the Indian Supreme Court ruled in favor of Shah Bano, as she was an Indian woman, but later on, Islamic Indian leaders pressured the Court alleging the woman was Muslim and was under the

Islamic Penal Code. It created women's agitations against the demand of the Islamic leaders, considering that Shah Bano was an Indian woman, "the Hindu right party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), although sitting in opposition, was gaining in popularity, leading to an increased sense of vulnerability amongst the Muslim minority" (Mullally 672).

Due to the sectarian nationalist Muslim movements against Shah Bano, she was maintained just during the *iddat*. This decision provoked not only posterior struggles by the feminist movement but also an empowerment of some nationalist groups, as they Court awarded Muslim community, which was based on traditional rules from barbarian age. In accordance with Mullally, "the Congress Government responded to the heightening communal crisis by passing the 1986 Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce) Act, yielding to the claims of cultural conservatives within the Muslim community and attempting to reverse the Shah Bano judgment" (671). On the other side, Muslim women started to fight for their rights in India against Muslim religious laws.

In 1987, an agitation against sati (a ritual in which a woman sacrifices herself in the funeral pyre of her husband) started as a result of the public murder of Roop Kanwar, an 18-years old girl, in Rajasthan. Based on Agnes, "there was a demand and after the funeral, the Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) stated law came into effect and was passed in October 1987" (30). The main argument of the protests was "that there could be no freedom or religion that could go beyond what was compatible with the paramount claims of humanity and justice" (Agnes 30). During the following years and after all the feminist protests against nationalist governmental ideology and justice, the IPC was modified, restructured, including favorable law for women according to the violence and offence they would live.

As said by the post-colonial political Indian scientist Shirin M. Rai, in 2018, in India, "the relative stability of the political system has allowed for a significant political space to emerge where women have been able to organize in their various interests" (224). The National Commission for Women in India was founded in 1990 due to the increase of popularity of the BJP and its links with "Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh, a militia type organization mobilizing through a Hindu fundamentalist discourse, often directed against minority groups such as Muslims and more recently Christians" (Rai 225). Due to the feminist movement, several protests, Indian women from all the castes and educational level and the campaigns against social issues they gained more visibility until

in the nineties they started to occupy public positions in the government with more frequency, as a consequence the National Commission for Women was established to “to assess the role of women in Indian public life. [...] The Commission is the result of pressure put upon government by feminist and women’s movements for such an organization, which would press for women’s interests to be represented in government policy” (Rai 228). The demands presented in the eighties were vital for the formation of the Commission which would deal with legal functions concerning women, advising the government and examining amendments. They followed a gender agenda, especially to abolish previous unfair situations with vulnerable or humble communities, “the poorer the training of the local staff, the more likely it is that either the investigation would be hampered by local patriarchal interests or that there would be ‘outsiders’ needed to carry out such an investigation, raising its own issues of legitimacy” (Rai 231).

Due to the new understanding of gender relationship by those who became adults during the 1980s and 1990s, a new deep discourse emerged as a critic of the second wave of feminism called the third wave of feminism, which made the movement more inclusive and miscellaneous. As Susan Archer and Douglas J. Huffman report “this does not mean there were no feminists or feminism activism before or even after these waves, but simply that their ideas and actions did not materialize into a mass-based, social movement” (58). The essence of the criticism to the second wave is expressed by the Afro-American author Audre Lorde, who overlaps sexual orientation and race to her discourse and puts ahead diversity instead “by and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the world sisterhood that does not in fact exist (289).

In 1992, the Eight Five Years Plan (1992-1997) was published. In this document, there were demands to improve situation of women in India. According to the plan: illiteracy, particularly among women (especially rural ones), is very high, Social determinants such as female literacy, age at marriage, employment opportunities for women, and their status in society are important, rates for women are higher than those for men (Eight Five Years Plan 7-11). The government started to introduce benefits for women related to employment, health and education.

In the same year, there was a reform of the Indian constitution, which would pass 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment Act. With these amendments, the Parliament

would delegate local self-governance to the districts of India. According to the researchers Jos Chathukulam and M.S. John it would mean “some initial outcomes of the incorporation of women in local governance, following the introduction of 33 percent reservation of seats for women representatives in local-level political bodies in rural areas of India” (66). Indian legislation was created under a patriarchal doctrine, since the vast majority of the employers belonging to this sector has been men. As stated by Chathukulam et. John “the predominant view held hitherto that women should be confined to home and reproduction, while men focus their energies in the public sphere, has effectively precluded the entry of the former in the field of politics” (65). Introducing 73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment Act were a step forward to protect the interest of vulnerable population. Through *panchayat* –the local bodies, communities in India would receive more protection local government would have a higher level of recognition within the legislative system, as specified by Chathukulam et. John:

The panchayat level was a natural response to the question of political justice for women. This approach to ensuring the presence of women in elected positions through statutory quotas is one that liberal feminists consider strategic for political empowerment. Such a view is based on the evidence that, in the absence of statutory provisions, women are unable to assume leadership positions through competitive electoral politics. (68)

India would be regulated by the three-tier system; Centre, State and Panchayats (together with municipalities). The United Nations organized in 1995, The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. It was the largest and the most significant conference of the three conferences celebrated previously in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985). They created The Beijing Declaration, together with a Platform for Action, accepted by 189 countries in which they dealt with key actions, recorded in a document, concerning essential issues, such as gender equality, women in media, women’s employment, women’s education, women’s poverty, etc., “and there was consensus on elimination of discrimination against women in education and employment, on increasing women's access to economic resources, and on recognition of the value of reproductive or family responsibilities” (Moghadam 81).

As claimed by the feminist, sociologist, activist scholar and author Valentine Moghadam, who focuses her work on feminist networks and female employment in the Middle East, within the Global Governance within the Women's Movement, the language (81) in the Platform for Action's Mission Statement was one point of contention brought up by the Indian delegation. It was argued that human rights for women had taken precedence and

that the issue of development had not received enough attention. The issue was resolved by adding language to paragraph 5 of the mission statement that addresses equitable social development as well as sustainable development (Moghadam 81).

Respecting the different Indian languages and culture was important within the feminist movement, since a large number of women didn't know English, and fifty years before it has been the colonizer official language, so retaking and promoting the Hindi was a priority. After the Fourth World Conference on Women, in the manner of Chathukulam and John (67), in the past two to three years, Kerala's political system has improved. The majority of the women who now hold positions in the panchayats had no prior political experience, but they have increased their awareness of development issues and overall skills, including oratory and communication. Women have been strong advocates for the "plan campaign" because for them, taking part in it is a goal unto itself, independent of the goals it seeks to accomplish (Chathukulam and John 67). According to the 1997 Government of India, within the Ninth Five Year Plan (97-2002) they took into account the empowerment of women and socially disadvantaged groups such as scheduled castes, tribes, and other minorities as agents of socio-economic change, development and poverty alleviation (16). It highlights that "in Andhra Pradesh several successful Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) groups have been formed and this has led to the empowerment of women in decision making on various social aspects that impinge on their daily life (Ninth Five Year Plan 16). There is an increase in the level of education among women, "the success of this programme has been attributed to two major catalysts namely, adult literacy among women and its culmination into a women's movement and close involvement of the NGOs." (16).

During 2002, the tenth Five Years Plan (2002-2007) was published. The document reflects a tendency of women's conditions and rights improvement. The general situation India is explained along its pages, offering different targets to each of the dilemmas suffered by Indian women, defending gender equality. As indicated by the Government of India in 2002 some of the key issues target that would be achieved are assisting victims of any environmental degradation (especially the women, who are the most affected ones), working on the waste of energy and time which the women devote to the searching of wood (due to the deforestation of villages instead of working in a remunerative work), strengthening and expanding social defense services to address to the problems of drug abuse / addiction, trafficking among women and girl children, destitution, etc. and

ensuring the requisite access of women to information, resources and services. Finally, a remarkable target concerning education in the following years would be the reduction of gender gaps in literacy and wage rates by at least 50% by 2007. These formulations would require a budget to ensure the resources and services for the development of gender equality goals. Even so, there is still a patriarchal trend surrounding women's issues, since they are continuously treated as victims, besides authorities insists on protecting them from society instead of re-educating Indian communities, especially aggressors.

Based on the feminist and activist Minister rank Seyda Hameed, and the feminist economist Devaki Jain (2009), for the first time, in the Indian history, the Planning Commission constituted an officially designated Committee of Feminist Economists (CFE) during the preparation of the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012). They describe the CFE as the Committee who made a difference to the final document, including the platform of voices that were engaged in advocacy for women's rights. As well as the previous educational plans, in 2010 the Government of India established that "the Eleventh Plan could be translated into sectoral plans with appropriate institutional arrangements and adequate financial allocations, so as to promote gender equality and growth with equity" (Eleventh Five Years Plan 3). However, with the formation of the CFE, the Committee would ensure the fulfillment of the objectives proposed in the feminist agenda. In concert with the Planning Commission of the Indian Government (2007), one of the highlights of the Indian women's movement is the birth and journey of the Indian Association of Women's Studies (the IAWS). Its philosophical base reflects the feminist approach to knowledge and an interdisciplinary approach to understanding phenomena. Besides, the integration of feminist economist to the eleventh Plan would help to shape guarantee the development of the objectives drafted in the programme. It would also include a chapter, retaken from the tenth plan and extended called the Women's Agency and Child Rights including a gender perspective to mainly improve their health, infrastructure, poverty and environment. The Department of Women and Child Development was updated to the Ministry of Women and Children in 2006, which would use its budget to drive reforms to the gender equality process initiated by the educational plan, and women's empowerment. As believed by the reporter Rupam Jain, six years later, thousands of "protesters gather outside the Indian presidential palace on December 22, 2012 during a protest against the brutal gang rape and murderer of a 23-year-old woman [called Jyoti Singh] on a moving bus in New Delhi" (1). The crime

appalled the conscience of Indian population. People came out on the streets of the Delhi and protested against the leniency of the government. In 2013, the associate professor in Women's and Gender Studies, Sharmila Lodhia states:

It seems inevitable that such bravery will engender real change in India, that the public displays of support toward Jyoti and the other victims she has come to represent will one day lead to the full implementation of the Verma Committee's blueprint for legal change, tackling gender roles and patriarchal structures at their core". (99)

It also opened a debate on law-reformation concerning the definition of rape. The Indian feminist writer and professor of political in Delhi, Nivedita Menon specified that "a rape is considered to be a harm against the honour of the woman's family, and the purity of her womb. Only the penis can damage that purity in such a way that patrilineal succession is cast in doubt – all other damage is bearable, ideally, leading to the death of the raped woman" (1). The definition involves men being the rappers and women as victims, "In India, custodial sexual violence against women (by police and army) and the culpability and impunity of the state, has been addressed in significant ways" (Menon 1). However, what Menon proposes is "gender neutrality in law of sexual violence" (1). She suggested the feminist movement has stood out the question of "gender neutrality in rape law" (1), since a rape can be produced by men or women (although the vast majority of the rape's history have been committed by men).

In the course of 2012, the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) was published by the Government of India. This new version would focus on universalizing education, health, and social security. However, there is a lack of specific strategies to develop these targets. Doctor for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, Mridul Eapen and Doctor Asha Kapur Mehta in Indian Institute of Public Administration, in Delhi agreed that "despite several decades of struggle by women's groups to make policy gender-sensitive, the approach to [the Plan] exhibits insufficient awareness of the specific problems of women, their unpaid labour and their distinctive economic contribution to the nations' economy" (42).

A high budget should be addressed to the growth and inclusion of women, ethnic groups and other disadvantages groups, even so "there is no magic bullet solution to ensure inclusion, [...] since the goal leads to greater complexity, both in programme design and appraisal" (Eapen and Kapur 43). Although in the previous plan's education and resources for the majority of the population, especially women, were ensured, Eapen

and Kapur suggest women receive poor returns, unfavorable laws and inadequate productive resources like capital, technology and support systems (43). Women need to be more recognized within the working system, as well as health cares along the country. For the empowerment of women, the Twelfth Plan suggests “correcting for the existing trend of the poor-quality employment [...] enabling small producers, in agriculture and non-agriculture, to become more viable and competitive; preventing displacement, loss of livelihoods and environmental degradation in the name of rapid growth” (49). On the report of Sai Amulya Komarraju, a doctoral researcher in the University of Hyderabad and the Indian teacher, Usha Raman:

In 2016, the first author conducted a series of focus group discussions with millennials (men and women, aged 18-25) in Hyderabad, and most participants defined feminism as “women’s rights,” “equal rights for women,” “equal pay for women,” and “for women”. What emerged was a startlingly singular view of feminism as being “for women and of women,” with only a few pointing out that it is about equality of all genders. (32)

As specified by Swati Saxena, feminism in India in 2017 centered on four themes, the topic of women's safety (1) and the universality of abuse is an important and ongoing conversation. Despite progress in some areas, there have been setbacks in terms of legislation and repressiveness of the state in addressing these issues. However, there have also been numerous initiatives led by individual brave women and women's groups, such as petitions and protests, that have brought attention to these issues and pushed for change. Additionally, global accolades and awards for those working to improve women's safety can have significant symbolic value in raising awareness and promoting progress. Overall, while there is still much work to be done, the efforts of individuals and groups to address these issues are crucial in creating a safer and more equal society for women.

4.4. Corpus Selection: An Introduction to the Authors and their Works

The corpus selected for the dissertation includes *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Durgabai Subhash Vyam, *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil, *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam. The corpus also includes three comics: *Priya’s Mirror* (2016) by Paromita Vohra et al., *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) by Priya Kuriyan et al. (a graphic novel divided into thirteen comics), and *Royal Existentials* (2014) by Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan. For the selection of the corpus there has been deep research on

contemporary Indian graphic novels and comics which deal with feminist responses to the nationalist discourse, and tweets they generated.

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability is a 2011 graphic novel written and illustrated by the Indian writer-illustrator team Srividya Natarajan and Durgabai Vyam. Srividya Natarajan is a writer and illustrator from India. She is a gifted and inventive storyteller whose work is distinguished by stunning imagery, emotive words, and a commitment to social justice. She hopes to create positive change in the world through her writing and illustration by raising awareness about the ongoing difficulties of underprivileged communities. On the other hand, Durgabai Vyam is an illustrator from India. Her art has been extensively lauded for its capacity to shed light on major social and political topics because to its bold lines, rich colour, and striking imagery.

The novel is a compelling and poignant depiction of dalits' (also known as "Untouchables") struggles in India. The plot of *Bhimayana* is around the life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a significant dalit leader and one of India's most important historical figures. The book delves into Ambedkar's experiences of prejudice and oppression as a dalit, as well as his path to political and social activity. The authors employ a combination of solid graphics and emotive prose throughout the book to bring the experiences of dalits in India to life and to raise attention to the current problems they confront. The novel is a compelling and thought-provoking investigation of the impact of caste-based discrimination and a monument to India's dalit community's tenacity and determination. *Bhimayana* has received widespread acclaim for its capacity to shed light on dalit realities in India and to bring these topics to the attention of a wider audience.

Amruta Patil is the writer and illustrator of *Kari* (2008), a graphic novel which depicts sexuality, gender and desire. Patil is widespread acclaimed for her creative narrative style and strong storytelling. She is an Indian graphic novelist and author best known for her work in feminist writing, empowering women and underprivileged people. She tackles complex and frequently taboo issues, and her work is distinguished by its sincerity, honesty, and unflinching gaze. She earned a degree in painting and illustration from the Sir J. J. School of Art. She has written and illustrated several graphic books, including *Kari* (2008), *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012), *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016), and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019).

Patil is regarded as a feminist writer for her ability to add depth to her characters and storylines, as well as for her ability to connect with readers on a deeply personal level.

Her work inspires and engages readers, and her contributions to feminist literature are highly acknowledged and admired. Amruta Patil's work continues to inspire and challenge readers, and she is a remarkable and significant voice in the realm of feminist fiction. Her writing aims to make the world a more just and equal place, as well as to inspire women and other marginalized people to speak their stories and claim their power.

Kari is a coming-of-age graphic novel about a young woman living in Mumbai. Kari is a photographer who juggles her personal and professional lives. She is looking for meaning and purpose in her life, and as she navigates the complexity of modern city life, she begins to doubt the values and beliefs she has held her whole life. Kari embarks on a voyage of self-discovery throughout the narrative, meeting a variety of personalities who both challenge and encourage her. She begins to question the responsibilities and expectations that have been placed on her as a woman, and she fights to find her place in a society that sometimes appears unfriendly and incomprehensible. The topics dealt in the graphic novel focus on identity, self-discovery, and personal evolution. Moreover, its compelling storytelling has established it as a classic of Indian graphic fiction.

The graphic novel *Nirmala and Normala* was published in 2014 by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam. Sowmya Rajendran is a journalist and writer from Chennai, India. She is well-known in India for her writing on feminism, gender, and children's literature and is regarded as one of the leading voices in these disciplines. Rajendran holds a literature degree and has worked as a journalist for many years. She has written for various Indian publications, including newspapers, periodicals, and internet media, and is well-known for her thought-provoking and perceptive writing. Rajendran has published various publications, including children's books, fiction, and non-fiction works on feminist and gender-related subjects, in addition to her journalism. She is widely regarded as a key authority on children's literature in India and has published substantially on the subject. Rajendran's activism and advocacy work promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. She is a frequent speaker and commentator on these themes, and her contributions to the area have been recognised. Sowmya Rajendran is a gifted and passionate individual who has made substantial contributions to writing, journalism, and activism. Her work inspires and challenges audiences, and she will be remembered for her contributions to these sectors for many years to come. The co-author, Niveditha Subramaniam, is a writer, editor, and illustrator who is specialised in children's books. She has proved her abilities as a writer-illustrator in various genres,

including teen fiction, picture books, and graphic novels. Niveditha Subramaniam, as a freelance content producer and editor, has most likely worked on various projects and refined her talents in these areas. Her work as a writer-illustrator demonstrates her inventiveness and narrative skills, and her contributions to the field of children's books are likely to have been well-received by both readers and critics.

Nirmala and Normala contrasts two opposite stories to highlight the absurdity of media representation. The book combines chapter by chapter the lives of two sisters. The first of them, Nirmala, lives to be the stereotypical main character idealised in Bollywood movies with a perfect life directed by a film director. In contrast, the second sister, Normala, faces similar situations to Nirmala but behaves as a person from the reader's world (out of a movie), evidencing that the characters surrounding her are overacting.

Priya's Mirror is an online comic book that was published in 2016, written by Paromita Vohra and Ram Devineni, and illustrated by Dan Goldman. Paromita Vohra is a Mumbai-based Indian filmmaker, writer, and activist. Her work focuses on feminism, sexuality, and the nexus of cultural and political issues. Vohra was born in Kolkata, India, and attended school in India and the United States. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the University of Calcutta and a Master of Arts in Mass Communication from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Vohra began her filmmaking career in the 1990s, directing and producing several documentaries about social and political topics. Her work has been screened at film festivals and venues worldwide for its original and provocative approach to these issues. Vohra is a prolific writer and researcher in addition to her film work. She has written books and essays on various subjects, including sexuality, gender, and the media. She has also been recognised for her contributions to the area as a pundit and public speaker on similar themes. Vohra's activism focuses on feminist and human rights causes. She has been active in several campaigns and activities to strengthen the rights of women and marginalised populations, for which she has received numerous honours. Overall, Paromita Vohra is a gifted and passionate woman who has made substantial contributions to the realms of film, writing, and activism. Her work inspires and challenges audiences all throughout the world, and her contributions to these sectors will be recognised for years.

Priya's Mirror is an essential piece of literature in the context of contemporary feminism. The comic is part of a series supported by the World Bank's WEvolve Global Initiative, which aims to challenge attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender

inequality and gender-based violence. The story highlights the marginalisation faced by women who have been victims of acid attacks and the difficulty they face in conforming to society's expectations. Acid attacks are a widespread issue, however, there is limited information available on the frequency of these assaults. This is because many survivors do not come forward due to concerns of retaliation or the belief that their accounts will not be taken seriously. The story focuses on Priya, a young woman who was previously a victim of gang rape, but has since become a superheroine. She has overcome her trauma and now carries a mirror, which she uses to reveal the inner goodness of those who gaze into it.

The comic is significant for contemporary feminism in several ways. It promotes awareness, since it sheds light on the issue of gender-based violence, particularly acid attacks, and its impact on women's lives. The comic provides a platform to raise awareness about this issue and to bring it to the forefront of public discourse. Besides, the comic represents the experiences of women who have faced acid attacks and their journey towards healing and empowerment. This representation is essential because it amplifies these women's voices and helps break the stigma associated with acid attacks. Moreover, it serves as a source of inspiration for women who have faced similar challenges. It shows that despite the difficulties and hardships, it is possible to reclaim one's life and find strength and empowerment. In conclusion, *Priya's Mirror* is a powerful piece of literature that is relevant to contemporary feminism and its efforts to challenge gender inequality and gender-based violence. The comic provides a platform to raise awareness, amplify the voices of marginalized women, and inspire others to fight for their rights.

Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back! (2015) is an anthology of fourteen comics edited by Priya Kuriyan, Larissa Bertolasco, Ludmilla Bartscht, and Nichole Marie Burton. Priya Kuriyan is an Indian comic book author, illustrator, and animator with previous experience working with a Mumbai-based production company that created animated commercials. She is a National Institute of Design graduate. As part of the Sesame Street program in India, she collaborated with Miditech to direct a number of brief educational films created especially for Indian youngsters. She has illustrated children's books for several Indian publishers, and she has also published independently. She is passionate about starting the preproduction process for animated films and television shows. Larissa Bertolasco is a German illustrator who was brought up in Italy. She has worked as a freelance illustrator for several publishing houses and magazines.

She decided to work between 2014 and 2016 on the realization of *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) with Indian women artists. Ludmilla Bartscht is a freelance artist, draftsman and lecturer. She was born in Freiburg, Ludmilla Bartscht studied visual communication and illustration at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, the Lucerne University of Art and Media, and the Berlin University of the Arts (graduating in 2012). Her shows have travelled both domestically and internationally. She frequently blends text and images to create visual narratives in her work, which spans from comic strips that deal with serious subjects to poetic and perceptive drawings. Nichole Marie Burton is an American comics artist, activist, illustrator, and graphic designer. She founded Ad Astra Comix publishing collective in 2013 to promote projects and concepts that seek to create positive social change.

The comics chronicle the struggle of Indian women to end sexual harassment in the country through the stories of both fictional and non-fictional women and girls who show their fears towards the path their families have settled for them and tackle a different future to achieve their desires. The project started as a response to the gang-rape of a student in Delhi in 2012, which subsequently reflected “evolving gender relations in contemporary India and the patriarchal anxieties they provoke[d]; class inequities in an era of global capital; and ongoing questions about women's safety and security in the public sphere” (Lodhia 90).

The online format for retelling mythological tales can be found in *Royal Existentials* by Falana Films, a Bangalore-based creative film and animation studio established in 2014. The weekly webcomic, created and written by filmmaker and writer Aarthi Parthasarathy and illustrated by animator Chaitanya Krishnan, uses Indian classical art and images to depict stories that address historical and contemporary issues.

Royal Existentials challenges traditional representations of women in Indian mythology by incorporating feminist memes. With 177 strips published until January 12, 2018, the webcomic highlights themes such as gender violence and resilience in its feminist retellings of mythological tales. The webcomic employs traditional Indian art and imagery to tell stories about historical and contemporary issues. One of the central themes of *Royal Existentials* is the creation of counter-narratives against the mainstream discourse in India through the use of feminist memes. The webcomic retells Indian mythology in a way that questions standard depictions of women, particularly women in Indian mythology. In its feminist retellings of mythological tales, the webcomic

emphasises topics such as gender violence and perseverance. Overall, *Royal Existentials* is a one-of-a-kind and innovative initiative that uses storytelling, art, and animation to explore India's critical social and cultural concerns.

Part II. Feminist Responses by South Asian Women Writers

Chapter 5. Caste Representations

In the Indian context, as Nayar suggests, there is a need to consider the appropriate way to use the graphic medium to criticize or satirize contemporary social issues, such as child abuse and casteism, but there should also be consideration given to using it to address the more current and relevant societal issue (Nayar 3-4) since this kind of work implies a more accessible format for writers and the audience thanks to illustrations, which provide a space to report and expose social problems generally uncovered by conventional cultural literature. Nayar is saying that through its portrayal of historical injustices, social inequalities, and the neglect of those who suffered, the graphic narrative promotes critical thinking and highlights the importance of human rights. It also reveals the historical mistreatment of certain groups and the urgency for change (9). The dominant discourse is responded through the lenses of feminism, giving female heroines facing heteropatriarchy and new nationalism offering unconventional standards. On the other hand, as maintained by Streeten:

The use of everyday and the inclusion of humour have made the subject matter recognizable to a wide range of people. It is these elements that have been used effectively in comics form in the works cited here, and the place of such visual works is to reinforce feminist activism being widely disseminated on the internet. (133)

In addition, “the growing number of independent comics and graphic novels presses, the diverse and challenging array of narrative, as well as the quality of production and print, have meant that Indian graphic novels (and comics) are unrecognizable when compared to the *Amar Chitra Katha* works of the 1970s and 1980s” (Dawson 19). Contemporarily the graphic novels analysed in this corpus are the product of a countercurrent tendency of change against the patriarchy and the display of different values accompanied by social gender deconstruction and heterogeneity. These graphic novels reply to Indian new nationalism depicting gender violence against women and the resilience of those women getting over their trauma. All the literary pieces offer a powerful perspective encouraging the achievement of gender equality.

Discrimination against women is present in many ways across literature, “South Asians in diaspora actively engage in debates and discussions on social and political happenings, including instances of gender violence, in South Asia” (Iyer 257). Based on Bhattacharjee and Tripathi, “gender inequality is detrimental to society, and artists across

the globe attempt to draw this inequality with their unique styles. The visual images carry the signs of gender-based violence which have an overwhelming effect on the readers” (179). In the contemporary era, women are going to step forwards from vulnerability to resilience thanks to the feminist movement, women have struggled against patriarchy, getting over their trauma and supporting each other, sharing common spaces for discussion and help. Despite their differences, as M. Dolores Herrero explains, all trauma theorists have a common concern with the disturbing effects of trauma and the responsibilities it brings (49). They recognise the need to address the challenge that trauma presents to our typical ways of understanding and acknowledging it, instead of ignoring it. The themes of disorientation, fragmentation, disruption, confusion, and indecision are prevalent in all the critical perspectives. The differences among them primarily lie in their focus (Herrero 49). As reported by Enarson, “understanding these vulnerabilities and impacts from a gender perspective is the essential precondition for building on and enhancing women’s leadership in crisis” (4), and even though feminist waves have had a huge impact in worldwide women, “Indian literature on issues such as stress, anxiety, resilience, coping and burnout in social work practitioners is rather scant” (Stanley et al. 42) and the low number of publications, in comparison to the whole Indian literary corpus, is being published by independent publishers. In the words of Ryan:

Within the current literature, there is too little attention to how communities may engage in their own resilience building without outside intervention or interference. The literature which poses resilience as fundamentally different from resistance overlooks the ways in which resilience can be seen as a tactic of resistance through the lens of infrapolitics. (299)

A high number of feminist literary works dealing with exposing women’s vulnerability and resilience is exponentially growing and written in many formats, including graphic novels and comics to address a wide range of populations. Albeit the concept of resilience has been openly discussed by feminist scholars. James explains that the discourse on resilience minimises the negative impacts of sexist, racist, and white supremacist patriarchal practices on white women and people of colour, portraying them as unimportant and holding individuals accountable for overcoming them (18). As a result, rather than challenging oppressive institutions, conventional feminist and anti-racist resistance tactics serve to strengthen and maintain repressive structures. As a result, what was previously thought of as noise becomes a signal that upholds the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (James 18-19). In addition, in the words of Bracke, “this

original sense of resilience, moreover, has also been deliberately elaborated and modified throughout its current usage in a neoliberal context, as merely bouncing back or returning to a prior state has often been considered not enough” (55). Bracke suggests that the idea of resilience takes into account that damage and impact will occur and is closely linked to the idea of danger, but it is also intended to address vulnerability by containing and avoiding it, recovering from it, reducing its effects, and controlling its transformative power (69). Following this line of thought, Butler proposes that loss has brought people together and made them aware of their shared vulnerability, and this vulnerability is a result of being socially and physically attached to others and exposed to the possibility of violence and loss (20). Besides, individuals, according to Butler, may feel overwhelmed and exhausted even though they do not know why (21). She believes that loss and grief are something larger than what one can control with their own plan, project, or knowledge. It is like being hit by waves that are beyond one's control (Butler 21). This theoretical line is reflected in the corpus selected, which is organised according to the social issues each work deals with. The controversy of the interpretation of resilience is challenged by the authors, who contextualise the characters' backgrounds to show the real conditions surrounding them, which have nothing to do with their duties or faults.

In this section of the dissertation, there are several topics from Indian graphic novels and comics analysed as a response to the oppressive and frustrating situations Indian women still live. Through a gender approach, the following topics are dealt with as a matter of empowerment and fighting, responding to the violence suffered for such a long time: alternative identities, changeable living spaces, mythology retelling, women's emancipation, women's education, sorority and deconstruction of mainstream references.

In the first chapter of the second part, the authors delve into the issue of caste discrimination suffered by Dalits and its colonial roots in India. The preference for fair complexion over darker skin tones is also explored. This chapter provides insight into how caste discrimination is deeply ingrained in Indian society and how it continues to affect people from lower castes. The second chapter focuses on the tradition of arranged marriages and the practice of paying dowry, both traditional practices still prevalent in India today. The authors illustrate the impact of these practices on the main character, who challenges these expectations, as well as on victims of acid attacks, who are speaking out and creating their own space in society. In the third chapter, the issue of sexual harassment, both indoors and outdoors, is presented with a powerful analogy of gang rape.

The authors provide a nuanced and compassionate portrayal of the challenges faced by women in India when it comes to sexual harassment and abuse. The fourth chapter addresses self-identity and gender, exploring the experiences of various characters as they navigate their own sexual and gender identities. This chapter highlights the complexities and challenges of defining and understanding gender in India. In the fifth chapter, the authors examine the deconstruction of gender roles and offer alternative spaces and situations in real life and science fiction. This chapter provides a thought-provoking perspective on the role of gender in society and how it can be reimagined. The sixth chapter retells ancient myths, questioning the outdated practices inherited from Indian culture that perpetuate gender and caste discrimination. The authors challenge the canon perpetuated by mass media and provide a fresh perspective on the role of myths in shaping society. Finally, in the last chapter, the authors present two stories about sorority and the importance of women supporting each other in their struggles for equality. This chapter highlights the necessity of solidarity and the power of sisterhood in achieving equity for all.

In conclusion, the second part of the dissertation provides a comprehensive examination of the complex social and cultural issues affecting women in India reflected in the selected graphic novels and comics. Through its exploration of caste discrimination, arranged marriages, sexual harassment, self-identity, gender roles, and sorority, the authors offer a nuanced and compassionate perspective on the experiences of women in India and the challenges they face.

5.1. Dalit Resilience in *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Subhash Vyam, Srividya Natarajan, S. Anand and Durgabai Vyam

In order to reflect those dalits' stories from the past and present times in Indian literature and raise awareness of the situation, Vyam et al. published *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011). This political graphic novel illustrates and depicts B.R. Ambedkar's untouchability experiences during his nurture in combination with untouchability experiences in contemporary India. Although Ambedkar suffered oppressive and abusive conditions for being dalit, he overcame adversity and struggles against both The British Raj and the new nationalism making his biography relevant as an example of a resilient voice who changed the law system. As expressed by Diego-

Sánchez, resilience is a concept that can challenge the dominant political, economic, and capitalist structures by promoting narratives that raise awareness, encourage resistance and subversion against the interconnected systems of patriarchal control based on factors such as class, race, gender, caste, or sexuality (110). This graphic novel demonstrates how untouchability is a persistent and current issue by displaying several examples. B. R. Ambedkar Indian social reformer who fought against the country's system of caste segregation and discrimination.

The Pardhan Gond art technique is used by Indian artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam to depict this stunning graphic novel about a man's life of endless struggle. The Pardhan Gond tribal groups of India produce original paintings in this living expression style that are closely related to their everyday life. They use ancient visual arts, including low-relief clay sculpture or natural pigments like charcoal and limestone, to decorate their dwellings with auspicious patterns and simple images, similar to other Gonds. In the book, Ambedkar's life is depicted in a way that defies the conventions of traditional graphic narratives. The book is divided into six parts: the preface entitled '*Forewords by John Berger*' about the importance of telling dalits' story, '*One Day*' which sets the context of the story, and the four books with B.R. Ambedkar's dalits life lessons called '*Book 1: Water*', '*Book 2: Shelter*', '*Book 3: Travel*' and '*Book 4: The Art of Bhimayana*'. In the words of Berger, "this book offers a prophetic answer, and it is this: replace the stage of History with the Body of a community. A body with a long past, a presence of many voices, and a vision of the future. [...] Stories are being told like this all over the world. They are seldom printed and published. This book has now set an example" (9), through the story-telling, gives visibility to those people who have permanently been silenced.

The origin of the caste system has been analysed in the first part of the dissertation. Even though the caste system in India was supposedly abolished after Independence in 1947, in practice, there are still distinctions amongst communities depending on their belonging. In the *varnas*, there were five groups of people. From top to bottom, the upper-class Brahman, the second highest called Kshatriya, the merchants and farmers were Vaishya, the servants and artisans Shudra. Finally, the dalit or Untouchable, who were supposed to be polluted and were out of the *varna* system, in fact, "dalit labourers suffered from the domination of village peasants; they also faced exclusion and oppression from all caste Hindus, even from castes themselves ranked very low in the hierarchy" (Omvedt

47). Dalits have struggled to achieve legal regulations and rights, having Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar as the pioneer in the dalit movement. “Despite constitutional and legislative prohibitions of Untouchability and discrimination on the grounds of caste, they continue to suffer caste-based discrimination and violence” (Waughray 327). *Bhimayana: Experiences of untouchability* (2011) shows the dalit struggle within the caste system. In the graphic novel, ‘*One Day*’ is the chapter which illustrates the story setting; “One day in the recent past, a bus stop in an Indian city” (Vyam et al. 11). The first panel shows a bus stop where two women are complaining in a bench about the lack of job opportunities for them due to caste system discrimination:

Southern woman: Super-qualified. Stuck in a dead-end job. That’s my life. I blame these damn job quotas for Backward and Scheduled Castes. It isn’t fair!

Western woman: Well... caste isn’t fair. (Vyam et al. 11)

This conversation continues on panel 12, where the northern woman denies the existence of the caste system in contemporary India, whereas the southern one disagrees:

Southern woman: Hey – you’re talking like one of **them**...

Western woman: What if I am one of **them**?

Southern woman: Caste isn’t real any longer. It’s a non-issue.

Western woman: Funny, people keep saying isn’t real, but caste never seems to go away. (Vyam et al. 12)

The pronoun ‘them’ is in bold as an indicator of the differences the own Indian people still make amongst themselves. ‘Them’ points out something different from the pronoun ‘us’ the known, so ‘them’ may refer to the Untouchables, people out of the system, who revendicate a proper place within society. The western Indian woman makes a reference to the Khairlanji massacre in panel 2 (12), which was the murder of four Scheduled Caste, who are part of the Untouchable, citizens by villagers of Khairlanji on 29 September 2006. However, the southern woman doesn’t recognise that event “What’s that? And what’s it got to do with **me**” (Vyam et al. 12). The pronoun ‘me’ is in bold, indicating that within the Indian society, there are ‘me’ and ‘them’, distinguishing again between different kind of people. The western woman on panel three doesn’t see the problem. She insists she doesn’t have a job because of the caste system, as if she wasn’t inside her own system, “all I care about is that I have no job. All because of caste quotas. My **merit** does not count”. This quote comes from four hands pointing out other people different from the speaker as if ‘the other one’ has the fault. The western Indian woman explains what happened in the Khairlanji massacre (panels 4-6), while some animals and figures illustrate the crime (12). On page 13, there are several circular panels, with the

headlines between the gutters, highlighting real crimes against the dalits from 2006 to 2010 and a letterhead with the following words: “Untouchability alive & kicking in India. dalits have little access to temples. Their kids are made to sit separately in school” (13). These pieces of actual news from the Indian press prove the inequality and discrimination suffered by dalits in India due to the caste system.

There is a narrative line; “Ambedkar: his statues outnumber Gandhi’s and Nehru’s, but few people know about his life or work” (Vyam et al. 14), making a real reference to B.R. Ambedkar, an Indian jurist, academic and politician, recognised for his long struggle for the rights of the untouchable caste, to which he belonged, as well as for his conversion to Buddhism. His drawing heads to the top of the page, on panel 12 (14). The western woman recommends the southern one to read about Ambedkar’s story “I’d read Ambedkar if I were you. I’d want to understand what happened in Khairlanji, and why two dalits are killed every day in India” (Vyam et al. 14), and the other replies “Ambed-who? The guy in all those statues?” (Vyam et al. 14). At this point, the western woman starts to tell Ambedkar’s story, whose illustrations go from panels 15 to 22. On panel 15, it is revealed, due to the conversation, that the woman with the glasses is from western India and the other one from the south since the last one doesn’t know the word ‘mahar’; “people of the Mahar caste were among the untouchables in western India, like Paraiyar’s and Mahar in the South” (Vyam et al. 14). Then she starts introducing the labours of the Mahar people:

Living on the edge of the village, going through the village every day to clean out its filth, doing labour for which they would expect no payment... This was how dalits across India lived for a long, long time... Buying spices and oil at hindu shops standing outside the door... Collecting leftovers at the backdoors of Hindu houses... Running errands for the village folk... Young **Bhim Ambedkar** was not the worst off among them, but he learnt bitter lessons about caste (Vyam et al. 15).

This would be the preface to the story-telling and illustration of Ambedkar’s life, which will be divided into three books, starting from his childhood and finishing years later when he grows up and decides to struggle to change the law.

‘*Book 1: Water*’ illustrates and depicts the water problems the Mahar community had in the 1900s since they had access to public schools due to the British Raj changing the law. Hence, all Indian people could attend school (or at least they were not discriminated against due to their belonging). However, Untouchables could not touch anything or even play with kids because they were supposed to be polluted. The problem was so big that young Ambedkar could not play with the rest of the children, and he could not drink water

since he had to wait until the peon gave water to all the kids, and when it happened, the peon left because he had other issues solve, so Ambedkar could not have access to drink water:

Ambedkar: Sir, the peon won't give me water.

Sir: What's up **Nayak**? Just give him some water and be done with it!

Nayak: You **know** I can't let him near the tap like other kids. I've got to fill a pitcher and then pour it for him. And I have other work to do!

Sir: Damn, and blast the stupid British government for letting untouchables study in the same schools as well-born boys. White folks haven't a clue about our beliefs. (Vyam et al. 21)

There were several problems in India when making education accessible for everyone in the schools since the colonisers started to change laws without considering the real problems that the Indian population and believers had towards each other. During the stories, there are several castes mentioned, such as Nayak, who belonged to the upper caste. Highlighting the word 'know' implies that although the government tried to set equal laws little by little, the Indian population and communities still followed their traditions and religious beliefs and knew their own caste regulations. Being an untouchable was a misfortune, not only to getting water in public fonts but also with using services in the towns such as having their hair cut:

Sir: You're a **mahar**! If you cut your hair more often, you'd feel less thirsty. You look as if there are no barbers in Satara.

Ambedkar: But doesn't he **know**? Barbers won't ouch us, Mahars (Vyam et al. 19).

Untouchables were repudiated within society, and if they could access a service, such as private transport, they were bothered and charged even more money. Another example is at their arrival at Bhim's baba's (father) working place in Masur, and they need transport to get to the Baba's home:

Station Master: Maybe my wife can take you in for tonight- I'll find out... So, you boys are from?

Balram (the oldest brother): From Satara.

Station Master: All the way from **Satara**? And your **family**?

Ambedkar: We are **mahars**.

Station Master: **Untouchables**! Who'd have believed it looking at you... I want you boys **out** of here. What are you going to do?

Balram: Maybe a cart can get us to Goregaon. Help us **please**! [...] Oh **Bhim**! Did you have to say we were **mahars**? Now he's gone away. I bet he won't come back. (Vyam et al. 35-36)

Since Mira Aunty (because they are orphaned) had given them new clothes to avoid judgement by strangers, at the beginning, they are dealt kindly by the station master worker. One of the most relevant characters appearing in the family's core is Mira Aunty, illustrated for the first time in the story on page 14 and later on giving some advice to Bhim. Although the character of Mira Aunty has yet to develop in the comic, it can be guessed that she is the breadwinner of the family and in charge of her nephews.

Within the caste system, women within the upper caste are set aside for home, where they must develop the house chores summarised into taking care of the family members. Working outside the home is frowned upon, in contrast to the women of the low caste, who not owning any land, have to develop their labour in the field, suffering from sexual abuse since they are considered sexually accessible by the social system. Compliance with Chakravarti, “property makes [...] fundamental differences between lower and upper caste women. Since the lower castes, by and large, do not own property, all dalit families have to labour; this includes women and even children” (91). This distinction is essential to maintain the discernment among the social status. According to Jhila Gangopadhyay’s testimony (1), low-caste women are required to work because most of them come from highly underprivileged homes. So, an upper caste man views a woman working in the field as having lax morals and being sexy. Because they are unable to “control” and “protect their” women, low caste men are shamed (1). The root is that women are considered a male’s possession, which makes the system they are living in an old unequal stratification hierarchy controlled by patriarchal rules. As claimed by Jhila Gangopadhyay:

There is a misconception that lower-caste women are “better off” because at least they have financial autonomy, but this isn’t true at all. Even today, they barely have access to education and remain restricted to very menial jobs. It is these women who are the most vulnerable to sex trafficking. Beyond the lack of upward mobility, financial autonomy doesn’t buy honour in a world where nothing matters more than caste. (1)

On the testimony of an inner member of Brahmanism in a post published in *Feminism in India* online magazine, the user T. Lalita insists on the idea of “how a woman should conduct herself in public and what she is expected to do at home and outside to uphold the honour and dignity of the caste”. All the castes keep the woman as a secondary element, providing the male figure with a central performance. As stated by Chakravarti:

Upper caste women on the other hand have no function outside reproduction – and are thus reduced to the single axis of providing sexual labour. Their domestic

management is, however crucial for the maintenance of purity norms and the avoidance of pollution, essential for sustaining upper caste status. Their household labour is gruelling but is not recognized as productive labour. For dalits, labour is central to their existence- but is devalued by the caste system. (91)

A disadvantaged position determines women since men own the control over land. Besides, those women contributing to work in property constitute a way of marginalisation and lack of rights with limited access to legal systems. Gender discrimination against women leaves them in a vulnerable discriminatory position since they exclude them from having a social and working life. On the authority of the Professor of Law, Rebecca J. Cook:

Women's ownership of land and resources depends on testamentary inheritance, since customary succession in the absence of a last will and testament favours male succession, and is generally denied to women, whether widows, sisters or daughters. Women's labour is characterized with a negative status, since their paid employment is often in menial tasks or devalued, and their work in the home is unpaid and often classified in economic reports as unemployment. (9)

The acknowledgement that women must have the same access and ownership to landed properties is a shred of evidence that feminist associations and organisations struggle against in order to raise rural and urban communities to achieve a legitimate share of the property. In the report of Bipasha Baruah, "consequently, issues related to women's access to housing, land tenure, and property rights have acquired prominence in research and in development organizations in South Asia only in recent years" (2099). As described in the history of neo-nationalism in the previous section, many changes have been made to move gender rights closer, particularly concerning educational matters. However, it is not enough since Indian women still have trouble affording private properties. Commensurate with Bipasha Baruah, although many feminist organisations have emerged since the last century, in South Asia, the government's response to women's needs has been limited to addressing health, nutrition, and poverty alleviation, rather than focusing on reforms that address gender-specific issues such as property rights, legal literacy, and political equality (2100). With a few exceptions, NGOs in the region are also reluctant to tackle the sensitive issue of land and property rights for women, even though it is widely recognized that these issues are critical to empowering women and promoting gender equality (Baruah 2100). Despite the advocacy of scholars and practitioners, it remains important to empower women with equal political power, independent rights,

and equal access to land and property ownership in order to achieve equality with men in society (Baruah 2100).

In the study “Women’s Individual and Joint Property Ownership: Effects on Household Decision making” carried out by Cheryl Doss et al., it is evinced the fact that Indian women have low levels of land ownership. Besides, most of those women are widows. Nevertheless, the Forest Rights Act do not confer the land automatically to the male figure within marriage; the name of the woman has to be included in the tenure of the land. In any case, in practice, it is the male figure (husband, brother, widow’s brothers-in-law) the ones who are recognized as the main owner and decision maker over the property. Attested by Cheryl Doss et al.:

In some cases, women’s names are not on official documents despite the new provision [...] The only situations in which women are typically able to control land are those wherein the woman is a widow, and there are no other male relatives (brothers of the husband) trying to claim the land, the woman is a female head of household and has no sons, or the family has only daughters.

In the ‘*One Day*’ and ‘*Water*’ it is represented how illiteracy, isolation and the lack of reinforced egalitarian institutions driving into rural communities limit the progress towards the end of gender inequalities in the case of Mira Aunty perpetuating the patriarchal discrimination regarding land among many others human rights mentioned in the dissertation. In spite of this, when Bhim finds out they are untouchable, he totally changes his attitude towards a group of four children. Apart from that, two animals are getting out from the Station Master and Balram’s legs; from Balram’s leg, it gets out a kind of scared mouse, and from the Station Master a shouting intimidating animal on page 35. These animals interpret the tense situation and the primitive fear feeling common to humans and animals when there are no regulations. At the end of ‘*Book 1: Water*’ there is a press note by Salman Usmani reporting that after many battles between dalits and the rest of the Indian castes in Chakwara, they won the right to drink water from the pond, so the rest of the castes polluted it on purpose to avoid dalits drinking water:

Today, the caste Hindus have started to shit and dump garbage in the pond. Recently, some men dug up the village sewer and directed it to the pond water. Every effort has been made to pollute the pond-literally and symbolically -for now. It is only the dalit Bair who uses it. In urban India, dalits are forced to clean sewers and drains, immersing themselves in putrid muck. In Chakwara, a pond that was once considered sacred is now no better than a large sewage tank. The dalits have, after decades, won the right to use it.

But they continue to lose their dignity, for the caste Hindus know how to “shackle the rushing form water” (Vyam et al. 55). This fact proves the conservative side of the Indian population, and they are clinging to religious beliefs which promote inequality amongst the citizens, hate, fear and differences between what is supposedly polluted and pure. Even nowadays, it seems the government have lost interest in helping dalits.

‘*Book 2: Shelter*’ starts when Ambedkar is 26 years old, in 1917, as it is described in the narrative line “1917. Ambedkar boards a train in Bombay, heading to Baroda” (Vyam et al. 60). Ambedkar comes back from his studies in America and England sponsored by “His father Highness Sayaji Rao” (Vyam et al. 61). The first contact he has with India happens in a train where he is asked by a brahmin about his life and studies, judging him positively because he has been out, guessing Ambedkar belongs to an upper caste. Ambedkar feels uncomfortable since he is being asked controversial questions, which can drive him to be discriminated against again, “My god, spending four years in the States and nearly a year in England has turned me into a foreigner! Being away has nearly wiped my untouchability out of my mind! I’d better be careful – an untouchable, wherever he goes in India, is a problem to himself and to others” (Vyam et al. 61). Ambedkar’s thought is encapsulated in a panel surrounded by the train passenger’s head and his own mind. Indeed, every time Ambedkar expresses an uncomfortable reflection about his life, the panels have a frowned eye. Unfortunately, Ambedkar realises that if people discover he is dalit, he will be rejected and treated as disrespectful without any rights, so he must pretend, or at least say nothing about his background to Indian strangers. The conversation continues, and Ambedkar is asked about his stay in India again by the brahmin. Ambedkar clarifies that he doesn’t have a place to stay and no friends and can spend the night in a hotel. It is a thought he has in his mind due to the frowned eye which accompanied the thinking balloons “An untouchable has no **friends** among other castes. If I claim a friendship and am rejected, it will be embarrassing and painful on both sides. [...] To stay in a Hindu hotel, I’ll have to **pretend** to be upper caste – and if I get caught, I’ll get beaten up, maybe **killed**” (Vyam et al. 63).

Ambedkar arrives at Baroda, looking for a shelter to spend some nights until he finds something to rent. He remembers, “Parsis are Zoroastrians and don’t practice untouchability” (Vyam et al. 65). In this way, he can be safe. Otherwise, he would be rejected or killed, as he mentions before. Nevertheless, as he is not Parsi, he must leave the hotel. However, Ambedkar says he is Hindu (instead of saying he is untouchable) and

convinces the inn owner to write down a Parsi name in the register so he can stay. Even at the office, he feels isolated and vulnerable: “it’s been just a week, but it **feels** like forever. In the office, they hurl files at me, fearing my touch. I **have** little work there but **hate coming** back to my depressing room in this decrepit inn” (Vyam et al. 66). He has big problems to find a proper shelter since the Prime Minister denies helping him. When he is discovered in the inn by the Parsi army, he is chased from the inn and threatened; “listen, you dirty **dog**, if we find you in this room this evening, your family won’t even find any of your remains to weep over” (Vyam et al. 68). He asks for help to Jai. However, he regrets, that he can’t help because he would lose his servants if Ambedkar comes to his home. While they are having that conversation, Jai is peacefully drinking, showing he really doesn’t care about Ambedkar. He asks another friend, Peter, who was Brahmin, but now he is converted, although he tells Ambedkar an excuse to turn him down; “I really do sympathize – it’s shocking, the way the Parsis turned you out. I have a small problem though – I’ll have to check with my **wife**. You see, I’m liberal in my thinking, but she – you know how women are, they just cannot be weaned from orthodoxy” (Vyam et al. 71).

It doesn’t matter how educated you are. It is almost impossible to be considered as a person within the caste system if you are untouchable. In the end, Ambedkar spends the night in a public garden without shelter. Ambedkar is frustrated about the impossibility of having a decent life, even a place to sleep, in his country. His reflections are drawn on the whole size of page 72, inside his face, which looks at the reader and shows all these experiences would create his personality in the future. This discrimination is juxtaposed to a 2008 piece of news on page 73, in which it can be read: “Three Dalit siblings living as tenants in Mukherjee Nagar here were allegedly beaten up and abused by their landlord’s family apparently after they learnt of their Scheduled Caste status” (Vyam et al. 73). It evidences the current difficulties for Dalits during centuries to live in India.

‘*Book 3: Travel*’ is set 17 years later, in “Aurangabad, 1934. Ambedkar, 43, is on a bus with a group of colleagues” (Vyam et al. 76). This book connects with the last one within a speech balloon which indicates ‘*Book 2: Shelter*’ was a story told by the 43-year-old Ambedkar on the bus:

Colleague: That was quite a story, Babasaheb, about the Parsi hotel. I’ve always been surprised by how ideas about **pollution** never change, even though people change their religion. Parsis, Christians – they all **cling** to the caste system.

Ambedkar: Not just Parsis, but Muslims too, though their religion, again, teaches the **equality** of men in the eyes of God. (Vyam et al. 76)

The bus where Ambedkar and his colleagues are discussing the caste system is illustrated with Ambedkar's head as the bus hood, leading a group of people who are in the same line of thinking as him. Ambedkar tells his colleagues an anecdote about his trip to Bombay in 1929 "to look into [the] social **boycott** by caste Hindus of the untouchables in **Dhulia**" (Vyam et al. 78), in which he arrived at Chalisgaon where a supporting untouchables group was waiting for him. He wanted to get in a tonga, while the untouchables told him walking to Chalisgaon was better. Ambedkar insisted on the idea of getting in a tonga, and he called one. The tonga fell down the river. When the untouchable group rescued Ambedkar and the driver, they explained to him the driver was an inexperienced boy who had rented the vehicle to his owner because nobody wanted to pick up an untouchable. The incident is contrasted with a new about "a village school teacher whose wife died because the doctor would not touch her to examine her" (Vyam et al. 82). As Ambedkar expresses, this was "a truly terrible story, but common one among our people" (Vyam et al. 83) referring to 1934, the year when the two stories are told, although below Ambedkar's statement, there is another contemporary piece of news "thrown out of the hospital, two dalit women die" (Vyam et al. 83), highlighting untouchables are still rejected and discriminated the rest of people. When Ambedkar and his colleagues arrive at the fort to visit it and get some water, they are insulted since they are polluted and can't touch water according to Hindu beliefs. Later on, there is a whole colourful illustration with authentic articles from the Minorities Committee of the Indian Round Table Conference in 1931 in which several conditions to improve dalits' lives were approved (90-91).

Ambedkar appears to be talking to Gandhi about the Hindu Code Bill and the relevance of Ambedkar's work as India's first Law Minister. Apart from the collage of comments, characters and ideas on the two pages, which creates one panel, the element enclosing and connecting the breakthroughs is water, which floods the pages due to its importance, particularly for dalits who had little access to it. In the words of Ibrahim, Ambedkar attempts "as the First Law Minister of India to make amendments in the Hindu Code Bill- such sanctioning divorce and grant property rights to widows and girl child". Widowhood is considered the last step of marriage in India. However, there are far differences between the upper and de lower castes in the ritual of widowhood. Focusing on the upper castes, widowhood is traditionally considered "a state of social death" (Chakravarti 87). The Brahmanical system considers a woman essential "by her role in

reproduction” (Chakravarti 87), implying a lack of social life and the end of her existence as she has completed her function in the reproduction of the caste and the serving of the male figure. On the authority of Chakravarti, “ideally the chaste woman would cease to exist at the death of her husband by joining her husband on the funeral pyre, but if she did not become a sati she came to be institutionally marginalised: while she as physically alive she was socially dead” (87). Although in contemporary India sati ritual is forbidden, a conservative social system hinders Brahmanical women from continuing with their lives since they have nothing to do with their husband’s family, “once the woman ceased to be a wife, especially a childless wife, she ceased to be a person” (Chakravarti 87).

On the other hand, lower caste widows don’t suffer marginalisation or discrimination because they are not responsible for reproducing the cast. Brahmans’ wives’ role is reproducing the purity of blood, but dalits are the lowest caste in the system, so their perpetuation is irrelevant. A wife getting married again is something normal. Dalit women do not get worried about becoming widows. As mentioned by Chakravarti, although there are many differences between the country and the castes, remarriage practices are accepted for the lower castes and:

The loss of a husband did not create the kind of panic and fear as it did among the upper-caste women. Where the upper caste wife at the time of the marriage rituals, and thereafter throughout her life, would be blessed with the hope that she would remain a sumangali all her life-that is, she should die before her husband- the mother of a jat bride could, according to folklore, thus say quite nonchalantly to her daughter at the time of marriage. (87)

However, for the lower castes, “enforced cohabitation was the rule among the untouchables”, meaning that after the death of the male figure, the rest of the family members should stay together, and none of them was marginalised. Another one is the case of chuhra women, as stated by Chakravarti:

Jat society values an expansion of the family through the birth of many sons as that means many more hands to work. The practice of levirate or secondary marriages for widows among many castes associated with agriculture or other kinds of work is thus not so much a recognition of her sexual needs but an arrangement to utilize the productive and reproductive labour of widows. (88)

Keeping the customs among the castes was essential to maintain their positions in the social system and to distinguish between upper and lower castes. Particularly, the role of women is crucial to establish the differences. Paraphrasing Chakravarti, the upper castes refused to let the lower castes abandon the custom of widow marriage and adopt the higher castes’ marriage customs. They were able to keep their privileged high ritual

status because it was insisted that each caste follow “its own” customs (88). Additionally, it was a method for the upper castes to manipulate and maintain control over the demographic makeup of all castes, no matter how high or low (88).

The framing of widowhood inside the conventional system has been challenged throughout history and communities. In spite of that, the role of women is still limited, as they “can work but often have no power over finances [...]. Messages of women’s subordination such as these problematise gender indicators that fail to account for women’s subjectivities in patriarchal societies” (Mathew 15-16). Professor Dipti Mayee Sahoo depicts the current situation of widows in contemporary India. Her research “An Analysis of Widowhood in India: A Global Perspective” published in 2013, although generalising, describes the situation women must confront after the husband’s death:

Clearly, it’s more than a problem of language, although that discrimination goes further, with epithets such as “husband eater” used against them. In the northern Indian state of Punjab, a widow is referred to as bitch, which means “prostitute” in Punjabi. In this region, they usually arrange for the widow to marry her deceased husband’s brother because being owned by a man is a way to avoid being raped. (46)

It becomes more than evident that “the inequality authors will arise in the graphic novels against this condition imposed by a patriarchal system. The final chapter is called ‘*Book 4: The Art of Bhimayana*’, written with letters made of little fish on a woman’s face. This chapter describes the life of the author Durgabai Vyam and the creative process in the design of the book, using their own:

Paintings on paper and canvas using the fabric and acrylic colours. For the fine black and white lines, [they] use Rotring pens. However, our aesthetic draws on our village experience... For example, to fill spaces, we use patterns like dhan (grain, page 60), kodo (mustard, Ambedkar’s face on the cover), moa grass (34), etc. The borders that frame an image are inspired by fences in a field. (97)

Due to the exchange of talent amongst Vyam et al. and the approach of the biographical stories from different fields, such as art, journalism, sculpture, writing, and graphic designing, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) is an artistic graphic novel which contains all kind of elements that represent the Indian culture, such as the colours, patterns, and vocabulary, and tells the history of Ambedkar and the discrimination he suffered since he was born at the end of the nineteenth century, inserting today’s news to raise awareness of the little progress done more than one hundred years later, even after the Independence of India. The combination of different drawing styles and the accompaniment of animals makes the graphic novel a creative piece of literature

and part of the popular Indian cultural heritage, which captures the silenced situations of dalits and helps people worldwide to get into the context of Indian issues.

5.2. The Politics of Fair Skin in “Inner Beauty and Melanin” (2015) by Bhavana Singh

This discriminatory skin standard is another target added to the women’s unequal conditions they suffer daily. The more dark-skinned the daughters are, the more amount of money parents invest in their dowry, “although dowry is illegal in India, it is common knowledge (especially in rural parts of the country) that a darker bride will have to compensate for her physical shortcomings by paying a higher dowry” (Shevde 6). Although Indian history is so far-reaching, there is evidence of English Colonialism and its huge influence on modern Indian society and the established beauty standards. Natasha Shevde upholds the impact of Western culture in the Indian media, “the fair & lovely product in India is laden with important cultural, social, and historical connotations. Although it is tempting to draw analogies between the Western hype over tanning products and the Indian obsession with fairness creams, one must acknowledge that the latter stems from a way of thinking that has been mired for centuries in a country of diverse cultural and social forces. Issues such as reputation, marriage, dowry, prestige, and oppression are important factors that manifest into various behaviourist patterns in society, especially among females” (Shevde 6-7).

This view continues in contemporary Indian society, making it almost impossible for women to fix an unnatural parameter for their dark skin, a common characteristic among the Indian population. Even though this issue has existed since time immemorial, the relation between the dowry and the fairness of women's skin has become more damaging with the appearance of mass media and advertising “since the British ruled India for a considerably long period, that is, over two centuries, it was inevitable that an English-language press would develop over time” (Parameswaran 28). In the 21st Century, the payment of a dowry is still practicable as it provides an identity to the women, interconnection among families, the prevalence of the social status of the caste, and an unharmed marriage. “The media with its powerful reach through advertisements, serials, films, and songs, has become a purveyor of these values. This has had a cascading copycat effect on all sections of society... At the same time, we see motivated efforts to

promote retrograde practices in the name of religious rituals and tradition, including son-preference based rituals abound, often backed by powerful political forces and governments” (Srinivasan 607).

The writer and media activist Paromita Vohra has focused her entire work on issues about gender, politics, urban life, and popular media. She replies to Antonia Navarro's question about the 21st Indian ideals and the female image constructed by social media, as Vohra rates:

Well, foreign women have conventionally been represented as being, on the one hand, sexually desirable for their fair skin and their toned bodies. [Fair skin color] is idealized in life: Colonialism, caste, and race. Brahmins, as well as the British, were usually fairer skinned. So that’s what’s considered desirable I suppose, a sign of racial superiority and purity. (Navarro 3)

Fair skin colour was often used as a marker to differentiate women, particularly in the Hindu caste found in India, another way to shape women within the patriarchal structure of Hinduism, apart from the power their own families have had over them, due to gender discrimination or other forms of family conflict.

In “Inner Beauty and Melanin”, Bhavana Singh introduces the comic describing her immersion into the life of a pigment and the absolute bewilderment value Indian society gives to fair skin. The story is divided into six chapters in which the main character is the melanin pigment suppressed by the external stimulus. The first chapter, called “Melanin gets the message”, introduces the pigment as an animated cartoon who is watching television, more concretely a commercial advertisement that cheers her up to buy a product to “be beautiful, win confidence, be desirable, look like the real you, change everything and maybe even your attitude in 14 days” (Singh 68-69). These two pages are an analogy of any Indian advertisements which are currently constructing gender roles and beauty conventions, treating within a preposterous way a simple natural cell whose function exists by itself, such as Nivea ones. After the empty spot, the pigment buys the products emulating the influential power this mass media exerts on women. Singh includes a fancy tag reproducing the made-up effects it would have on the customer's skin after fourteen days. With an asterisk and the small print, the illustrator clarifies this is a recreation of any products in the market and how they replace some words such as dark “with other simple words like ‘anti-’, ‘dead’, ‘dull’ or ‘damaged to aid consumer understanding. Some avoid using ‘dark’ altogether to enhance consumer clarity by

keeping the focus on fairness and whiteness” (Singh 69). Even more, advertising presents darkness as a disease to sell the population their pioneering solutions with their products. In the second chapter, “Melanin in morphosis”, she lies in bed and, like The Elephant Man, she transforms herself into an insect, in particular, a fly, to utter the human pain and connect this animal with the summer and the different activities such as sunbathing Melanin used to do (70).

“Melanin in Skinteresting Facts” is the title of the third chapter, in which the backsides of two cream fairness products are illustrated. The title plays a word game with interesting facts about skin in beauty. “An estimated 298 tonnes of skin-whitening products are sold annually in the country. This is in addition to other services and treatments that offer to – whiten/ lighten/ brighten/ tighten/ bleach/ depigment/ detoxify/ resurface/ exfoliate/ hydrate/ rejuvenate/ peel/ polish/; make skin glow/ fairer/ smoother/ fresher/ cleaner/ clearer/ softer/ suppler/ spotless/ flawless/ younger-looking, all naturally and from deep within” (Singh 70).

This information is used as a bomb to seep into the female consumer with the vast number of synonyms provided by Singh. Most of these terms and fake effects are falsely promised to the customers. They create a sense of changing the complexity due to the harassment of advertising approved by the governments to be broadcasted on television, generating an unnecessary vice to these products and subsequent frustration due to the lack of accurate results.

In the fourth story, “Melanin in silent judgment”, the pigment looks like a woman in front of her computer exposed to social networks. In the 21st Century, the Internet is considered one of the leading mass media channels, which influences especially the young population. Social networks provide a recreation of flawless lives and new, artificial bodies, but the influenced people fall into the error of comparing Internet people with themselves. Melanin says, “Wow, is that the phot... I’m looking so fat! But check her out! They [models] all look the same! Yaa! 81 likes?! Seriously! [click] 82” (Singh 71).

In the fifth chapter, called “Supermel & Yoovyji in entitlement”, Melanin becomes a superheroine who fights against Yoovyji. This cartoon represents the malignant effects of UV rays on the skin. The illustrations exemplify the importance of melanin production and its important role in the immune system. Skin tone depends directly on the activity of these cells. Melanin can be eumelanin producing a dark colour, or pheomelanin,

producing fair skin. The panel denotes an educative reply to the derogatory advertising in mass media, trying to modify the composition of the bodies' cells without explaining how complex the organism is and getting the population hooked to their dispensable articles. This idea is directly linked to the sixth chapter, "Melanin in infinite wonder", as fairness is a prevailing subject in the Asian population, and patriarchal mass media take advantage of misinformation to capture as many clients as possible.

Chapter 6. Arranged Marriages, Dowry, and Acid Attacks

6.1. Self-Identity and Marriage Expectations in "The Photo" (2015) by Reshu Singh

In contemporary and advanced India, there is the tradition of arranged marriage, it is “the chief mechanism by which the hierarchical caste system reproduces itself. Individuals are born into a caste, generally, marry someone within the same group, and then go on to have children who repeat the process” (Ahuja and Ostermann 2). In the experience of Serena Nanda, an author and professor specialised in gender diversity, “even among the educated middle classes in modern, urban India, marriage is as much a concern of the families as it is of the individuals. So customary is the practice of arranged marriage that there is a special name for a marriage which is not arranged: It is called a “love match” (1). When a girl is married, her custody is transferred from her father and brother to her husband and her husband’s family. It applies to all *varnas*, in the words of Nanda, “how she dresses, how she behaves, how she gets along with others, where she goes, how she spends her time, her domestic abilities—all of this and much more—will be observed and commented on by a whole new set of relations” (5).

There is still strict control over women's performance concerning private and especially public life. Sexuality is one of the essential parts of the caste system as it is “an aspect of the larger ‘rationale’ of pure and impure’ (Chakravarti 86). Marriage with a child girl was a common practise, particularly in the upper caste, where they consider pre-pubertal girls as the purest ones due to their “womb was the sexual property of the husband before she began to menstruate, immediately after which the consummation ceremony would be completed” (86), being this characteristic necessary to represent the “notion of caste purity” (86) and leaving the role of women as a possession of men to perpetuate the caste. There were different ways of marriage practices depending on the caste, as Chakravarti suggests:

Although we cannot be sure how old these differences are, especially in relation to marriage practices, the acceptance of customary practices in the Brahmanical texts and the continuing references to it in texts of the medieval period, as well as the writing of caste *puranas*, would suggest that diversity of marriage practices were a running tradition. (86)

Scholars agree that “caste boundaries remain strong (Srinivas 1962; Jaffrelot 2003; Banerjee et al. 2009) and that intermarriage rates are low (Goli et al. 2013). Yet, there is growing evidence pointing to interest in intercaste marriage in urban India”

(Ahuja and Ostermann 2). Marriage keeps the social distance among the different castes, although Ahuja and Ostermann conclude in their 'Crossing Caste Boundaries in the Modern Indian' study that intermarriage has a social interest since they have observed an "increasing openness to intercaste marriage, especially the willingness of upper caste individuals to marry into the lower castes, [which] is therefore a sign of social inclusion" (5).

Nonetheless, the difference among the social castes remains in the marriage. For the Brahmin upper caste, marriage is a sign of power and pureness as there is no pollution in their bodies. Moreover, religion is quite present in their lives, so endogamic marrying ensures the prevalence of their sacred bloodlines and increases their social status and respect in contrast to the lower castes.

Another remarkable aspect for Brahmin women is the role each of the women must develop within the marriage dictated by patriarchal dominance. Wives are expected to live with their husbands and their family. It implies they cannot keep their privacy and must interact with each member of their husband's family without having enough privacy even to have sexual relationships. On the other hand, their mothers-in-law take care of their sons, such as serving them food or ensuring their comfort at home. In a study of C.J. Haripriya Fuller and Narasimhan, they interview several Brahmin subcastes called Vattimas who continue with the tradition of arranged, endogamous companionate marriage for the middle class in contemporary India. In the testimony of Sarada, an Indian Vattimas woman, she corroborates:

Herself was confined to the kitchen and the rear of the house, while her husband spent his time on the veranda at the front, but because his father normally stayed in the front room and a wife could not appear before her father-in-law, she could not walk through the house to see her husband, even when not working for her mother-in-law. [...] Young couples could rarely talk to each other privately at home, [she] was even prevented from serving food to her husband, because her mother-in-law kept this role. (739)

Under those circumstances, it becomes an arduous and hostile context for women to develop any activity within the marital dominance and the lack of intimacy for the young couple even to speak. However, thanks to the third feminist wave and the abolition of pre-pubertal marriage among the Brahmins, women born from the late 1990s to nowadays are less prone to be obliged to get married so early. As C.J. Haripriya Fuller and Narasimhan conclude, "neither Sarada nor anyone else gave any specific reasons [in their study] for abandoning child marriage, although several people mentioned the

growing importance of girls' education, [...] the majority of people in modern Tamilnadu have regarded child marriage as incompatible with good girls' education" (740). Women belonging to the low castes in Indian, such as dalit women suffer several patriarchal gendered forces in their homes, "having to navigate through resistance, agency and power" (Mathew 2). They must cope with marginalization since they are the low step in the system, domestic violence, as well as physical punishment at school. It implies their communities get behind their marriage and put all the effort in their education to serve the male figures. Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen throw light upon gender inequalities, such as proper rights or education expressing the following:

Families and society as a whole monitor women's schooling and work decisions as a way to ensure marriage prospects for women [...] The patrifocal family's interests are prominent in this context. Therefore, the goal is to enhance women's abilities as wives and mothers, and to contribute to the financial security while fortifying the patrifocal system. (227)

For dalits women, education and consequently their marriage are the only opportunities of living; "education is a step towards gaining social mobility through marriage; if the girls are well educated then they can marry well-educated boys. Thus, the goal of education for these women is marriage and not employment or independence" (Mathew 22-23). The postdoctoral researcher in contemporary South Asian Studies, Clarinda Still, claims that the experiences of dalit women and girls require attention because they face a triple disadvantage in their lives due to the intersection of gender, caste, and class (93). Although the lives of some dalit communities have improved since independence, the gender gap remains persistent and has yet to be fully addressed (93).

Dalit women's aspirations are determined by the traditional patriarchal gender roles provided by marriage, where they develop the housework. It is not only that they cannot find an improvement of their lives in the educational system or in their families but also society does not offer job employment for women, since they are supposed to stay in their homes working for their husband and children. Balagopalan and Subramanian express that "dalit women's work is restricted to the domestic sphere not just as a product of society's norms about women's work but also due to a lack of employment possibilities for dalit women outside of this sphere. Dalit women are often employed as domestic cleaners and workers" (43). Marriage is a crucial difference among castes and classes, and it is going to be depicted in the comics and graphic novels of the corpus where female

characters speak out and break gender gaps, struggling against their familiar atmosphere where they feel trapped as well as showing alternatives to their sexuality.

“The Photo” by Reshu Singh is the third comic published within the Indian independent anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), where the main female character faces arranged marriage expectations through the outgoing nature of self-identity. The feminist author, Reshu Singh, depicts the character of Bena, her background and aspirations, out of her family’s marriage expectations, proposing hers, which is out of the Indian canon. While her parents expect her to get married, she expresses her non-conformity through the outgoing nature of self-identity in conversation with them. The election of a partner and arranged marriage are traditional customs based on old mythological beliefs, and ideologies not standing up to scrutiny nowadays, that still oppress women, perpetuating gender inequality in Indian society. In the words of Annie George:

Subjectively, newly married adolescent women are forging a new identity for themselves that encompasses their new bodily and social experiences. As relatively powerless new brides, newly married adolescent women can be seen as victims of social practices and patriarchal systems that cast them as violated women, who lack the autonomy to regulate their sexual and bodily experiences. (207)

It may be said that arranged marriage is also directly connected to the construction, change or loss of the women’s identity, as they have to assume their new role within the matrimony. This is the leading affair our main character, Bena is worried about losing her self-identity and accepting an arranged marriage. Reshu Singh clarifies in the prologue that the story is about Bena facing her fear of losing her ‘true’ self. Still, more than that, it is a study of the idea of identity and of our expectations of ourselves and each other (Reshu 22) and it is the reason why she appears in the comic in a domestic atmosphere, dialoguing with her mother. Focusing on the typography in this comic is crucial to understanding and differentiating each of the characters’ thoughts. Firstly, dialogues have grey balloons and black typography, although when Bena is thinking, her typography is white with a black background. Secondly, when someone makes an order or emphasises is written in capital letters. Finally, when Bena feels the loss of her self-identity, her balloons turn white to black.

The story opens on page 22, with an illustration of Bena occupying the whole page. She is posing for the camera, looking directly at the reader. This is one of the steps in the process of mating a partner. In this case, Bena’s family hired a photographer to

upload the picture to a partner's market. Bena introduces herself and specifies with an asterisk that her family wants to "marry her off" (22), which means to get married to a stranger. She expresses her point through her thoughts. Furthermore, a balloon in capital letters orders her to tilt her head to look better.

Her thoughts explode with the photographer's flash (page 23), making it clear she does not want to get married. For her is a simple concept, but she continues thinking, "but it's not so simple" (panel 3, 23), referring to her family's expectations. In the following two panels, the author uses the white balloon with black typography when Bena asks for her self-identity and looks at her photograph as if she does not recognise herself within them. Then, the family takes part in the discussion about Bena's marriage (panel 8, 24), making this issue social and public. In the conversation, the reader can realise Bena's mother went through the same type of marriage since the father says, without looking at the female characters, "when I saw your mom's photo back then, I had to change my mind. She looked just like Madhubala" (panel 15, 26). This sentence is crucial to understand the different perspectives. The father takes for granted that Bena must obey him. That is why he does not look up to her. He imposes his experience, showing his dominant role and how he reacted when he saw Bena's mother. Indeed, Bena's mother's experience is not expressed in front of her husband. The father says, "back then", which is highlighted by the author, referencing the past times and consequently, times have changed, feminists have empowered women, and they must take their decisions. In the sentence, there is also a reference to the Indian singer and Bollywood actress Madhubala, who was considered a femininity and beauty icon in India during the sixties.

Nevertheless, the father speaks in the past, stating the superficiality of an arranged marriage and praising his wife's body, cancelling any ounce of his identity. However, Bena feels identified with her mother, is filled with the hope of having a close referent for her (panels 16-17) and runs freely through the wildness of nature; "Me and Ma were very similar when we both were young. We daydreamed about being superheroes. Saviours of the world! All wrongs were righted, baddies were ninja-kicked, accidents stopped before they could happen" (Singh 27). The author faces the rigid structure of the family, instilled by the male figure, providing Bena with hope and wishful thinking. The female figure of Bena's mother is depicted as firm but understanding, occasionally dropping a comment that glimpses her resignation towards her past life. While Bena's father is on the terrace asking for another cup of tea, Bena's mother is doing the washing-

up and makes a cutting remark, “lose the paper first then!” (panel 19, 28). In the narrative text (panels 19-20) Bena remembers her mother’s story, bringing to light her talent and independence before having her sons; “mom did her Mater’s in economics, and she used to paint landscapes. Once, she painted a pair of tigers – the size of the seal ones. But since she has to babysit the three of us, she doesn’t get to do any of the fun stuff” (Singh 28). Bena’s mother asks Bena to make the tea for her father (panel 20), but Bena refuses to do it (panel 21). Bena’s mother continues in her role of the housewife and asks Bena what she wants for dinner. However, all Bena wants is for her mother to do fun stuff (panel 22, 29).

Bena and her mother keep an intense dialogue (29-30) whereas panels (22-25) lack their boundaries. Bena’s mother asks her why she doesn’t want to get married, and Bena replies she doesn’t want to be like her, an indoor woman who doesn’t develop herself. However, Bena’s mother expresses her conformity as a housewife since she feels like the boss of the home and throws the ignorance of Bena doing the house chores in Bena’s face. Finally, Bena says “everyone knows their own good” (Singh 30), while Bena’s mother sentences “and her own fear” (Singh 30). When Bena’s mother ends up with that sentence, her figure is transformed into Bena’s one, so Bena can see herself physically reflected in her mother, and her glasses slide a bit due to the shocking situation. Bena buries herself in a river of thoughts, with doves flying, reflecting on her mother’s situation and her heroic steps to create a family “you gave everything to become a superhero to us. But collected so much bitterness along the way... Isn’t being happy heroic too?” (Singh 31). In her reflection and later dream (2-33), the author illustrates Bena developing several unconventional activities Bena wants to do, such as being a sleepyhead, being a child at the age of 10, Bena as a ninja-wizard and forgetting about how she must fit in her society “ain’t the one I look like [referring to her initial photo], ain’t the one I long to be” (Sight 32). When she wakes up (panels 31, 33), her figure is drawn with a thick clear line, with some clouds clearing behind her. Looking at the reader, she narrates, “but I am more than my photos, far more” (Sight 33), establishing her own identity, which is out of the conventional canon imposed by the social rules, and what is expected from her. Indeed, she feels so far from the idea of getting married that she vandalises her marriage photo (panel 32), adding a cigarette, sparks, an angry face and a boot under the dress as if she was lying on the chair, as a way of reinforcing her decisions and express her feelings as a free woman.

6.2. The Influence of Dowry in “That’s Not Fair” (2015) by Harini Kannan

Hinduism is one of the most tolerant and accepting of all the world's faiths. It is one of the most opulent ideologies, embracing the rich culture and moral precepts. On this criterion, India should have been one of the most liberal cultures in the contemporary age. Moreover, *Hindutva*, which translates to “Hindu-ness,” is the dominant political philosophy of the current ruling party, the BJP. This kind of Hindu nationalism argues for a “Hindu Rashtra”, or Hindu nation-state. Theoretically, a state with a liberal mindset would have provided considerable benefits to Indian women, but this is not the case. A convergence of *Hindutva*-led patriarchal nationalism, the colonial culture of fair skin preference, and age-old discriminatory traditions such as dowry have played a crucial part in making life arduous for women.

In India, *Hindutva* is a political movement that promotes rhetoric that lowers women via its inherent patriarchal framework. Its discourse evokes nostalgia for the grandeur of the Aryan Empire and reverence for the past and intensifies these feelings with the Hindu faith, as articulated by Savarkar. “*Hindutva* is a political essay influenced by the cultural and historical roots of authoritarian Hinduism, with the Aryan race providing Hindus with their unique identity” (Borreguero 116-117). As defined by Shashi Tharoor, *Hindutva* is a blatantly political ideology from racial pride notions prevalent in the 1920s. The governing BJP administration has made the saffronization of history a pillar of its growing authoritarianism, which is based on hardliner Hindu rhetoric and policies. The lifestyle and consumption patterns of the emerging middle class and bourgeoisie demonstrate Hinduism's relationship with neoliberalism. In contrast, its engagement with fundamentalism is manifested in the emphasis on vindicating Aryan period Hindu traditions.

In a wide range of cultural fields, particularly in popular culture, its manifestations that are professionally designed in highly aesthetic and effective forms function as tools to normalise the masculine and patriarchal nature of political authority and to legitimise gender hierarchy. The popularisation of this cultural trend entails a normalisation of gender hierarchy through legitimising it on a historical and religious basis. By promoting a strong national identity, instilled in the supremacy of specific religious values, this conservative political discourse (allied to the Hindu traditions and morality) provides a

step backwards regarding gender equality in this secular and modern country, the biggest democracy in the world.

Modernisation of the economy resulted in the liberation of many women from religious persecution, granting them more democratic rights. “In spite of modernization and women’s increasing role in the market economy, the practice of dowry in India is becoming more widespread, and the value of dowries is increasing” (Srinivasan and Lee 1108). Therefore, economic modernisation did not guarantee women's complete liberation and emancipation from patriarchy. As it did not entirely challenge established gender norms, Indian women remained identified primarily as mothers and in terms of their functions within the household. Gender is a significant dividing line between secularism and Hinduism in Indian history, marked by conflicts between secularism and Hinduism.

Women's social status has been considered a market object dominated by the male side of society, even placing value on their duties and natural complexion since birth. Because of this lack of female rights and their forced dependence on the male figure, parents traditionally attempt to compensate their daughters with premortem dowry payments when they marry before the father passes away. There are several criteria to follow when transferring this inheritance. In this sense, Wilson reminds us that although village women have little power, rural Asian women in Britain still fight to be heard worldwide as they are always behind the tyranny of their husbands at home (3). That is to say, the level of women’s education; the more educated, the less amount of money needs to be paid by the family as the daughter’s value increases in the marriage market. A high level of education implies more value for women, “if dowry is interpreted as a price that clears marriage markets, then higher education could substitute for dowry payments as more educated brides enjoy higher valuation in the marriage market and hence have to pay lower dowries to secure the groom of their choice” (Sanchari 26).

Focusing on their age, the younger they are, the higher the dowry. Parents have to compensate the new husband for his bride’s shortage of knowledge so he can invest more money in her wife’s education. To reduce the dowry, parents invest themselves in their daughter’s schooling and “[they] switch from dowry to education to compensate daughters across cohorts” (Sanchari 26). As well as education and age, skin colour plays a fundamental role in the value of the woman and her marriage, and it is extended to mass media. Lighter skin is a preference for South-Asian men. This thought makes it difficult

for women who do not fit the beauty and behaviour canon established by a patriarchal society to marry. Even in movies (especially in Bollywood or other skin products such as Ponds or Nivea) and literature, female characters have been represented with lighter-skinned actresses “most significantly, the ‘success story’ wedding photos consistently had lighter-skinned brides than grooms. Dark-skinned women were almost non-existent in these ‘success stories.’” (Sonora and Mara 65).

“That’s Not Fair” by Harini Kannan opens the Indian anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). It is a brief illustrative story about the importance of the colour of skin by the family even when the baby isn’t born yet. As the author introduces in her short abstract, “, especially in a South Indian family, the most important question is whether [the girl baby] is dark-skinned or fair. Her complexion is directly linked to how much dowry the family will have to give to get her married” (Kannan 6). The first double meaning can be found in the story’s title, as Harini uses the word “fair” as something wrongful and to accompany the series of strips, where a foetus is growing inside the placenta. She has dark skin. She continues with the second illustration, where a balloon says “somewhere in a shady clinic”, which involves a scene in which the mother is doing sonography. The word “shady” implies another double meaning for the situation the Indian mother is living in; it can be understood as “something with plenty of shade so dark” and “something disreputable”. The mother is in the clinic with her son. The future dark baby is being judged dishonestly because of her complexity. In the next panel, the balloon says, “it’s a girl!” (Kannan 7), and the baby appears on screen, waving with a finger and the gender is represented with a bow made by the umbilical cord. In the next panel, the mother is offered the sonography results and a handkerchief, expressing her disappointment with her grimace.

The shape of the mother and the son standing behind an advertising letter reflexing their situation, in which a dark woman is presented together with the slogan “is your daughter not married yet!!” (Kannan 8). This panel reveals two circumstances; the future of her baby due to her skin tone and remains herself the obstacles she has to afford in the past as her skin is also dark, and, as the previous panel, she wants to avoid her daughter facing these impediments. The concept of mating or the election of a partner within the same caste is another traditional custom that oppresses women.

Marriage is supposed to be among the same castes, especially the upper castes such as Brahmins at the top, who must perpetuate their purity level when having children.

As Chakravarti explains, Brahmanical patriarchy is a single framework that connects caste, gender, land ownership and population, despite variations in its practices towards women. This framework encompasses the brahmanized upper castes and the less brahmanized middle and dalit castes (89). Following this argument, the upper castes could suppress and control the system, keeping their privileges at the top of society, abusing the castes below, and even assaulting women. Although the male figure of an upper caste must get married with a woman of the same caste, they are allowed to mistreat the rest of the women, especially those who belong to the dalit caste. Chakravarti states that upper-caste men have had sexual access to lower-caste women, which expresses their material power over the lower castes. This practice is normalized and accepted as the norm, where upper-caste men's use of lower-caste women is seen as natural. He also points out that historically, a woman of lower caste, particularly those with darker skin, have been viewed as the natural objects of desire and pleasure (89-90). It was the upper caste being at the top of the social pyramid who had the access to the low caste, something that did not happen and vice versa. A man belonging to a lower caste having "sexual relationship with a 'higher' caste woman causes hysteria, and brings swift and violent retribution upon the lower caste man, and often on both persons" (Chakravarti 89).

The preservation of the caste in the social system is regulated by the election of a partner who belongs to the same caste and then the marriage. Even within this tradition, the patriarchal regulations maintain the woman in an unequal position. In an online article published in *Wear Your Voice Magazine*, Jhilam Gangopadhyay explains that when an upper-caste man marries a lower-caste woman, this is referred to as hypergamy, as the woman's caste is elevated through the marriage. However, the opposite is not allowed. An upper-caste woman marrying a lower-caste man is referred to as hypogamy. This is due to the idea that a caste's honour is closely tied to the honour of its women. If a woman from an upper caste marries below her caste, it is seen as dishonour and "pollutes" her and her entire family and caste, bringing shame upon them (1).

The role of women as future wives depends on their mate, who will become their husband under the endogamic marriage to carry on with the pure and polluted castes. The conservative view of the Hindu caste system crashes with the liberal circles Brahmin frequent in their colleges. The Hindu caste system is based on old mythological beliefs and customs, ideologies not standing up to scrutiny nowadays. Although it is a tendency the majority of the castes had to carry on during the 20th century, and this trend may be

changing over the years, women have suffered institutionalised oppression because of Savarna Brahminism, a critic reflected in the corpus. There are many other rituals still present within Indian families. Attested by Jhila Gangopadhyay, “even today, the system of dowry is rampant in India despite the presence of laws that prohibit it”. Indeed, there is a wide range of Indian websites where women are registered and offer their profiles as if they were markets. They expect to be chosen by their future groom. However, the future husband's family would choose the best candidate according to the prototype of the conservative, submissive Indian woman. It implies that there are lots of patriarchal patterns when seeking a convenient marriage. For instance, the corpus of this dissertation includes “That’s Not Fair” by Harini Kannan, which opens the Indian anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back!* (2015) and depicts the necessity that an Indian family will have to compensate a lower-caste baby (even before she is born) if she upgrades her status by marrying them to an upper-caste man.

The mother starts drinking gunk to make her daughter lighter, while the baby just shows her disagreement with the abusive fairness standard and answers her mother’s actions with sarcastic replies such as “Ma!! I’m just getting fat! Good luck with getting me out!” (Kannan 8). The second trick she tries is powdering her body, and while she appears exhausted, lying on the floor, the Hindu God Ganesha looks at her, reminding the high dowry families must afford and “even an unborn child is not spared” (Kannan 8).

The next panel, composed of three pictures, illustrates all the prejudices and negative comments about the dark skin baby towards the mother and the baby. Although the baby is still a foetus, she has her voice and states her discrepancy with the unfair treats she is receiving. To evidence her friction, she gets angry, crossing her arms, showing her bottom and even insults people even though her mother hides her mouth and only some symbols appear in her balloon. The story goes on with a dialogue between the parents about their savings, the mother announces, “we should start saving, for our child’s wedding” (Kannan 9). Whereas they have two children, the current son and the unborn baby, they evidence the dowry is an established ritual in India as in the dialogue, the mother uses “child”. The baby doesn’t silence and complains about that decision by reason of her studies are much more determining for her “what about my college fund?” (Kannan 9).

The last try of getting lighter comes out when in the next panel. The mother is spreading cream on the surface of her belly from a tin which says, “be fair” and the

enraged daughter responds, “Ma!! Really?” (Kannan 9). If any doubt existed, the night the mother is giving the bird, she sings a classic Asian lullaby called *Kanne En Kanmaniye*, which depicts the beautiful life that a baby will have when she grows up, so the baby gets cheerful. This short reference prevents the reader from losing the background surrounding this story. The infant is ready to bring the world her position and thoughts, “It’s high time I came out and taught this society a goddamn lesson!”, and continues “I’m coming out, bitches” (Kannan 9). Her powerful attitude presents an authoritative and fighting personality and a ruling and prevailing behaviour totally out of the female depiction of a normative character in a novel; that is why she needs this convincing vocabulary.

When the baby is finally born, there is a contrast of commentaries. On the one hand, the father is not convinced about her daughter's appearance and just states, “A healthy girl” (Kannan 10). On the other hand, a new character who seems to be the grandmother articulates, “But dark...” (Kannan 9), with a dissatisfied face and finally, the son reminds the grandmother in a sarcastic way “just like her mother...” (Kannan 10). In the last panel of this page, the baby takes revenge with the motto “eat this!” proclaiming a tremendous ending. On the final page, there is one big drawing of the baby shouting to everybody with a “WAAAA!” (Kannan 11). With this scream, the infant reveals her strong and opposing ideals to the patriarchal society, which has been oppressing her even when she had not been born yet and left clear her arrival to the world to fight against prejudices and traditional conservative standards together with her future revolutionary activity.

6.3. Acid Attacks and Overcoming Adversity in *Priya's Mirror* (2016) by Paromita Vohra

Priya's Mirror (2016) is chapter 2 of a saga supported by the WEvolve Global Initiative of the World Bank, which aims to alter mentalities and conduct that contribute to gender inequality and gender-based violence. The story is written by Paromita Vohra and Ram Devineni and illustrated by the artist Dan Goldman. *Priya's Mirror* (2016) shows the marginalisation women face to conform to society's standards after an acid attack. The comic offers storytelling on how women who suffer from acid attacks are often left with physical and mental scars for the rest of their lives. It shows how they are often seen as damaged goods and are ostracised by society. The story also shows how

difficult it is for women to get access to justice after an attack. Acid attacks are a global problem, but there is little data on the prevalence of these attacks. This is because many victims do not report the attack out of fear of retaliation or because they do not think they will be believed. The story follows Priya, a young woman who is the survivor of a gang rape, who has turned into a super-heroine after getting over her trauma and now carries a mirror to reflect the inner benignities of the people who look at their reflection.

Paromita Vohra, one of the co-writers of *Priya's Mirror* (2016), is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, writer and columnist based in Mumbai. Her films include *Unlimited Girls* (2010), *Q2P* (2011) and *Bombay Calling* (2005). Ram Devineni is a New York City-based documentarian, comic book creator and publisher. He is the co-founder of Rattapallax Films and the founder of Rattapallax Press. Dan Goldman is a Brooklyn, NY-based comics artist and graphic novelist. Her work is focused on the empowerment of feminism in India and the struggle against gender violence. Ram Devineni is a documentary filmmaker and founder of Rattapallax. Al Jazeera interviewed Ram and Paromita in 2016 about *Priya's Mirror*. In the interview, they discuss the lack of data on acid attacks, the need for more awareness about the issue, and the importance of storytelling in raising awareness and changing mentalities.

One of the most common gender violence attacks in India is the practice of burning women's faces with acid to disfigure them once and for all. Based on Doley (2020), "acid attack, [is] also known as acid throwing, [...] a form of cruel, immoral act which is defined as the act of throwing acid intentionally on the body of another to disfigure, maim or kill", in this way, it becomes harder for them to continue with their lives, even within society, where they are judged. Any person might do this type of criminal activity, so it might initially seem ungendered. However, "the 226th Law Commission of India Report, as well as the Justice Verma Committee Report, admits that the heinous crime of acid attacks has a specific gender dimension in India. Acid attackers generally target young girls intending to disfigure the face of the victim" (Goswami 1-2). In addition, disputes over land, inheritances, dowries, and rejected marriage proposals (Patel 1) frequently lead to jealousy and acid violence in South Asia, with women serving as its primary targets. Because the attackers intend to alter the victims' appearance rather than kill them, acid attacks are inhumane. Additionally, women are attacked with cheap, readily available acid (1).

Women who survive must go through a resilient process to get over the crime and face everyday fear of being attacked again or excluded, “consequently the victim is faced with physical challenges, which require long-term surgical treatment, as well as psychological challenges, which require in-depth intervention from psychologists and counsellors at each stage of physical recovery (Patel 2). This practice has been developed for many centuries, but the number of cases reflected in Indian popular literature is comparatively low. The massive gender violence suffered by Indian women led the NGO Rattapallax to create a comic called PRIYA’S SHAKTI in 2012, which would derivate into a multi-content project thanks to the publication of further adults and children's electronic comics containing augmented reality. The saga's main character is Priya, a superheroine who fights against criminals to achieve gender equality in India, empowering the voices of those victims and marginalising women who have suffered gender violence. The project approaches a wide age range and controversial topics that have seldom been covered in Indian literature before, being the second chapter, *Priya’s Mirror* (2016) by Paromita Vohra, Ram Devineni and Dan Goldman, one of the pieces which illustrate acid attack crimes and is inspired on factual acid attack survivors.

The cover of the comic summarises the main elements of the story. Priya appears powerfully, riding her tiger in the air, holding a mirror in which a man’s face is reflected.

In this scene, there is a scared female acid attack survivor, raiding her hands and shouting, while in the background, a mixture of sand and green acid gas frames the scene. Priya greets the reader with the Hindu way of Namaste, pressing her palms together similarly to a prayer position (2), riding her tiger, which looks at the reader. In contrast, the moon is behind her, creating a powerful composition. In this comic, Dan Goldman, the art creator, combines comic characters with real natural environments used as the main backgrounds of the story: the rainforest where Priya rests, the village, Ahankar’s sanctuary, the beach, etc... Every setting is made of one or several real photographs. When Priya is in the rainforest having rest on page 4, she keeps the reader in the loop of her resilient situation since she was raped some time ago. “Sudden nightmares filled Priya’s sleep, images of the day she was raped. As she regained control of her life, she knew she wanted to help others do the same” (Vohra et al. 4), so even though she was strong enough to get through her traumatic crime and become a heroine. While the comic presents bright, colourful characters, when Priya remembers her trauma, the crime is illustrated inside

pastel thinking balloons. Priya's horror is reported within the vivid illustration of Priya being raped and her crying expression (4).

Rafi, a local villager, suddenly appears looking for Priya's help, telling her she is "known to everyone for helping women find their courage" (Vohra et al. 5), evidencing Priya's power and empowering influence. Rafi explains that he has fallen in love with Anjali, an acid attack victim living in the sanctuary; one night, while she was singing, he heard her and fell in love with Anjali, giving her cause to explain her own story. She was a victim of an acid attack due to her refusal towards a suitor called Raj. She explains her story on page 8 while she is in a round panel in the middle of the page as she looks currently. Four panels illustrate four critical moments of her life until arriving at her current situation sprout from it. "Over the years, I endured dozens of painful operations, on my eyes, nose, ears, throat, lips and hands" (Vohra et al. 8), claims Anjali, exposing the problems of acid attacks, which is not only the crime itself but the permanent survivors' physical trauma and pain. "My results came a month later. I finished first in my class, but my success was ruined. I couldn't get a job. People were frightened of me" (Vohra et al. 9), since society tends to avoid every single person out of the canon and being an acid attack victim is unconcealable. "Ahankar came to meet my family, and said he'd protect me. We'd heard he ran a peaceful home where he took care of girls like me. I felt there was no place for me in the world, so I went with him" (Vohra et al. 9), so when feeling most vulnerable, Ahankar (previously Raj) takes advantage of Anjali's pain and brainwashes her telling her the world is so cruel with acid attack girls. Still, he can help to keep her captive in a supposed sanctuary. "Surrounding the caste is a moa filled with acid spewing from Ahankar's mouth. He is a demon disguised as a benevolent man" (Vohra et al. 11). Although Ahankar is a fat man with the powers of acid in his veins, he avoids outsiders going into his sanctuary, throwing up acid lava from his mouth, as it is illustrated on page 11. With the usage of yellow and green colours, Ahankar is featured as a villain since the beginning. Ahankar tells the women in the castle, "No one can love you! Remember that! Those who say that are fooling you as our sister Anjali was fooled. The outside world is cruel" It destroys those who are weak! It has no place for people like you. You are safe here away from the world in my care" (Vohra et al. 12), so he lies about women undervaluing their self-esteem to make them think they must hide from society. Although the maleficent Ahankar's intentions are clear as crystal in the comic because of their exaggeration when this situation happens in the real world, it might be blurred for

the sufferers to see the original abusive condition they are living, even for society, it might be challenging as well as it was for Anjali's relatives.

Nevertheless, to offer a broad perspective of the story, the background of Ahankar is also depicted when he was Raj, a young man in love with Kusum. Unfortunately, Raj was rejected by Kusum, and her brothers beat him and introduce acid into his mouth, throwing the body into the ocean. Thanks to Kusum's prayers and the intervention of Gods, he transformed into a villain who keeps the acid inside as a power, kills the brothers and kidnaps Kusum, who has been burnt by his acid too. Instead of getting over his trauma, Raj becomes a criminal. The mythological retelling of the Hindu God Shiva, who can create and destroy everything, and the Goddess Parvati, mother of nature, is introduced to help the characters. While God Shiva helps Ahankar to be alive with his powers, Goddess Parvati helps Priya offering her a mirror to reflect people's lives and desires, a moment to analyse themselves and reflect not only what they see, but also think about their condition.

In the middle of the story, when Priya shows the captive women the Machiavellian side of Ahankar, they are not only illustrated with details about their damaged faces, exposing their disfigured faces but they are given their space along the pages to tell their story. Concretely, four women explain the consequences after the attack. One of them says, "I don't want to be part of a world that won't listen to me, that thinks it's my fault that I've been destroyed. I cannot forget how the police kept asking me 'why did the boy throw acid on you? You must have done something'" (Vohra et al. 24). She narrates a patriarchal system in which women are considered guilty victims who deserve violence, justifying the criminal. The woman next to her claims "I was in an abusive relationship, and he felt that to be a man, he had to beat me. When that was not enough..." (Vohra et al. 24), revealing there are many who suffer from gender violence and are silenced in their homes. The woman below her manifests, "when that boy threw acid on me, I lay on the road burning. People threw 30 buckets of water on me and yet when my father came and held me, his shirt got burned. My parents went bankrupt taking care of me" (Vohra et al. 24). She reveals the financial problems (sometimes assumed by the victim's family if she is lucky enough) behind the acid attack due to the recovery treatment it implies and the several operations to continue living and reconstruct the faces. Finally, the last woman who testifies about the violence suffered says, "we all have similar stories. How many do you need to hear? There is nothing for us outside. You cannot understand what we've

been through” (Vohra et al. 24), summarising that all acid attacks are traumatic and have terrible consequences.

Priya uses the mirror Goddess Parvati gave her to make acid attack sufferers understand they have a life outside a castle (their homes). The mirror might be a metaphor for the conscience thinking over the trauma but also for healing the consequences through future hopes. Besides, Priya teaches Ahankar that “controlling others is not strength. Take this mirror. Find your true courage. Show others there is another kind of strength” (Vohra et al. 34) is exposing him to the mirror too, which makes him lose his powers, or allows him to get over his own shocking aggression by other men. In this panel, Priya asks Kusum “are you coming with us, sister” (Vohra et al. 34), introducing the concept of the sorority, a key term vindicated by many of the Indian feminist authors in the comics and graphic novels as a symbol of women strength. Finally, Kusum stays with Ahankar to “show him how to use the mirror of love” (Vohra et al. 34). At the end of the story, the women fund “Mirror of Love Café”, a café and art centre where it is suggested they still struggle against acid attack crimes. Anjali wonders, “do you know that after I got my law degree, we fought a case together? Selling acid is now illegal” (Vohra et al. 35). At the same time, she works in the centre with Rafi. She betrays her validity as a person, forgetting about her physical image.

Priya’s Mirror (2016) offers a different approach to an Indian national problem. The story includes an unconventional dark skin heroine whom Gods help to assist people in achieving gender equality. Priya helps the acid-attack female sufferers and the male sufferer who become a criminal later on. Her magical power might be a metaphor for the consciousness used to recognise a traumatic situation, assimilate it and get over it, becoming resilient instead of a victim. Despite the presence of Priya as the main character and how the comic is organised, the acid attack survivors, the story's true protagonist, transmit a powerful message to society about self-sufficiency and overcoming.

Chapter 7. Sexual Harassment and Gang Rape

7.1. Harassment in Private and Public Spheres in “Asha, Now” (2015) by Hemavathy Guha, “Someday” (2015) by Samidha Gunjal and “Basic Space” (2015) by Kaveri Gopalakrishnan

Gender violence is directly connected to harassment, which is generally considered implicit within society. The main objectives of second-wave feminism, as stated by Gray, included bringing attention to the violence against women that was not publicly acknowledged (154). This included various forms of violence that were disregarded, denied, or downplayed in political discussions, such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, exploitation, and violence inflicted on women by the state (Gray 154). The issue of violence, particularly its relationship to masculinity and power relationships inside families, was essential to the heated arguments that split the British women's liberation movement between 1970s and the 1980s. (Gray 154). It has had many negative implications slowing down the feminist movement and the path to achieving gender equality. One of the most extended problems about reporting sexual harassment is that it can be suffered in a familiar environment or public. In both ways, although the aggressor's environment might be aware of the crime, it is seen as an implicit behaviour and generally used to be covered up by their relatives or known neighbours.

Familiar harassment in India is common since siblings used to sleep in the same bed. However, while “rape or sexual abuse, when committed by a stranger, is often reported by the victim, and she is far more likely to be treated sympathetically, sexual abuse within the family is far less reported, and a victim of incest is rarely heard and even more rarely gets justice” (Guha 110). In “Asha, Now”, the author Hemavathy Guha illustrates “the life story of one such girl which is not entirely fictional, abused by her brother” (Guha 110). This story, unfortunately, is common in India within real families, and normally the victim is silenced because “parents fear for their ‘honour’. Moreover, often dare not take any action against the offending male who enjoys a superior status in the hierarchy about children” (Guha 110). “Asha, Now” provides a sense of depersonalisation, standing out for its spotted homes, and stripped clothes, creating a universal setting for the story. It can happen anywhere, at any time. In addition, this universality is also demonstrated in the lack of faces on the characters, except one of them on page 144, which cruelly shows the sadness and frustration of the girl after the

harassment of her brother. Furthermore, the title sets the story in the present day, when Asha is an adult and wakes up next to her husband after “her recurring nightmare” (panel 1, 111) and starts to remember:

As she lies down again, her mind wanders back to her school days... She is lying on the mattress. She wakes up in the middle of the night. Instinctively, she touches her shirt and finds the buttons open. Her eldest brother is lying beside her, his hand on her breast. Horrified, she pushes him away. She buttons her shirt and turns over (112).

The panel above this narrative line shows Asha’s brother harassing her. Although Asha pushes him aside, she cannot do anything else. However, in the picture, Asha is protecting her sister from the eldest brother with her arm because the three of them sleep together. Another sexual harassment scene happens while Asha has a shower, “suddenly, the door is pushed open, and she sees her brother standing, staring and grinning at her. She screams and shuts the door, weeping with humiliation. Surely, she will complain to father once he comes home” (Guha 113). In panel three above the narrative text, Asha’s brother opens the bathroom door and finds Asha naked, pale, and in a tense, paralysed position after his interruption. Although it is written that Asha was going to tell her father about the situation, in panel 4 (114), she appears crying, covering her face feeling humiliated and frustrated because she is being molested and her family doesn’t take action. The incest is repeated over the years; “Asha, older now, is sleeping in the room with her siblings. The nightly visits recur” (Guha 115), accompanied by Asha and her sister sleeping in the same bedroom and the eldest brother leaving the room after the sexual abuse. As time passes, the father might have passed away: “father is no longer there to protect her. Asha contemplates her life and existence. She vows to escape from all this...” (116). Although the father never took action against Asha’s brother. In addition, the panel above this narrative line shows Asha kneeling on the left and probably a new Asha standing up and deciding to escape from home on the right. Indeed, in the next four panels (117), Asha appears sleeping safely in a women’s hostel, studying alone, making new friends and getting married. After, Asha is illustrated protecting her daughter from her brother with the following narrative line “Has Asha got over her past? She still wakes up with a start in the night and makes sure she is always there to protect her daughter from her uncle” (Guha 118), which indicates the reader Asha still tries to get over her trauma. Still, she has broken the circle of familiar harassment. She is aware of the importance of women’s support, in this case, mother and daughter, similar to the story of

“They Prey” by Aryan where a mother takes care of her daughter while she confronts her rapist. As mentioned by Guha, “there is no place where a victim can reach out to heal this type of trauma. She has to live with it for life. You can file a complaint legally, but many people do not want to go against their brother or father” (appendix).

Besides, Asha shows another way of resilience by protecting her daughter. Furthermore, leaving the male roles aside (Asha’s father and husband) and keeping only the rapist brother gives visibility to the sorority and to the importance of women’s support to abolish patriarchy. Finally, Asha does not need the intervention of a man when she grows to stop sexual harassment since she has enough force to stop her brother.

As stated by Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anne Waldrop, the role of women in Indian social life and within the working sphere might have been used as a might be double-edged sword by politicians since those pro globalisations have demonstrated the relevance of women inside the industry. In contrast, those conservative against globalisation have depicted it as a possible working exploitation. However, their rights are constantly changing thanks to feminist organisations, and much progress has been achieved concerning the equality of their social lives. However, as reported by Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anne Waldrop:

Although the infusion of educated, middle-class women into the nightscape is new, their right to navigate urban, public spaces at night – in other words, to travel like a man – remains constricted at night to work is slowly becoming acceptable in some social circles, but going out at night to hang out at a bar, meet with a boyfriend or simply roam the streets remains unacceptable behaviour for a ‘good girl’. (29)

Indian women play different roles in society depending on their caste. Commensurate Depending on the caste, Veena Bhasin, in all social groups, women have a concrete framework where they develop their occupations, “parental, conjugal, domestic, kin, occupational, community and as an individual” (1). Concerning social life, women's status is submissive. “Despite several economic, political and social changes, women are still far behind. One of the most unflattering statistics concerning India’s girl child shows that the preference for a son runs across rich as well as poor households, educated as well as illiterate families” (Bhasin 1). This perception of the foetus and the wish to have a male baby will be analysed in “That’s Not Fair” by Harini Kannan opens the Indian anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), where the parents are offered a handkerchief to cry when they find out in the sonography of a pregnant mother she is going to have a girl. On the report of Bhasin:

The family structure in India is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal. Patriarchy denotes a culture of power relationship that promotes man's supremacy and women's subjugation. It encompasses institutional endorsement of man's ascendancy within the family and other social structures. It justifies the normative process pertaining to the recognition and sustainability of his dominance in society. (1)

The High-caste women Brahmins abstain from working in the field, undertaking a life indoors and seeking their husband permission to commute alone. High and Upper castes women have further opportunities to have access to higher education where they find confrontations towards their freedom and self-expression. In contrast, in the low castes, women suffer a lack of resources and access to education, which derives in a loss of control of their lives. Unlike upper-caste women, they complement their incomes working in the paddy field or farms. Nevertheless, they still keep the social stigma of polluted women since they work outside the home.

Furthermore, having access to education does not guarantee gender equality outside of home life. As reported by Harold Wilhite in *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India* (2014), "being highly educated had not affected the power balance between men and women in the majority of households (Wilhite). Educated women who challenge this situation are often met with resistance from their partners and senior family members— both men and women. This can be a source of family tensions" (65). Since the industrial revolution and The Independence of India, the nuclear family has been promoted. Upper-class women have reformed their role inside society, and now they actively participate in nuclear households and can work outside the home. Despite this, it is the male figure who makes the last decision. It provokes tension in twenty-first-century homes where, as attested by Harold Wilhite, "women use to negotiate multiple demands [which] affect and are affected by new forms for consumption, beginning with the period in which their families are searching for potential husbands, the negotiation of dowry, and extending into their new lives in the marital household" (65)

There have been many social improvements thanks to activist feminist women's mobilisations and political mediation. However, there are many contradictions surrounding Indian women's social life since the number of upper-caste women who have access to high education is increasing. At the same time, they continue being the shadow of their husband or male figures in their homes, doing the familiar house chores. On the other hand, the vast majority of low-caste women labour outside the home growing crops, which implies their marginalisation, as they are considered polluted women by society. It

might seem they own more freedom, but it is not the case. Also, discomfort with public transport is an issue suffered by women worldwide. In the report of Gekoski et al.:

Worldwide, every day, women are subjected to unwanted sexual behaviours on public transport. These may range from sexual harassment – broadly defined as any unwanted sexual attention including lewd comments, leering, sexual invitations, threats, displaying pornographic material, being followed or pictured, and public masturbation. (4)

Furthermore, this kind of intimidating behaviour is developed almost only by men, and “most literature relating to sexual assault and harassment on public transport concentrates on trains, subways, buses, and trams (Gekoski et al. 4) and in the case of independent Indian comics, this pattern is repeated in “Mumbai Local” by Diti Mistry when an insect (which might be interpreted as an analogy of a strange man) tries to attack the main female character, in “Basic Space” by Kaveri Gopalakrishnan when the female character expresses her anger towards the role she must perform in front of men to establish her boundaries, and in “Someday” by Samidha Gunjal when she just goes out to the street and is harassed by a group of men. The three belong to the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015).

“Asha, Now” deals with the theme of unspoken and ignored harassment, while “Basic Space” addresses the issue of overt and publicly acknowledged harassment and the need for an effective response. In “Basic Space”, the author Kaveri Gopalakrishnan illustrates a story as a response to the personal experiences suffered “when travelling by public transport or even walking down the street” (Gopalakrishnan 120), being forced to have a strong attitude in order to set her boundaries. “Like every single teenage girl, I adopted different behaviour patterns: dressing differently, changing my body language in public, or trying to blend into my surrounding more to avoid curious or aggressive stares in public” (Gopalakrishnan 120), an unnecessary alert situation which causes stress to women turning their lives into survival mode reminding the wild animal instincts, in which there are prey and a predator. “Basic Space” is divided into six chapters which approach a reflection on gender role constructions. Accordant to Gopalakrishnan, the story is inspired by the conversation of fifteen Delhi women of several ages and backgrounds (120).

The first one is called “Chapter one: Drawing the Line”, similar to the title of the whole book. There are three panels without frames (121), where the female main character draws a line on the floor to establish her space (1-2). In the third panel, the

character is drawn standing up surrounded by arrows which describe her defence position when she is in public, “blank/stern face, straight back, stiff arms, battle stance bag over chest” (121). In the next narrative line, she tells the reader, “it keeps me safe, and tells people where my space beings” (panel 4, 121), while the figure is challenging (but sweating) looking at a suspicious man showing her stern face. Then the main character asks, “but what is basic space?” (Gopalakrishnan 121), introducing the concept of basic space and the story itself.

In chapter two, entitled “keeping the line, straight everybody” (Gopalakrishnan 122) is said in a speech balloon the main character clears up “what women.... want?” (122), which sets the question of why women have to create barriers every time they are in a public space. The following question opens a discussion in the strips “I asked 18 women of different ages and from various backgrounds: what ‘lines’ do you draw, as a woman?” (122). There are several answers encapsulated in panels 7-17, where the author illustrates the sight of a woman who looks angrier in the market than at home (panels 7-8, 122), a female wrist wearing pins as a bracelet to make them sounds just in case of emergency (learnt from her mother) (panels 9-10, 122), a woman using a *dupatta* (a traditional shawl worn by women in India) for self-defence at night who recognises she goes out although there are still rapes (11-12, 122), a woman being molested by a relative (14, 123), a woman feeling like a *goonda* (a hired criminal) (15, 123), and finally a woman with her daughter hidden in the women’s coach protecting her.

In “chapter 3: making a big circle (I am not garbage)” (Gopalakrishnan 124), the female character surfing the net clarifies tries to mock the magazine (clarifying women are not garbage in the title). The author illustrates the pieces of advice from a teenage magazine which recommends that women imagine themselves covered by a garbage bag (panels 18- 21, 124) to establish their personal space in public. However, the main character complains, “but wait! I’m not garbage!” (Gopalakrishnan 124), appearing next to organic street rubbish being ignored by a taxi (panel 21, 124).

In the fourth chapter, “my cat is not me: my cat has some real boundaries and teaches me a lesson” (Gopalakrishnan 125), the author illustrates an analogy between the situation happening with women and public transport and at the same time, raises awareness about the importance of taking care of animals. Within panels 22 to 25, a girl is trying to catch a cat, and the pet escapes from her, jumping on the floor and establishing its boundaries.

In the fifth chapter, “in a completely fantastical scenario: imagine, women” (Gopalakrishnan 126), the author deconstructs gender roles and illustrates several situations starred by women without following the conventional behaviour society dictates them: a woman wearing no accessories but just a flower (panel 27), a woman walking dressed up as she wants (panel 28), a woman running without worrying about her breast (panel 29), a woman lying down in the grass peacefully (panel 30), a woman spreading her legs sitting down in a bench (panel 31), a woman without a bra at work (panel 32), a naked woman eating an ice-cream in Delhi (panel 33), a girl playing and getting dirty with the mud (panel 34), and a woman scratching in public (panel 35). Most of these situations are conventionally developed by men in real life. However, the author must encourage women to go through an imaginary world to feel free, as men feel daily. In the final chapter, “eraser”, she remembers, “our heroine doesn’t have any answers, but this method sure does keep everyone away” (Gopalakrishnan 128), referring to the initial defence position. However, Gopalakrishnan empowers the heroine, erasing the boundaries written on the floor and leaving her free, at least as a fictional character (panels 39-40).

“Someday” by Samidha Gunjal is the last comic of the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), which approaches street harassment through a woman who becomes Kali. As explained by Gunjal, “Kali is a Hindu goddess associated with Shakti, the force of divine female energy. Kali is the fierce avatar of the goddess Durga who, in need of help, summons Kali to combat demons” (148). Transforming the female main character into Kali gives her the power to meet justice towards the male gang leaping on her. Street harassment “is a daily reality for most women in India” (Gunjal), and also worldwide, harming women’s right and their freedom, making them challenging to develop their daily lives outdoors. However, Gunjal retells Kali to give her power to the main character to end up sexual abuse from the roots, making the frustrating feelings of women towards aggressors real.

“Someday” is characterised by its lack of dialogue. There are some onomatopoeia balloons in panel 7, but the rest is without dialogue. Apart from that, another main feature of “Someday” are that, as far as the story moves forward, the panels take up a total of pages or even two pages in order to instil awareness in the reader and recreate the sock felt by female victims in sexual harassment situations. In addition, Gunjal awards a magic power to the main female character, reflecting the desires many victims have after having

lived these harassing encounters when they remember the horrible situation and think they could have done something else if they had had the force or somebody else with them.

In the beginning, the floor of her home is illustrated (panel 1, 189) with a cup of coffee, a cigarette, a couple of books, a pencil and pattern tiles. The female protagonist is having a shower peacefully (panels 2-4) and getting ready to leave home. She feels so glad and sure when she looks at her reflection in the mirror. The setting is calm (panel 5, 150) on her way to town. However, the environment changes (panel 6, 150) when she reaches a ricksha, and eleven men in the street are looking at her, smiling, whistling, and showing their tongues, even the man driving the vehicle. Men of all ages continue bothering her (panel 7, 151). Instead of speaking, they make sounds, indicating they are such as zombies, non-thinking creatures, pointing at her, and even one of them takes a piece of fruit and makes an analogy between eating fruit and eating the woman. She goes down the street, ignoring men, although they still attempt to call her attention (panel 8, 151). On the wall behind her is a poster with a naked woman and the word “murder” below, indicating what will happen. The buildings (panel 9, 152) disappear, and the background turns black while men get closer, harassing her. In panel 10, Gunjal recreates an intimidating and criminal scene step-by-step, illustrating the men’s size as double, while the woman’s size is half, leaving her in the middle of a circle. The woman is naked, just covered by her handbag, while the men’s clothes are breaking due to their growing or just disappearing, leaving them naked. At this point, men are becoming monsters.

Then, in panel 11, men appear white and bold as a mixture of monsters and ghosts, their genitals are exposed, and they are wiggling their arms. The background is black, and the main female character is so small, inside a light circle naked without her handbag. Subsequently, the men's gang approach her (panel 12, 153), creating a circle blocking her, depicting a street gang rape. Unfortunately, most of the real stories would finish at this point, with a dead female or a lifelong trauma, although the Gunjal turns the tables (panel 13, 154) when she draws rays of light coming up from the inside of the circle, making the monsters wiggle their bodies from top to bottom. Suddenly, the monsters blow up (panel 14, 155), their bodies are quartered in the air, and the main character has become Kali goddess, with a black body and four arms and hands, showing their tongue, imitating real paintings of the Hindu Goddess, depicted in the same way but in blue. Afterwards, Kali is holding a man’s head, a bowl, and a sickle, leaving one hand free (panel 15, 157),

wearing a skulls collar, and long dark hair, stepping on a man, recreating the famous painting of *Samhara Kali 1910* by Indian painter and artist Raja Ravi Varma. The buildings start to emerge in the background, and monsters try to escape while some turn into scared men again. Panel 15 is the only one that takes up two pages, showing the female power against adversity. Finally, the main character appears sitting down on a bench (panel 16, 158), keeping her Kali avatar, holding her hand, a cup of coffee, and a cigarette and winking at the reader, evidencing the fact that a woman is multitasking and can go through all sort of troubles. The situation illustrated in “Someday” (2015) depicts the story of a girl as the main character within a patriarchal society where men molest her. Accordant with Gunjal:

Females are always objectified and considered a liability. But at the same time, all our goddesses summons Rudra Avatar in a time of injustice or war. Devi and Kali are two sides of the same coin, and they coexist in every female. While nurturing the female kid, they only focus on evoking Devi with exemplary behaviour and never encourage them to confront the Kali part. (318)

In the story, the woman doesn't need any speech balloon to show how men make her feel. Her facial gestures express her fear, emotions, and in the end, the divine force. On the other hand, the only speech balloons appearing are onomatopoeias said by men suggesting men might lose their reason when they see a woman. Even having their minds to think about their acts, they don't use them, transforming them into primitive animals who support each other as pride, a situation comparable to the bamboo ceiling where they conceal each other, creating an unbreakable net for women.

7.2. Gang Rape and the Animal Analogy in “The Prey” (2015) by Neelima P. Aryan

In India, gang rape is a severe problem, “according to Crime Records Bureau crimes like burglary, arson etc. have been decreased while crimes like murder, sex abuse, gang rape etc. have been increased” (Sathyadevan et al. 1), being this one of the high numbers of gang rape reports high have surfaced in recent years. Furthermore, there is evidence that the rate of gang rape in India is increasing, based on John, due to the success of the struggle through social media against sexual harassment promoted by the #MeToo movement by Tarana Burke:

The movement rapidly spread in our country since almost all women have been victims in one way or the other in the past verbal, physical, mental or sexual. “Eve-teasing” is quite common in India and almost every woman has been either “bumped” into or groped about while travelling on public transport or walking down the streets. It has become quite normal that sometimes girls do not even

recognize it as a kind of harassment. The hashtag was quickly linked to the 2012 Delhi gang rape case and became popular in the wake of sexual assaults during New Year Celebrations, in 2018. (29)

The country's cultural attitudes toward women contribute to gang rape in India since they are seen as second-class citizens in many parts of India. Some males believe that they can take advantage of women and treat them aggressively because of this. The country's economic position is another aspect that may add to the problem of gang rape in India. India is a developing country where much of the population lives in poverty. This can result in desperation and criminal activity. India's gang rape problem could be related to the country's political position. There has been an increase in religious and ethnic tensions in India in recent years. Some males may believe that they may use rape as a weapon against women from other communities as a result of this.

The story "The Prey" by Neelima P. Aryan is included in the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) is a narrative denouncing the fear gang rape victims suffer, particularly in Kerala, where the story is set and where the rate of sexual abuse against women is high, indeed "the track record of Kerala, in recent years, is far from gladdening. Crimes against women, from eve-teasing and molestation to gang rapes and murder, are disturbingly frequent. Instances of suicides and dowry deaths are multiplying" (Ramachandran 109). In fact, as claimed by John, "in Kerala, the [#MeToo] hash tag was well received. Contrary to the usual "prestige- silence" observed by Malayalee women, even when brutally treated, many stepped out of their traditional upbringing to reveal that they were harassed". Neelima illustrates the original story of her mother Prasanna Aryan 'Prayan' entitled *Pennezhuthu* in Malayan, which means 'a woman's writing' as a response to the debate of categorising women's literature, a fact that might undervalue the quality of the body of work produced by women (Aryan 54). In the words of Ramachandran, "apart from general categorizations like the active male and the passive female and the all too common identification of the female with nature and the male with culture, role models like the all-suffering mother, the vamp, the girl-next-door and so on, are the typical example of the stereotypes through which femininity is sought to be challenged" (118), so in this sense, from an eco-feminist approach, "The Prey" connects the female characters and the strength of nature while transforming these ancient stereotypes and associations between women and the natural world turning them over, empowering the relationship between the mother and daughter and bringing them to light with the capacity of providing justice within society.

On the other hand, as another way of reinforcing the new relationship between women and nature, when focusing on the male character, the author represents it directly associated with two wild animals; a savage and brutal eagle attacking and a kind of wolf. Women are separated from being Mother India or *Bharat Mata* (Chatterjee, Roche) anymore, opening the way to the exhibition of the patriarchal brutality towards the resilient female. The need for a platform for the expression and denouncing the sexist and violent behaviour is crucial to increase the “possibilities of acknowledging and promoting feminist intellectual work as an important aspect of activism. Our suspicions regarding the masculinity of social theory must not lead to a retreat; rather, it ought to work as critical armour in our efforts to use it for feminist purposes” (Devika and Sukumar 4473), so the message of “The Prey” accomplishes the creation of this feminist space throughout literature, to discuss and evince the sexist injustices against women and a vulnerable part of the population focusing on the resilience through the expression of trauma.

The story opens with the word “prey” in capital letters, emphasising the question of who or what the prey is (55). The second panel shows a hairy hand cutting a piece of meat so perhaps it is the mother who cuts the steak or, as said by Dawson Varughese, although “this detail seems incidental at this point in the story, as we move through the panels, we come to understand that ‘male’ as a ‘threatening’ presence is depicted through this trope – the tight, detailed patterning of hair, black on white” (255). In the third panel, the female hands of the main character are holding half of the steak in the Kerala newspapers. Both of her wrists are surrounded by a couple of Bangles, the typical Indian bracelets, a symbol present throughout the story; the jewellery worn by both female characters will become evidence of their culture and tradition and identity.

After the girl is carrying a trap (panel 4), apparently determined to hunt. The next panel takes up the whole page (56). In this illustration, there are several levels with a sense of depth. In the foreground, their home’s wall is drawn with the traditional tools used to cook and survive in a rural area, hanging on it. These domestic furnishings, particularly the sickle, implicitly command respect, stronghold, and independence because they own the necessary staff to hunt and provide for themselves. Behind the door, the reader can observe the mother framing the illustration with her hands on her hips with a perspective of her from the back, saying, “what is this girl up to?” (56), a speech balloon that connects the reader, who is looking the scene from the indoors of the home, with the

background which is the centre of the stage and contains the daughter, sitting on the grass and waiting.

Beyond the drawing, the trees surround the image giving a sense of movement behind them. The girl prepares a trap with half of the steak on it while her dog smells it, coming back to its sleeping mood, presenting a calm and carefree behaviour, as if it knew there is no real danger the female protagonist could not afford (panels 6-8, 57). The mother tells off the daughter questioning why she is offering food to the person who stole her some chicks (57), although the daughter asks for her silence while she is waiting for the criminal to reappear. On the next page (58), the reader is translated to an aerial view, where the criminal appears as an eagle creeping up on the family discussion. The mother expresses that the daughter is mad since she might be attracting criminal attention to attack them again (panel 11). Still, the girl asks the mother to silence again, seeming absolutely convinced about what she is doing (panel 12). Then, the eagle is drawn in detail, clapping eyes on the girl, and showing the calm of the dog sleeping in between panels 13-17 (59).

However, the savageness of the eagle's eyes and a man's eyes is superimposed, blurring the wild and human instincts in panels 17 and 18 (59-60). As mentioned by Dawson Varughese (2018) "this exposure of hairy skin as the man hitches up the lungi is both a blatant disregard for social etiquette and a display of predatory behaviour" (258), creating an analogy between the wildness of both creatures, not only through their overbearing attitude but also due to their furry skin. Moreover, the man appears with the hips and legs of a wild bushy animal as if he couldn't control his sexual part (panel 20), becoming more evident in panel 21 where it is scratching its lower back while gazing at the girl in front of it and cleaning his teeth with a stick-on panel 22, preparing itself to attack, maybe after having committed a previous crime. The tension continues for the next three pages, where the eagle leaps into the trap. The author draws its airy path after several rounds (61), finishing in panel 29 with the eagle trapped by the trap and the feathers floating in the gutters (62-63).

The story finishes with an illustration (65) that perfectly complements the one described on page 56, but with the opposite perspective. In the middle of the illustration (65), the daughter stands up, with her hands on her hips. The reader can see the female characters' faces smiling, having control of the situation, and turning the situation around: the prey becomes the hunter, imparting justice to the wild rapist. Behind the girl, the

mother pluralises the victory of feminism defeating patriarchy, saying, “Oh! Girls these days”, raising awareness of the story’s activist moral of the women's movement’s strength. Finally, in the background, nature stays behind, symbolising the importance of women independently of their influence and connection with them.

Chapter 8. Alternative Sexualities in *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil

The main character starring, *Kari* also suffers discrimination, but this time it is due to the fact of having an alternative identity and being lesbian and independent. *Kari* (2008) is a coming-of-age graphic novel about a young woman living in Mumbai. The representation of different gender constructions characterises her literary work and, particularly in *Kari* (2008) she depicts a queer heroine and her loving and friendly relationships through her peculiar visual style drawn with charcoal paint, aquarelles, pencils, crayons and text. The graphic novel is divided into eighteen chapters. The author proposes unusual characters to give visibility to several collectives who go unnoticed within the ideology promoted by neo-Hinduism. The author switches between fiction and reality. The illustrations and writing style of the graphic novel make the book a piece of art. Furthermore, the author presents both black and white and colourful panels, where she highlights the nature of Kari's love and identity through flowers and raw strips, as well as her darkness and obscure environment, which makes the book a mature and adult literary work. In each panel, Amruta presents intense situations in which Kari deconstructs herself in front of the reader, showing her unconventional thoughts and feelings, which became difficult to assimilate into society.

“Following colonial rule and nationalist attempts to reform Indic practices and texts in conformity with Victorian ideals, such debates about same-sex relations and terms used for them were stifled or went underground” (Vanita 246), considering homosexual topics as a taboo or unconventional issue not considered in normative literature. However, “Marxist, socialist, feminist, national liberation, civil rights, dalits, ecological and gay and lesbian movements have been born. The question of integrating these creative but diffuse and potentially divisive forces into the political mainstream has been part of the agency of the Left during the last decades” (Sherry 2228). All these groups have struggled against the Indian nationalist structure imposed within society, in which the concept of identity was promoted in relation to *Hindutva* and patriarchy. Nevertheless, in the words of Sherry:

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic, it gives one a sense of personal location, the stable core to one's complex involvement with others. In the modern world, these notions have become especially complex and confusing.

Each one of us lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities which battle within us for allegiance, as man or woman, upper-class or dalit, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled. (2228)

Due to the conservative canon imposed in India, it is hard to introduce homosexual literature within conventional living spaces such as the educative system or media. For instance, concerning lesbian literature, “the real anxiety and fear is that lesbian desire and lesbian relationships would remove patriarchal control and seek greater gender parity in the nation, both in terms of women’s access to the paid public sphere and the threat to the primacy of male desire” (Nair 3).

Focusing on the main character from *Kari* (2008), which entitles its own graphic novel, “we hear a story of a protagonist who happens to be lesbian rather than a story of what it means to be lesbian [...], we learn about her special relationship with Ruth, her lover, and see the different (positive) reactions of her social environment to her homosexuality” (Sarma 5). Indeed, the opening chapter of the novel, called ‘*The double suicide*’ introduces, within the fictional frame, a homage to the painting *Las Dos Fridas*, in which Kari and Ruth, the two girls couple, who has a love relationship, are committing suicide through the cord cut, which connects their hearts (panel 2, 3). In *Las Dos Fridas*, which Frida Kahlo painted after her long-time boyfriend, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera abandoned her, it can be seen two perspectives of the author; one of whom Diego rejects, whose heart is bursting and bleeding her to death, and the other of whom he embraces, whose heart is beating. Ruth and Kari's attempt to end their lives could be interpreted as a metaphor for a heart-breaking breakup. Furthermore, given the homage to Kahlo's picture, Kari and Ruth's suicide could signify the same person's death, given their intense love relationship. In *Kari*, the main character is on the right representing a loved and respected woman, and Ruth is on the left, holding some scissors, after having cut the cord and abandoned Kari. Amruta explains the end of love metaphorically through the act of suicide. Death will also be present in the novel, connected with the love relationships and identity of the characters.

After that, the background behind the drama of panel two is exposed on panel 3 (4), in which Ruth is depicted at the top of a roof, holding a mobile phone, and declaring her love to Kari. The decayed dark building where Ruth seems to be crying due to the thin and large charcoal lines that drop down it. In the narrative line below panel 3, Kari describes how the two girls declare their love feelings to each other via mobile phone before Ruth jumps off from the building, “I am the one loved her most in the world too”

(Patil 4). On the other hand, Ruth and Kari both jump from their separate buildings as a metaphor for their decision to call off their romance. Amruta then strategically illustrates the two women's fates across panels 6-8 (7-8), illustrating the continuance of their lives. That's to say; they do not really die but appear in new separated lives remembering and missing their love relationship. Kari tries to identify herself in the city of Mumbai since she lands in a sewer, where she must pick up the pieces of her life and move on, while Ruth lands in a safety net beneath her building, hops on a plane to a strange place, and starts a family. The character of Ruth has an unhappy grimace, flying to a place to see her new family composed of her husband and a child. Although Kari longs for Ruth, she continues experimenting with her sexual identity with other women throughout the novel.

After the split up of the relationship, Kari shelters in her working life as it is described in the second chapter, '*The Fairytale Hair*', whose name comes from an advertisement Kari and her trainee art director Lazarus (panel 19, 13) must promote for their ad agency. Lazarus compares Kari with a fox (panel 15, 12) in order to encourage her to think about a promotional campaign for the hair product. At the same time, Kari transfers the wild animal metaphor to her love memories, in which she is a fox in the cold of the snow (panels 15-18) and "the further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran – always on the horizon" (Patil 12) being Ruth the character of the princess chasing after Kari. This part is significant since the panels are in colour, highlighting the importance and passion of the past love relationship. In the depiction of Kari's pain, she says: "every day I wonder into the strange backyards and junk heaps and miraculously find my way out and back to work or home again" (Patil 14), accompanied by her crying eyes involved the clouds of her dreams imagining Ruth with a baby "while I sleep, Ruth must be striding towards a flame-coloured calling", and herself as a skeleton in a suit (panel 23, 14).

The name of the third chapter is '*Crystal Palace*', making a reference to the shared flat where Kari and her roomies live. The splendid alias of the flat might be a reference to the marvellous situations lived within its wall, together with the fragility of the love relationships developed there. The Crystal Palace is compared to Kari's "chorus" (Patil 16), a comfort zone where the protagonist feels secure. The meaning of the flat for Kari is illustrated on panel 24 (16), a colourful collage with princesses dancing surrounded by jewellery. The flat blueprint is drawn (panel 25, 17) to contextualise where Kari is in mourning. While the other roomies spend time together (panels 26 and 27) in intimate relations, Kari has to put up with them on the other side of the bookshelf which separates

the beds in each of the rooms, to the extent of saying, “Lord have mercy of the uncoupled” (panel 28, 17). Through this kind of situation, Patil switches from fiction to reality since she brings real situations the reader might have experienced when sharing a flat to the novel. Kari’s desire to have a deeper relationship with her female roommates remains in the concept of sorority illustrated in “Mumbai Local” by Diti Mistry and “The Poet, Sharmila” by Ita Mehrotra, as Kari says, “I had expected walk-in sisterhood. Head massages and face packs and fusion, end-of-the-day comparing of notes. This Little warbling women camaraderie is a badge that must be painstakingly earned” (Patil 18). Unlike men, women take more intricate work to create that kind of supportive relationship. Kari shouts that she made some soup for her roomies and asks if they would like some, but they reject the proposal (panels 29-31). Kari finds some comfort in her weekly call to her mother outside her home, in a telephone booth, although she only listens to her without the option of replying (panel 33, 20). The connection with her mother is so crucial for her, as she says, “the only person who always wants to talk to me is Mamma. Every Friday, at 10 p.m., is the long call home. Mamma talks, and I listen. When I get back home, the silence has teeth again. My bed feels as large as a football field” (Patil 21). This is the narrative line for panel 33, which is in colour and takes up two sides of the paper due to its sensitive importance. Coming back to her flat mates, their depiction also faces an unconventional construction of relationships since “Zap, Billo’s boyfriend, is Delna’s ex. Orgo, Delna’s boyfriend, is Billo’s ex.” (Patil 22), doing crosswise couples a close-nit for Kari. Furthermore, Billo and Delna are two victims of gender violence, a context which again connects the story directly to the reality of many Indian children who have to escape from home or grow up in a violent atmosphere. Afterwards, the author introduces a reference to *The Little White Bird* (1902) by J. M. Barrie, who introduced the myth of Peter Pan and Wendy, claiming “although I am not part of the organism [referring to the two love couples], they like me well enough. I am non-threatening and non-intrusive. And women of the world adore tousled boygirls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan. The more my roommates grow to like me, the more vehemently they dislike Ruth” (Patil 23). In this paragraph, the term “boygirls” is used to describe Kari; it is a concept similar to genderfluid, in which a person sometimes feels identified as a woman or as a man. In addition, this paragraph also opens a new remembering of Ruth and the time spent with her in the flat. Kari narrates, “Ruth inhabited Crystal Palace only when the princesses were out a-dancing” (Patil 25), a poetic

description of the situation in the flat concerning her roommates and her love. Along panels 38 - 42 (25-26), there is a naive representation of Ruth's behaviour towards Kari and Kari's plenty of admiration for her partner, leaving a space for an alternative gender construction in Indian literature.

In a flashback "to when I first came to smog city" (Patil 28), the author describes how Kari partially reveals to her parents that she was meeting another girl since she shows them what her roommates are and the presence of Ruth in her close circle. That is the reason why the fourth chapter is called '*The Visitations*' because it illustrates and depicts the arrival of Kari in Mumbai and how her parents come to the Crystal Palace to catch sight of Kari's lifestyle. As Kari relates, "my parents visited Crystal Palace once. Not long after I fell into Ruth. The chorus was affable, but they had forgotten how to be appropriate" (Patil 28), making a reference to the opposition of her parents to her lesbian relationship, that's why they are visitors or guests in the Crystal Palace. Furthermore, when Mamma and Baba meet Kari's roommates, they find their open-mindedness strange due to their conservative education (panels 45-46, 28). As Kari says, "from the on, everything is downhill. In 1.5 seconds, Mamma's eagle eye takes in a braless dress, a lit cigarette, and the location of the young man's head in Delna's lap. In the next three days, she takes in other things as well" (Patil 29). However, Mamma becomes even more brutal and harsher, expressing her repudiation towards Kari and Ruth's love relationship by saying through some speech balloons: "why does this Ruth call so often? You made a best friend so quickly? When a husband comes along, best friends become nobodies. You don't [want a husband]. She will" (Patil 29). This way of disapproving of a love relationship is based on actual facts since it is frequent to find parents disappointed with their daughter's relationship. Since Kari's parents repudiate her lifestyle, she decided to distract them "with movie outings and cuisines that they are unfamiliar with and don't care for" (Patil 30), as well as any son or daughter would do in order to avoid arguments during their parent's visit. Despite all her efforts, "the call [of disapproval] comes two days later. Mamma's concern has percolated into complete hysteria. I am glad that the assault happened in the form of a dismembered voice. 'This is not how I raised you', says Mamma. 'Of all the people in such a big city, you pick the smut and the degenerates' (Patil 31). This reaction proves a cultural clash between two generations, the conservative and the progressive or modernised, at least more open-minded. Kari replies by explaining to her mother her life perspective within the telephone box on panels 52-54 (31); "what

you call smut is someone else's ache and reality, Mamma. Hm? No, I am not doing drugs, Mamma. This city has made a boatman of me" (Patil 31). In this point, the author illustrates Kari's situation through panels 55-62, with Kari looking at water and the sewer where she was on her arrival to the city, as Kari relates, "forgot to mention. The day I hauled myself out of the sewer – the day of the double suicide –I promised the water I'd return her favour. That I'd unclog her sewers when she couldn't breathe- I earned me a boat that night. As a boatman, you learn to row clean through the darkest water" (Patil 31). Kari felt like someone within a sewer, which might be the trauma of being rejected by her family, who, due to water, could unclog her sewer. That boat offered to Kari might be the city of Mumbai or even her self-esteem. In the end, on panel 62 (34), she appears in the shower looking at the dropping water, running to the waste pipe, which she calls "the mother bog" (Patil 34).

The concept of dead actively appears in chapter fifth, entitled '*Angel on the Cornice*', where Angel is introduced as "the brand manager of the client's end" (Patil 36) by Lazarus. Her dying condition (evident due to the shorn of all her because of the chemo) makes Kari feel "a potent connection as first love" (Patil 36), which might show the innate supportive empathy of the main character. As reported by Nayar:

Kari, it is suggested, is partly in love with Angel, dying of cancer and shorn of all hair due to her chemo, although, Kari admits, it might have been Angel's 'dying [she] was drawn to' (38). It is Angel's emaciated and rapidly dying body that Kari seems drawn to. Death and the 'actively dying person', as Kari terms Angel (36), are what interest the former in life. Kari is Angel's boatman, designated to ferry her across when she is about to die (40). Whether this role is assigned to Kari because she essentially escaped death, Patil leaves unclear. Later Kari is present when Angel dies (102), as the boatman who is around when the last breath leaves the body. (65)

However, Kari is identified by the author as a boatman before meeting Angel, a person who has created her own ship, drifting in the water of Mumbai, and trying to survive after the loss of her love so the connection she feels with Angel might also have been provoked after the recovery of her own love suicide. Moreover, when Kari visits Angel to care for her at least for a talk, Angel stops her tracks, clearing her mind about any possible Kari's love feeling towards her, "I don't know why you are here, but you should know two things. One, I am bald because I am sick, not because I am butch. And two, all that I own will soon be gone on hospital bills" (Patil 38). So, supporting both perspectives, Angel asks Kari on panel 76, "you have a sign above your head that says 'boatman. People who are about to kick the bucket will be drawn to you in hordes. You

must know, though – once you opt in, you can't opt out. Once a boatman, always a boatman. Why didn't you just choose to play with pretty boys instead?" (Patil 40). This quotation plays with the metaphor of the boatman as a man who guides the souls and a male person who tries to survive since Kari breaks gender constructions.

On her way home, on the underground, after the conversation between the two characters, Kari reflects on how society behaves concerning visible strangers' problems and the indifference to other people, "everyone guards their sanity against the grief of strangers. We see a dismembered body on the tracks, but after the first gasp, no one utters a word" (Patil 42). On panel 80 (42) there is a lady on the underground with a highlighted eye bruise and burst lips, a victim of a beating, ignored by a silent society, "the Airlines lady who travels in the same compartment as us day after day, has bruises on her arms and face today and her eyes keep welling, but no one asks her why. Our eyes dart towards her, but we go back to travelling in too much proximity. Two inches from one other and expressionless" (Patil 42). It might be a critique of real situations happening on public transport and the social non-action in relation to gender violence.

The yearning and reflection for the past love are beautifully depicted through poetic lines and bloody illustrations of Ruth among a drop of roses (panel 94, 49), doubtlessly a same-sex desire which does not appear in traditional literature. This reflection in chapter sixth, called '*The Snow Glove*', gives rise to Kari showing her wings tattoo on her back to Angel while she remembers her past love (panel 95 50). This situation suggests that Kari and Angel continue getting to know each other with the passing of time. In point of fact, in chapter seventh, '*The Ark*', Kari visits Angel, and they speak about Kari's desire for a strange girl she saw in the street while she was on her way on an autorickshaw. The story happened in with our and floods as a framework, as in the Bible, even Kari narrates, "are we on the verge of some biblical levelling of sin by water?" (Patil 52). The graphic novel contains Christian references, from the characters' names to the recreation of biblical scenes. Also, the natural element of water is an essential character of the story, a metaphor for Kari. In this chapter, Angel again verbalises Kari's desire for other women, referring to the one she met last night "you should have given her a lift. Else by the time you change your mind, no one will want to play alone" (Patil 55). Angel and Kari interpret a romantic scene while they are having a cup of coffee, although Kari decides to let it pass, as she narrates, "there passed between us a moment when I could have drowned in tenderness, walked over and kissed her. But Angel's no

lap cat, and neither am I. I think we were both grateful that we let the moment pass” (Patil 56). It might show the common sense and natural root of the friendship between Angel and Kari, the maximum splendour of respect between two people caring about the other.

The eighth chapter, ‘*Somokescreen*’ is based on the recreation of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. Patil illustrates on panel 104 (58-59) a table where the three women of the Crystal Palace gather to share their living experiences, letting out their feelings and emotions without the male presence of their boyfriends Zap and Orgo. The biblical scene is encircled by the smoke of Delna’s cigarettes. The absence of the men allows Delna and Billo to act free and natural with their own bodies and desires instead of taking care of their partner’s comfort; “today is one of those rare hearty suppers at Crystal Palace – without Orgo and Zap attached to the girls’ body parts. I love it when the boys aren’t around. The girls are a lot cheerier and a lot more interested in one another. [...] On such days, the conversation wanders along a familiar track” (Patil 58). In this way, Kari claims the importance of women’s freedom and inner space in order to develop themselves as independent individuals. On the other hand, “the other thing that happens during these suppers is that the girls mother me and shamelessly flirt with me in turns” (Patil 58), indeed on panels 105-107 (59) on the right side of the narrative line, Delna and Billo says, “Kari is so sweet! Handsome and loyal. I want a husband like Kari!” (Patil 59).

Kari’s female flatmates innocently flirt with her, leaving their minds, thoughts, and sexuality free. The expression of sex through these narrative lines and panels is considered as opposed to the traditional neo-nationalist perspective of social relationships among women. Including *Hindutva*, these patriarchal ideologies do not consider alternative gender constructions, so the author represents how two independent women naturally attempt to develop their sexual desires with the same sex, despite having been depicted previously as heterosexual. However, it is considered to be against *Hindutva* ideology which “is trying hard to revive the traditional value system that keeps women in their ‘proper place’ [...], nurtures the concept of patriarchy and ignores the human dignity of women” (Mendonca 58). At the end of this chapter, the main character appears naked in front of a mirror on panel 108 and wonders how society hopes people behave according to the traditional gender roles. Kari leaves clear that “it is not that I have a bad relationship with the mirror. On the contrary, I think mirrors are splendid, shiny things that make great collectables” (Patil 60)”, even though she has a healthy relationship with my own body it seems society, represented in this case by her two flatmates, want her to be within the

female constructed role; “the problem is, I don’t know what they are trying to tell me. These things can be troubling. The girls are outside the door telling me to wear kohl, and here I am wondering why I am not looking like Sean Penn today” (Patil 60). With this reference to the actor, primarily due to her physical appearance and haircut, Kari reasserts her personality in front of the reader, who is the mirror, feeling comfortable with her queer genre construction.

The tone changes in the ninth chapter, ‘*Secret Lives of Fruit*’ where the story focuses on two unlike topics, gender violence and the erotic fantasies within Kari’s imagination. When Kari arrives home, she finds Delna lying on the floor, devastated and answering rudely to Kari’s questions (panel 109, 62). As Kari narrates, “turns out that Delna wants to dump Orgo and marry her twenty-seven-year-old boss. Of course, I cannot let that pass without due investigation” (Patil 62), so it might seem Delna is involved in a sort of arranged marriage since she is shattered overnight due to her apparent decision of marry another man. In this line, on panels 110-112, Kari asks her, “Does he sit with his things wide apart? Is the family dog always tied? Does he lose his temper with waiters?” (Patil 62). In the illustrations, Kari feels extremely worried about Delna’s confession and expresses her mistrust of her future groom. Later on, Billo’s problems appear on panels 113-116, when Zap overwhelms her trying to force her to do something she does not want to, as Kari narrates, “about three times a week, Zap grovels at the foot of her bed. Men seem to like their women sulky and demanding. They routinely take on projects too hot for them to handle. And then they stop by for simplistic advice from girls who never learnt to play” (Patil 63).

On the other hand, the second part of the ninth chapter depicts the erotic side of Kari in her office when she hears the name of Angel’s replacement, Susan Lush. The author plays with the term lush since it can be a surname, but it also means abundant. Both Kari and Lazarus fantasise about the name of the new NYC head office, as Kari says: “can you see her the way I do? Susan, Lush against watermelon walls, Susan, Lush against Grecian blue or white. Susan, Lush and tan on a bone-white beach. Susan, Lush and succulent, all salt, all sun. In my secret mind, the shiny lady on Lazarus’s soft board is Susan Lush” (Patil 64).

In this way, the author totally deconstructs Kari’s gender, giving her many traditionally considered both male and female characteristics, such as her capacity to express her erotic side in front of the reader, providing this action with spontaneity and

rejecting literary taboos. This atmosphere is broadened with the Fairytale Hair audition held in the company. On panels 118-120, there are several models waiting in the agency, and their photographs are illustrated with tight-fitting clothes, and some of them wear underwear. Kari reflects, “if hair-product audition equals so much cleavage, lingerie audition equals what? (Patil 65). After the meeting Lazarus, Angel and Kari have, they decide to go to Angel’s home to have some fruit. Here is when Kari describes a suggestive comparison between fruit and women. Fruit is drawn on panels 121-125 held in Kari’s hand while she narrates, “I play with fruit that the girls and I are too broke to buy. [...] There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. [...] A fruit lingers on your fingertips with unfruitlike insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. [...] There, I said it again: Lush” (Patil 66). The narration becomes poetry transforming Kari’s thoughts into metaphors to depict her inner world.

The eleventh chapter, called ‘*The Vigil*’, starts with Ruth’s sexually explicit remembering. In the beginning, Kari past to a sort of romantic cinema (panels 126-127); “this is the place where Ruth passed by me for the first time in my life” (Patil 68). Then there is a sight encounter between Kari and Ruth on panel 128 with straight lines at the background, the lines turn into curves on panel 129, and finally, they turn into waves behind a sexual practice on panel 130 between the couple. As Kari narrates, “whatever laws have to be broken, the first few seconds suffice. After that, everything is a matter of time and incident” (Patil 69). This lyric summarisation of the situation might refer to the conventional canon, which doesn’t include same-sex relationships. However, it can be interpreted as the first time a couple of intimates. Kari returns to the present day on panel 132 when she speaks to Lazarus after leaving the cinema (70). They go to the “Tea Centre to meet Bearded Man” (Patil 71) when suddenly a man pours into their gathering just because he is a man and feels he can do whatever he wants. This scene exemplifies the man’s behaviour that might be found in a public restaurant at any time, any place. Illustrations of the individual on panels 135-136 depict his oppressive behaviour towards Kari just for being a woman:

Fifteen minutes into an already erratic discussion, out work lunch is interrupted by the entry of a gargoyle. Walrus mouche and rotten teeth, the rolling laughter that is the trademark of the rich and famous. Everyone in each room turns to look, faces scrunching into smiles of recognition. For the next two hours, the commercial is forgotten. Story after story follows, each cleverer and more lurid than the one before. Unlike women, loud men do not dislike other loud men. In fact, they laugh at each other’s jokes and quite adore each other. (71)

Kari describes a scene in which a man misbehaves at ease, completely protected by the patriarchal system, since no one does anything, even knowing he normally mistreats women in that restaurant. They even smile. Last but not least, there is a camaraderie between the aggressor and the rest of the men, who laugh his assaults off. In addition, on panels 134-136 (71) the invader says to Kari: “are these your news proteges? Who’s the young lady with the burning eyes? Don’t make moves on her, you dog! She is one of my yateems” (Patil 71). The man is directly insulting, scoring, intimidating and discriminating against Kari for being a woman with short hair. ‘Yateem’ is a term for the word ‘orphan’, a term the man uses to refer to the lady behind him (panel 136). Unfortunately, it is a contemporary stereotype of a situation that happens in public, including the non-action of people surrounding the offence. When Lazarus and Kari leave the restaurant, Kari says, “hope my burning eyes make his penis wither and fall off” (72). However, this reply might contain frustration towards the non-action of nobody and her impossibility of replying to the assaulter that due to the possible consequences of being damaged by him.

Another example of how Amruta Patil depicts alternative sexual expressions through gender diversity is in chapter eleventh, called ‘*Playing*’, referring to the sexual relationships Kari and her flatmates have within their lives. Particularly, Kari lives her queer liberal condition as a woman against any religious commandments. In fact, in order to satirically respond to the conservative Christian religion, Kari narrates her sexual encounter with a stranger justifying her act through the biblical statements; “The wine the Blood of Christ. Brings the truth out of a woman sooner than any confession box does. Makes you trust a stranger with your life, your cars keys, your best-guarded secret” (Patil 75). Kari’s narrative line, accompanied by panels 143-147, where the author illustrates an explicit sexual encounter between Kari and another woman, supports the satire of using Christian symbols, which have always been patriarchal and traditional and mix them up a bit. As if that was not enough, after these panels, Delna asks Kari:

Delna: what were you doing in there so long?

Kari: I was fornicating with a stranger. (76)

Kari’s ideas reaffirm makes her a powerful character since she goes out of the conventional, tackling gender constructions to the extent of clearly saying what she wants without taboos, especially concerning sex. Not only Kari but also her flatmates live their sexuality as free as they really want to, and they aren’t shocked about Kari’s clearness.

All the sexual events in this chapter are depicted in a natural way which makes the protagonist able to express her personality better since her closer environment behaves in the same way, creating a gender-deconstructed environment. The penultimate panel 150 (76) illustrates an orgy among the flatmates Delna, Billo, Zap, Orgo and a couple they had met in the pub. However, Kari appears apart from the frame in the final panel 151, where she narrates the experience, giving visibility to alternative identities:

After a night out in town, the car becomes a snake pit of entwined arms. There are more people squeezed in here than we left home with. The Vicky who was making hot eyes at Billo has one hand on her thigh while she snogs the unsuspecting Zap on the other side. I wonder if it ethical to be the only one who's stone-cold sober and watching them say and things that will be forgotten tomorrow in collective amnesia. All that is inconceivable by day is easy by night. I have tried. One or twice, maybe thrice. Joined the snake pit of arms, let enquiringly lustful, missionary fingers touch my face, the small of my back. If they kiss, I kiss back. But if they probe, I close. I am not revolted, I am simply disinterested. Why would I bury my face in dyed gladioli and faded asters when I have furled the flower of Eden?". (76)

The narrative line above is the one which closes the chapter, offering a sophisticated poetic narrative of a sexually explicit illustration, getting across unorthodox practice which might claim its place within the literary culture. The paragraph, together with panel 150, in which there are several naked parts of the body, breaks the established conventions and human shyness concerning the hide of the body and the fault of feeling guilty after exposing the body to other people or even more than one partner. All in all, it offers a space of enjoyment, offering different referents for the reader.

The subsequent chapter, the twelfth one called '*Love Song*', references the poem Lazarus (Laz) writes to Kari. He recites it on panels 154-157: "I wrote a poem for you. You and I, Kari, we are one orgasmic nucleus. You and I, Kari, we turn around in endoplasmic serendipity" (Patil 78). Along the panels, Kari's facial expression becomes surprised due to Laz's dalliance for her. Laz grasps Kari's rejection and he starts a conversation, where he is offended on panel 158; "what? Ruth wrote better poems than me? Is that it? [...] Are you, like, a proper lesbian?" (Patil 79). Laz questions Kari's sexual orientation suggesting two categories for a homosexual woman; 'lesbian' and 'proper lesbian', implying that the first one is a woman who maybe also like men (bisexual) and the second one may be a woman who only likes women. Kari thinks below the panel: "I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth, and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshy, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate" (Patil 79). The absurdity of the

inquiry makes Kari feels so uncomfortable, although she satirically replies to Laz to put him in his place;

Kari: I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner. The circus isn't in my life. It's on my head.

Laz: I'm not sure the Ruth bitch even existed

Kari: Careful, buddy. Don't overstep. (79)

After that, on panels 161-163 (80), Kari reveals how she felt herself identified with the genderless singer Kathryn Dawn Lang, stimulating her emotions and making her shed a tear after having found a referent to represent her queerness:

I remember the day I saw K.D. Lang for the first time. On TV. Grammy Awards 1997. She was handsome, preening. Me, I was mute, with no way to explain myself to myself or to anyone else. What kind of creature was this, this genderless one, and why did she make me feel this way. (Patil 80)

K.D. Lang, together with the character of Ruth, are the ones who have seriously stirred Kari's feelings to the point of feeling admiration and love for them. Indeed, Kari compares the emotions felt by K.D. Lang to the ones towards Ruth, expressing that she remembers Ruth monthly. When that happens, she feels like a wound in her stomach, "Ruth put my heart in serious peril too. She is still a bullet in my stomach, and I nurse the gore she left in her wake. Month after month, I bleed" (Patil 80). This narrative line is written between Kari's flashback and panels 164-165 (80), in which the author accurately connects Kari's monthly bleeding with the menstruation bleeding through Delna's question, "don't you remember when your period is due?" (Patil 80), highlighting another topic which used to be taboo in the literary Indian culture.

Kari turns twenty-one years old in chapter thirteenth, '*Fish*' and Ruth, her flatmates and Lazarus congratulate her. Particularly, Lazarus invites her to see a Chinese martial art. On panel 177, Kari gratefully says, "I love Chow Yun Fat. That's the look I am aiming for" (Patil 85), then a man sat down behind Kari on panel 178, mocks her, saying a sexist comment: "You get to be Chow Yun Fat with boobs" (Patil 85), while there are two giant arrows pointing at her breast since her breast is illustrated plain, so Kari asks "what boobs?" (Patil 85). Below these panels, Kari funnily clarifies, "sure enough, I'd grown boobs. I fought them all evening" (85). Once again, Kari is suffering public harassment just for being a woman out of the conventional canon. Albeit, Kari's resilience allows her to face any patriarchal offence and violence against her, turning her into a queer heroine.

The controversial topic of prostitution flourishes in the fourteenth chapter, *'The umbilical'*, in which Lazarus confesses to Kari on panels 185-188 his worries after having sex with a prostitute called Tina. He admits, "don't know why I am feeling so scared, Kari. It was safe sex. [...] I know... I'll get a test done tomorrow" (Patil 88-89), probably recognising his fear about having a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Kari contextualises the situation, bringing prostitution to light:

Tina, lurks in his mind like a worm. Prostitution is legalized in Tina's country. Beautiful girl, smiling and sweet, not a ghost, not a sad shell, waiting for min at the nightclub in the evening. [...] When the person in front of you is scared, you must speak carefully and calmly. Always the truth. Reassure, but never lie. (88)

Lazarus' preoccupations generate a sense of maternal protection in Kari since she kisses Lazarus' forehead on panel 188 (89), revealing in her thoughts, "when he leaves, I can feel the unmistakable wrench of an umbilical cord" (Patil 89), showing another side of her complex personality; similar to the sheltering emotions she had had for Angel, albeit without attraction.

Within the framework of a Hindu festivity in chapter fifteenth, *'Ganesh Country'*, Amruta gets the characters involved in a deep analysis of life. The chapter starts with Kari joining in the Ganesh celebration, traditionally held on the fourth day of the first fortnight in the month of Bhaadrapada in the Hindu calendar, which consists of a parade carrying a statue of the God in the form of an elephant and immersing it in the sea at the end of their worship. Besides, Ganesh represents the force of overcoming life obstacles, as Kari relates; "I join the bloodstream of devotees, in time to immerse the god" (Patil 92), connecting Kari as a boatman with again with the element of water; "the morning after the immersion, the beachfront is a massacre ground. [...] My canoe is a knife. I navigate through the narrowest veins, steering clear of obstacles to get to where idols clog the sewer" (Patil 93). Metaphorically, as Kari is connected with water, she might navigate her own obstacles and Ganesh God. The sailing of the difficulties brings Kari to witness how Billo is unfaithful to Zap, having sex with the bar lady Vicky. The current event is metaphorically described by Kari in the narrative line using royal analogies, such as 'The Crystal Palace' for the flat, 'the courtier' for Vicky, 'Empress' for Billo, 'loyal minister' for Delna, and 'dragon' for the household-help Kusumtai (Patil 94). In a subsequent argument between Billo, Delna and Kari, due to the possible unintentionally Billo's pregnancy and a possible abortion (a drop of the baby), Kari falls into an unconscious status where she remembers herself visiting a lab full of organs and connects that

flashback to the vision of herself immersing in the sewers to leave a possible baby there (panels 217 – 225), jumping to the disclosure of her love for children (panels 226-229) and her desire of getting Ruth pregnant (panels 230-232), where Kari utters; “Isn’t it great? We never have to worry about getting knocked up my mistake. I’d give anything in the world to be able to knock you up, Ruthie” (Patil 100). These last three panels, which close the chapter, are illustrated in colour, expressing Kari’s strong desire while having explicit sex with Ruth.

‘*The Boatman*’ is the title of the sixteenth chapter, which revolves around death, particularly Angel’s death and Kari’s company until she passes away. Amruta illustrates and depicts it on panels 233-239 (102-103) with Kari on the phone hearing Angel’s last desire “need your help, Kari. My time is up, boatman. I need you to ferry me over” (Patil 102). This declaration happens after two great Laz’s news. On the one hand, he is not ill from HIV; on the other hand, the spot Kari led has won the AAA awards. Even though she should be cheerful, Kari appears (on panels 233-235) drawn dark and obscure due to the mourning she must face. Moreover, Kari is illustrated on panels 236-239, just after Angel’s death, filled with scribbling hard lines, which create a stimulating effect.

There is a turnaround in Kari’s physical appearance in chapter seventeenth, ‘*The Awards Ceremony*’ when Kari’s ad agency is nominated for the AAA awards ceremony. Kari decides to have her hair cut at MR Hair Dressers, “a Barberia [...] opposed to a hairstyling salon: that makes it 400 rupees cheaper and far less supercilious” (Patil 106). Increasing the price for female services and products, such as a haircut, is an example of real worldwide sexist situation. The authors base panels 243-249 on an event that might have taken place in its contemporary period, anywhere. Kari meditates:

I consider lying to the man that I am auditioning for a film about the Indian Army – people like being to celluloid history – but I am too lazy to begin. As it is, scissorman is neither happy nor convinced. Why would someone choose to be a shorn sheep when she could be earth mother or rumped siren instead? The answer is that, increasingly, my hair makes me feel like a drag queen. (107)

Since Kari wants a buzz cut, she reflects on the idea of lying to the hairdresser in order to avoid his rejection or judgements. However, Kari feels lazy about making up a story to have her hair cut and gives up that idea, insisting the hairdresser trim her hair. Not only doesn’t want to lie but also, she finds herself comfortable expressing her identity as a sexual transgender expounded in cross-dressing.

Another client who is being shaved next to Kari on panel 245 (107) looks at her knitting his brow, disapproving of the presence of Kari in the barbershop, together with the hairdresser who asks Kari several times on panels 241-244 if she really wants a buzz cut; “Lady’s boycott? Madam, won’t looking good. I have Lady’s patterns. Madam, face looking boy type” (Patil 107-108). Kari’s style change is crucial since she has lived through several vital events during the last chapters, including the loss of her love, Angel’s death, her parents’ disapproval, her workmate’s support, etc. That is one of the reasons why panels 241, 242, 243 and 248 are in colour. In panels 241 – 244, Kari makes the decision to cut her hair in a barbershop comes into it, while in panels 248, she confidently walks on the street feeling empowered, shouting to the reader, “Bring on the ladies! (Patil 107).

The eighteenth chapter is the final one, called ‘*The Exit Route*’. The drawing style in this chapter is totally different from the general one used in the rest of the graphic novel. Although comparable to the one used in chapter fifteenth, in Kari’s disclosure of her love for children on panels 226-229 (99), or in the sixteenth, on panels 236-239 (103) with Angel’s death. Basically, it can be deduced that when Kari has a deep or hard emotional situation, the lines become tough and doodling. After the AAA Awards, Kari realises that she doesn’t want to follow Lazarus’s path, neither having a prostitute as a wife, looking luxurious and superficial. She appears at the top of a roof on panel 260 (112), similar to Ruth at the beginning of the story on panel 3 (4). She even imagines herself jumping off the building and people’s reactions on panel 262 (113). Nevertheless, what comes clear to her mind is “1) I feel no bird urge. 2) I want to step back, not step off. 3) I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won’t be jumping off ledges for anyone anymore” (Patil 115). The queer heroine might show a life lesson thanks to the events and situations she overcame during the chapters expressing her same-sex love desire.

Chapter 9. Deconstruction of Gender Roles

9.1. Changeable Living Spaces in “Ever After” (2015) by Priyanka Kumar and “The Walk” (2015) by Deepani Seth

As well as gender roles must be deconstructed in a feminist society with regard to the role of women in the political, economic, educative, and working systems. Shared living spaces where women have carried out domesticity should be reconsidered in the same way to achieve an understandable coexisting environment within each home, offering individuals free will in their behaviour when they grow and within the nurture. Living spaces should be changeable since individuals fluctuate over time and the influences of their relationships with the surrounding world.

The story of “Ever After” by Priyanka Kumar is the fifth comic published within *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). The author introduces several indoor sceneries starring a woman while developing house chores and routines. However, the conventional housework will be invaded by paranormal monsters that might come from the main character's mind, who is bored with the normal situation and the lack of excitement in her life. As the creatures invade the area, the woman becomes even more aware of her monotonous life and begins to feel trapped by her daily routine. The author parallels the monster and the woman's feelings as if the former were a metaphor for the latter's inner fears and anxieties. One of the main features of these comic strips is that it does not contain speech balloons or text, except the title appearing on a TV screen introducing the story, which starts on page 45, where a woman is switching programmes with the remote control becoming boring with the ordinary ones about religion, soap operas or losing weight advertisement. Consequently, in the fourth panel (45), the character shows a weary facial expression. However, in the fifth panel (45), an alternative planet appears on TV, catching the attention of the woman showing the hand of a monster.

While the main character is sleeping (46), she thinks about the suitcases under the bed and the clothes she can pack. This is the start of a change in her mind. Panel 9 (page 46) explicitly shows the breast of the character. At the same time, she has a shower, normalising the narrative of women's bodies since it seems to be censored in mainstream graphic narratives. Panel 10 (47) illustrates the main character's cooking. However, two gutters separate the picture, as if she is thinking of another world disconnected from reality since her eyes follow the path of the cooking steam, which is evaporating. It might

be an analogy of her feelings disappearing to another dimension. On page 48, the woman is having a conversation with her husband. Although there are two shared speech balloons, the dialogue is illustrated with lines. Each character speaks with a different pattern of lines, making them misunderstand what the other is expressing. The reader can spin the page to have a complete perspective of the couple's conversation, in which both feel sadness and frustration since they do not understand each other.

The monster, apparently getting out of the TV (49), approaches the woman and has a sexual encounter with her on panel 16. This illustration becomes very interesting because the main character takes the situation as something normal, expressing to the reader that women have sex. After all, it is a part of their conventional lives and even think about sex by imagining sexual encounters or masturbating themselves (this panel does not specify if the monster is confirmed, a fact that would become the story a sci-fi) or it is in the women's head and evokes a conventional masturbatory female scene. It is during this encounter that the main female character changes her mind. While she is having another dull conversation with her husband in the living room, the speech balloons they share do not exchange information (50). Instead, her husband speaks with a line code while the woman's language is represented through a TV and suitcases, and none of them seems to be paying attention to the other, even though in this panel 17, the face of the woman is hopeful.

The liberation of the female character from her conventional indoor life is even more visible (51) through the visual narrative of panels 18-22 when the woman gets close to a window, gazing at the outdoors. She decides to jump through it, transforming into an imaginary monster that emulates a kind of two-beaked bird at the top of a handrail, observing the city. Coming back to the living room, the main character, with her female appearance, starts a conversation with another woman (52). Through panels 23-29, the reader can observe the boredom of the main character due to the ordinary dialogue they are keeping, represented by lines and the soap opera programmes illustrated at the beginning of the story (page 46), which annoys the main character so much. It is on panels 26-28 that the monsters appear again, and it seems to be the own protagonist who is transforming herself again into a monster, even though she is surprised and does not know if it is a factual situation or a secondary effect of the tea she is drinking. Indeed, the tea's steam always appears as a premonitory step before an alternate reality full of monsters or even herself becomes one. The end of the story is open, as the author mentions in the

preface (page 44). The leading character is illuminated by all the monsters that have appeared in each part of her day inside the suitcase illuminating her (page 53). Finally, the suitcase appears opened, on the surface of an unknown planet that has been conquered with a flag. The story might end with the woman realising that she needs to break free from her routine to find excitement and happiness in her life. The plot might indicate that the monsters the female protagonist sees, interacts with, and even becomes are the unconventional experiences she wants to have, or she is already enjoying in her life, even though, from the reader's lens, they would become so weird that they are illustrated as monsters. There are several creatures for every kind of situation where she is tired or bored, recreating the alternative situations she might be creating to escape from ordinary domesticity.

Focusing on "The Walk" by Deepani Seth, reflects the day of a central female character. Deepani Seth warns that its setting is India. However, it could be "a woman, in any place, with or without a job, with a home or without one, walking across a city that could have been any city anywhere" (Seth 78), a statement that democratises the story to be empathised by any woman in the world, independently from her circumstances. The premise might be transferred to the feminist movement that can be interpreted by everyone and struggles for the equity of all individuals, leaving aside boundaries, nationalities, gender constructions or age. As Seth describes, the story blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction. Perhaps facts overcome fiction, understanding "fiction" as the ideal world where everybody lives in freedom with their rights and obligations and transforming fiction into the new reality. Presenting an unknown character allows the reader to emphasise the main character, even reveal their emotions through it and reflect not only on the plot of the story but also on their societal problems.

"The Walk" has been made with a dark charcoal style of painting, evidencing contrasts between the black outline of the characters and the grey background. Even though the generalisation of the tale, the buildings, newspapers, and signs illustrated incorporate their letters in Hindi. It is the only comic within the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), which has been written in two languages: English as its original language and Hindi next to each sentence translated by the teacher and filmmaker Ujjwal Utkarsh. The whole narrative presents a contrast between day and night. Each of the panels becomes darker when the pages mirror the emotions of the female character. Domestic and public environments change into obscure uncomfortable

spaces when the thoughts inside her mind have the leading role in the plot. In the first and second panels (79), there are two lampposts opening the strips. The first one is off, indicating the lighter side of the character at the beginning, while the second one is on, symbolising the dark side. The third panel is back with the title and the translator's name in white letters. In the fourth panel, there is a drawing of the street setting the action and a client going into the beauty salon (79). Inside the salon, the main character is surrounded by women, talking about beauty and joking about marriage while working; they smile and laugh. The panels are illustrated with a lighter background creating a comfortable atmosphere for the female protagonist. Later, the husband shouts from the backroom (panel 14) if someone needs a mobile recharge (81), so the woman apparently has a friendly conversation with him (panels 15-17) about the recharge of her mobile phone. However, the woman turns back and complains to herself in reflection that she had already asked him to do the recharge, and he had ignored her request (panel 18, 81). This panel is remarkable since her inner problems flourish, and the drawing becomes relatively darker. In the working environment, the female characters have a dialogue. The conversation and panels are fluid (80-81), albeit the story turns gloomier and silent when she is alone with her husband at home: both pick their working clothes from a hanger, first the woman and then the husband, he combs his hair. The only speech balloon said by the husband is to inform that he needs extra clothes to stay away from work. Neither of them exchanges more words, although the woman feels loneliness and incomprehension due to the situation. They exchange glances (panels 28 and 31), and finally, he sets off. The woman sheds a tear, even though she quickly comes back to the beauty salon to work, and the last two panels in her works become lighter again (38-39, 85) since she feels how sisterhood encompasses her. Then, she finishes her work and goes out of the salon (86), friendly waving at the workers in the shop opposite hers. The illustration is accompanied by the footer line "Everyday several exits, several goodbyes" (86), reflecting the fact that in the world, there are many departures, even though not all of them affect people in the same manner. In the case of the main female character, her husband's departure hurts her feelings, while seeing off the salon staff or her worker's neighbours is a trivial fact. On page 87, the leading character starts a path of reflection within the shadow of the night, "losing spaces, and finding them. Losing oneself, sometimes..." is the foot line narrating the illustration in which the back of the woman at the bottom can be seen, introducing the dark deliberating path she and the reader will go

across together in the following pages. While the homes on both sides of the way are light grey, the road in the middle of the picture is totally black as night, perhaps mirroring her pain.

“At the same time, the narrative does not come to a halt with the scene of domestic discomfort. It moves seamlessly to another scene, where the woman is out in the neighbourhood” (Kamra 123), getting through the nightlife of the city, exploring fleeting situations (as they only occupy one panel) showing different living circumstances of random citizens (88-89), “looking into the stories of others” as a foot line on panel 42 is one of the critical points of the comic which makes it brilliant since the line is a universal thought a high number of people have come up to imagine others people lives, even try to get into their minds for a second, escape from our problems and conclude everybody has their deals. Panels 43-49 show people developing routines, and the reader can observe them as if the story changed the main character for a second. The main female character on panel 46 looks at her reflection in a glass, thinking, “finding parts of yourself, some familiar, some new” (89), continuing her seek in the nightlife, observing and listening to a theatre queue conversation, interacting with a fruit seller, even ignoring (as something usual) an unknown street stalker who shouts “Hey! It’s not like I don’t miss you. Come on, that’s not fair!” (89) to annoy her. She still gets into more obscure places, such as a bar full of men drinking alcohol and smoking when one of them says, “The moon is alone in the sky today” (panel 51, 90), a metaphor describing the main female character, who looks at the moon (panel 52) while walking outside the city, going to the field (91). As reported by Mitra and Murayama, “around one-fifth of the urban growth is accounted by rural to urban net migration. There was a continuous rise in the contribution of net migration to total urban growth since the sixties” (4), a fact reflected in the last interaction the woman has with others when she observes a rural mother cleaning pots and pans at the main door of her home, while one man, perhaps her husband complains “I will have to go to the city next month. It’s getting difficult to find work here” (panel 54, 91); this speech balloon refers to that rural migration movement started in the middle of the twentieth century.

Throughout the way the woman walks, the city disappears. She arrives at a bridge (92), which has the leading role on panels 55-57, whose brushstrokes create the illusion of both the waves of the sea and a wheat allotment, evidencing the author’s premise of a story set “any city, anywhere” (Seth 78). The sensation of being in-between fiction and

non-fiction worlds is expressed on panels 58-61 (93). At the same time, the woman stares at the moon from standing on the bridge railing with a narrative text on panel 62 concluding, “even as the owners and creators of those stories come and go, like travellers, like seasonal nomads, moving between temporal spaces” (93), which refers to the authors, the characters created by them and the living spaces that can change transforming something unconventional to an ordinary routine implemented in our lives, such as in “Ever After” by Priyanka Kumar, being the main characters the ones who must create that alternative space and achieve it.

9.2. Women’s Emancipation and Leadership in “Ladies, Please Excuse” (2015) by Angela Ferrao

Women's emancipation in India began in the late 19th century when many women's rights organisations were formed. The organisation worked to increase women's education and employment opportunities and to decrease child marriage and dowry. In the early 20th century, several women's rights activists began to call for greater political and economic rights for women. In 1947, the Constitution of India guaranteed equality for women in all spheres of life. Since then, women have made significant progress in education and employment, although there is still room for improvement. Besides, there is a lot of discrimination against women in the workplace in India, and they are often paid less than men for doing the same job, or they are not given the same opportunities for advancement. This can make it very difficult for women to succeed in the workplace. In most cases, it becomes tough for Indian women to find a job due to discrimination. Indian women also work in highly insecure jobs and are paid less than men.

The piece “Ladies, Please Excuse” touches on the issue of women's emancipation or the push for equal rights and opportunities for women within the workplace. The representation of conventional gender norms, the portrayal of men in positions of responsibility, and the investigation of cultural expectations and biases against women are the key points addressed in this comic. The context and content dealt with by its author would determine the specifics and messages regarding women's independence in it. “Ladies Please Excuse” by the illustrator, cartoonist, and writer Angela Ferrao is a comic illustrating the problems Indian women daily face after obtaining their qualifications when they want to get a job:

Every interview threw up different questions, and the goals posts would be shifted. Did it have to do with me being a woman? Of course, it did. I noticed that men did not seem to have such problems gaining employment or financial security. Through my short piece, I have tried to focus on some of the issues that women face in their struggle to earn a living with dignity. (140)

Due to the traditional rigid conception of the role of women indoors by society, discrimination can manifest itself in several ways, from the interviewer asking female candidates different (and often more difficult) questions than their male counterparts to outright refusing to hire women for certain positions. Companies might tend to focus their interviews with women on personal related to the candidates' lives: such as familiar situations, pregnancy, marital state, etc. "Ladies Please Excuse" suggests women face more discrimination than men when applying for jobs, particularly in male-dominated industries.

The story opens with the title in bold letters and the main character, Jenny, with an inspiring facial expression while she is having a cup of coffee and searching for a job on an online website and in the newspaper (panel 1, 141). On the computer screen, it can be read "Perennial Search", which is the website's name, the name of the main character Jenny Pinto and that she has a degree. Although that panel sums up the main topic of the comic, which is searching for employment being a woman, Jenny's search starts in panel 2, when is waking up yawning and turns off the alarm clock. On panel 3, she opens the main door to the lighting collector, who smiles at her sarcastically and thinks, "looks like I'm not getting paid today either" (Ferrao 141), showing a bill of 900 Indian rupees. Jenny is holding the door with a thinking balloon with the symbol of the Indian rupee with wings flying away, indicating she does not have money to pay him. "Now I know what toothpaste feels like!" (Ferrao 141) is the expression Jenny uses on panel four while she is in the underground, compressed by the number of people there are inside that means of transport, but also as a metaphor for the current financial problems she is facing. To clarify this metaphor, Ferrao draws panel 4 with a little length and a lot of widths, creating the impression of a real toothpaste being pressed. When she arrives at the interview (panel 5, 141), she finds an friendly interviewer who starts asking her personal questions without relation to her qualifications, "we run a large organization, no fixed timings, are you a team player? Are you married? Planning to? No? What if you decide to leave to get married? Can you handle pressure? You're young. We work late nights. Can you? Should I hire you?" (Ferrao, 141). His physical position behind the desk indicates these questions

are normal for him, and he has the audacity to focus the recruitment on Jenny's private life. Jenny is aware of the discriminatory interrogations: "I thought he would ask me about my qualifications, explain the job... Stay late!?! Has this man ever left the building?" (Ferrao 141). Jenny's outrage's feelings flourish when she leaves the interview (panel 6, 142) and asks herself, "was I interviewing for an office job or a marriage bureau? How will I ever land a job? Men can take up so many kinds of jobs, no personal questions asked", evidencing the extra troubles of employment search women have to go through in comparison to men.

The infantilisation of women becomes even more evident when a man tries to sell baby dolls to Jenny while she is expressing her feelings (panel 6). At home, she does the house chores, washing up, cutting the food, and cooking (panel 7, 142). At the same time, she remembers three male interviewers, whose floating heads appear within circles, asking her about her private abilities "Can you? Are you? Do you?" (Ferrao 142) instead of being interested in her curriculum.

The next day, Jenny converses with another woman (panel 8, 142) who seems to be her friend, and both share their experiences being interviewed. Jenny's friend says, "one place didn't even have a washroom. By the end of the interview, I thought I would burst. To make matters worse, the fellow conducted the entire interview to m breasts. I have to check and see if I had an extra pair of eyes down there!" (Ferrao 142), evidencing women are not only discriminated against and questioned about their private lives, but they are treated as objects even before being hired.

In her following interview, Jenny looks at herself in front of a mirror (panel 9, 143), ensuring the outfit is appropriate since she does not want to experience her friend's sexual harassment. Instead of thinking about questions related to the possible job, she has to focus on her physical image to prevent the interviewer's behaviour. In the underground, Jenny hopes the interview "isn't like the last one!" (panel 10, 143). However, paradoxically, her surroundings show a patriarchal society, in which she is thinking about the following job interview, preventing sexual harassment behaviour, and facing a man in the underground who at that moment is looking at her with a stern face while behind her another man is sleeping on a chair without being afraid of being molested. In the following interview (panel 11, 143), the same questions are repeated "Can you? Will you? Do you?". At the same time, she ironically imagines a peanut playing trumpet celebrating Jenny guessed right about the sexist behaviour of the interviewer. Behind Jenny's

interview, there are two offices where men work peacefully, stretching their arms, talking and having a cup of coffee.

Once again on the road (panel 12, 143), Jenny contemplates three typical street female vendors, carrying a basket of food on their heads and wearing their children in their arms, showing women's strength despite the unfairness. She reflects, “women have to balance everything, work and home, what about these women? They’re working on the street. I’m sure they don’t have even the most basic facilities” (Ferraio 143). Women must struggle not only to find a job but also have some common amenities as employers, including separate bathrooms and changing rooms, transportation to and from work, on-site childcare, flexible work hours or telecommuting options, and equal pay. Jenny continues her search (panel 13, 144), looking at the newspaper where several offers are available “wanted: young dynamic willing open team player”, “Opportune agency”, “Join now: rising company inc.” (Ferraio 144). However, Jenny sadly confirms in panel 14 that “there are more options in footwear than job options for women” (Ferraio 144) while looking at a shoe shop’s window display full of men. She comes back home, in the countryside (panel 15, 145), where she finds her brother Johnny arriving at home after having found a job, with the father behind carrying a new television as a present for his parents, evidencing the easiness of gaining a salary being a man, while Jenny contextualises the situation “Loot at Johnny! Good job, no great qualification. Here I am with a slew of degrees answering questions about my ovulation cycle! And still no job” (Ferraio 145) making clear if she is more qualified for a job, companies discriminate her just for being a woman. Jenny explains her situation to Johnny since he disagrees, being part of the patriarchal system and enjoying his man privileges (panels 17-18). Both have a deeper conversation (panel 19) about the unfair conditions that women must face: being discriminated against, sexually abused, being paid less, being asked about their private lives and the lack of washrooms in some companies.

Finally, Jenny does not hesitate to struggle and change the system, imagining herself as the CEO of a company, having paradisiacal holidays with the narrative line “and Jenny dreams of success” (Ferraio 146), empowering female readers to fight for decent and respectable employment, becoming an inspiration for girls in India who want to achieve their dreams, no matter what. Accordant to Ferraio, “exposure to real life situations via literature like, “Ladies Please Excuse” could create a talking point and perhaps an insight into employment hurdles women face” (appendix). Albeit, “Ladies

Please Excuse” exposes a cognitive bias when women are interviewed nowadays that might be replicated in people out of the male heteronormativity, such as women or the LGBTQ+ community, so maybe the deconstruction of conventional masculinities and femininities is one of the solutions against discrimination.

9.3. Educational Disparities in “An Ideal Girl” (2015) by Soumya Menon

“An Ideal Girl” by Soumya Menon responds against the dominant nationalist discourse proposed by *Hindutva* during the Indian post-independence, presenting countercurrent femininities about what the concept of an ideal girl should be. As believed by Mehrotra:

Partly due to its *Hindutva* ideology and the promotion of Hinduism at the cost of other religions, they see women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and any of that as radical and not positive. They've made changes in textbooks as well, only giving examples that are anti-secular and misogynistic, which show men working more than women. Women are meant to run the family. (appendix)

With a fragmented feminist movement in India during the fifties and the beginning of the sixties and the rising of the nationalist atmosphere, the government started to install a series of educational charts called An Ideal Boy in schools, top-rated from the 1950s to 1965. They are a series of posters illustrating the excellent behaviour of an ideal boy, raising awareness of male citizenship. Simultaneously, the charts show female characters in the background serving the ideal boy and doing the house chores. The nature of the Ideal Boy is still being determined, and the accurate date when it was published too. However, it was published by The Indian Book Depot (Map House), a publishing house that has provided Indian schools with educative supplies such as books, charts, maps, etc., since 1936. The charts show "the figure of the Ideal Boy, conceived and circulated within the state education system" (Doron 732). For instance, some of the good habits illustrated in the strips include actions such as studying attentively (surrounded by other boys), joining NCC (National Cadet Corps), taking meals at the proper time (with his mother serving him), or taking part in sports (with other boys), among other activities. According to Doron, “the boy was viewed as an effective vehicle for imparting ideas and practices about personal and domestic hygiene—essential for the cultivation of the future model citizen. The Ideal Boy was projected as the ultimate specimen of health, physical, social, and moral perfection” (732).

Given that from 1951, the First Five Years Plan was being carried out by the government in India, including men and women in education equally, marginalising and denigrating the role of the female, being reduced to a secondary character developing the house chores and serving the male seems quite contradictory. As described before, these scenes make sense when analysed, considering the patriarchal traditional nationalist movement (enhanced under the doctrine of Hindutva) that surrounded the Indian population. “The majority of men in the Congress and others involved in the freedom struggle subscribed to patriarchal values and resented any challenge to male authority within or outside the family” (Basu 105).

The reform of education was an excuse to restart Indian inequalities under the nationalist discourse of the country's emancipation from the British, going on with the differences of gender and castles previously established. As Doron observes, “the original 'Ideal Boy—Good Habits' poster series was part of a larger ordering project driven by the state to foreground the child as the embodiment of a modern secular state. Women were largely absent from such renditions, at best portrayed only as subservient mothers or sisters” (720).

Although the educative charts were incredibly influential during the decades of the fifties and sixties, there are still reminders of the posters in some Indian public places. The actor and comedian Stephen Fry published one of the last contemporary fusses on his Twitter on January 21st, saying, “decidedly odd of my doctor to hang this in his surgery. I've tried to live up to it, though. Haven't managed to “Pray Almighty” or “Join NCC”, otherwise, I'm getting there” (@Stephenfry) and adding the picture described before.

The durability of this campaign and the remainder reaching the twenty-first century catch Soumya Menon's attention. In her blog, Menon describes herself as an Indian animation filmmaker and illustrator trained at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. She loves travelling, and after a brief residency in New Delhi in April 2014, she created a graphic story answering everyday sexism and violence against women there. The story is named “An Ideal Girl” and was published with another fourteen graphic narratives in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) edited by Priya Kuriyan et al., a book that encourages the struggle against gender violence, shadeism, sexism, and classism in India.

In “An Ideal Girl” graphic narrative’s prologue Menon (2015: 36) writes that she rediscovered the Ideal Boy posters when she was a student and collected them, founding a warped perspective because the girls in the posters were serving the boy in the background, doing the household chores. In the graphic narrative, she turns things around, illustrating an ideal girl's steps to set free.

The story is divided into six panels. The approach is similar in all of them, except in the last one, where she turns the role of conservative femininity into a real contemporary ideal girl who is free and takes her own decisions. Following the same structure as the original An Ideal Boy charts, Menon starts drawing a boy showing a good habit, with a caption behind the strip describing his excellent behaviour. The difference in An Ideal Girl posters is that, after describing the first good habit of the boy, she introduces “between-the-panels exploration of some of these pre-set notions of the Ideal Girl” (Menon 36). It means she illustrates the good pre-set behaviour established by the society in the ideal boy, illustrating the same behaviour in an ideal girl. Some panels between these male and female strips show the number of activities an ideal girl carries out behind the same final habit. Menon (36) explains she “wanted the Ideal Girl to tell her own story”. While the ideal boy shows a good habit without further ado, the ideal girl presents the same one, besides many habits that are not considered significant activities just because a woman develops them.

Focusing on the first chart, the first strip is described as “The Ideal Boy is well educated and cultured” (Menon 37). The panel continues with seven more strips before showing the same behaviour as the boy. Menon illustrates and writes, “The Ideal Girl was well educated, of course [strip 2]. Yet they encouraged her to pursue her hobby [strip 3]. Not as an art, though [strip 4]. Or even a skill [strip 5]. But just a role like any other [strip 6]. As tradition decreed [strip 7], this was the prospective bride’s way of earning her dowry [strip 8]. The Ideal Girl is well educated and cultures too [strip 9]” (37). Throughout all the strips, the author describes the patriarchal path the girl should follow to be an example for other girls.

Between the panels, Menon analyses the steps she is obliged to follow to be considered equal to the boy. Sewing is an essential household-chores developed mainly by women in India as a tradition of the nation. In this way, dowry is related to education in India, “if dowry is interpreted as a price that clears marriage markets, then higher education could substitute for dowry payments as more educated brides enjoy higher

valuation in the marriage market and hence have to pay lower dowries to secure the groom of their choice” (Sanchari 26). Parents must compensate the new husband for his bride’s shortage of knowledge so he can invest more money in her wife’s education. To reduce the dowry, parents invest themselves in their daughter’s schooling and “[they] switch from dowry to education to compensate daughters across cohorts” (Sanchari 26). Behind the same strip for males and females, women must complete more vital stages to be considered equal to men.

In the second educative chart, the ideal boy (Menon 38) is presupposed to be “well settled.” However, the designer includes ten strips in between showing the extra effort the female must make to be in the same position (Menon 38), “The Ideal Girl juggled her household, family, and job very well without any help from the Ideal Boy who showed up from time to time to take away her earnings making her wish he stayed away for good. She could certainly do without him. The Ideal Girl is very well settled”. Menon depicts all the functions developed by the female in an atmosphere and a time when it is supposed there is an equality status among men and women. The reality is that women must carry out, and accomplish the household chores, educate children, look after them, serve the ideal boy, and maintain social status, working for others without keeping her savings. This time the author shows not only the hard job an ideal girl develops to be considered the same as a man but also the role she plays behind the ideal boy. He is not doing any of these activities just because he is supposed to have good superficial habits, but he needs the ideal girl to be the ideal boy, not the other way around.

In the third chart, Menon writes, “an Ideal Boy respects family” (39), while in the next ten strips in between, “The Ideal Girl studies well. So well, she was accepted into one of the country’s best universities. Yet she was told that she had to think of her brother, the Ideal Boy, who would soon be applying to university. Two university courses were too much expenditure. Of course, she should study at a local college, perhaps, and be a good sister. And Ideal Girl, too, respects family”. In this case, the comparison happens between a male and a female sibling. The boy is assured of going to university even if his parents have savings for one of the siblings. In the case of the female, although as well as her brother, she respects her family, she must take care of the essential member of the family, fight to be accepted in a university and study hard to be the best. Going back to the First Five Years Plan and the following ones that went on until publishing the graphic narrative, the plan states that women and men should have equal opportunities and that

women should be provided special facilities for the fields with particular aptitudes. Unfortunately, India lives under a nationalist discourse extolling the woman's role as a procreator, carer, mother, wife, and sister. Even if all these fields are covered, continuing with social status and trying to be independent become an arduous task.

The fourth chart shows an example of the famous refrain about prevention being better than cure. The author shows and writes in the captions, "An Ideal Boy protects his sisters. Ideal Boy decided to prevent crime" (40). A male soldier appears in the second strip with a bubble saying, "for their own safety, women ensure home by nightfall!". Hindutva's patriarchal discourse suggests women are vulnerable, and instead of confronting possible criminals, this ludicrous ideology exposes women as defenceless victims who need an ideal boy to protect them. The strips continue with the woman's vision in these cases and society's view "Ideal Boy decided to prevent crime and protect girls. And so, the girls commuting in the city which disappeared into thin air was the girl who became another statistic that reinforced the diktat to protect girls by ensuring they were home by nightfall or, better still, that they stayed put at home. The Ideal Girl is protected by her brothers" (40). In these panels, the girls are just passive objects who receive the action of protection from the male dominant. In the sixth strip, which is in black, a murder is suggested. The conservative discourse dodges the issue pointing out the woman as the source of the problem because she should have always been behind the male, although she has been killed by men paradoxically.

The fifth chart shows the violence women can suffer in their homes by men if they complain or ask the male to share the tasks. In the first strip, the ideal boy appears angry, although, in the caption, it can be read, "Ideal Boys don't complain", maybe because they don't have anything to complain about. In the between strips, the situation girl is the absence of freedom to express herself and have her voice because it would be a bad habit, so she merely serves the boy and the family and doesn't talk to anyone "when Ideal Girl asks Ideal Boy to share the household chores, they [referring to the family] were all surprised! Even shocked," For Ideal Girl was not in the habit of talking back to her elders. She was not in the habit of talking at all. Ideal Girls don't complain, either" (41). This is the conservative discourse women fight against. The feminist movement in India denounces the strategy of silencing women's voices because the Ideal Girl is just a patriarchal standard imposed by men supported by *Hindutva*, glorifying those times when the Aryan Empire organised society and women had no rights within it.

In the last educative chart, Menon offers an alternative femininity construction and proposes the girl as the story's main character and the one who makes decisions in her life, deconstructing the concept of the pre-set ideal girl “The Ideal Girl walked long distances every day to get to work. They told her that there was no need for her to work. She refused. They asked her to find work closer to home. She said she liked what she was doing. They got her a bicycle so that she could get back home sooner. Instead, she cycled further and further away. She decided she had had quite enough of being the Ideal Girl” (42). Menon empowers the female character by offering a new habit of women: making their decisions. In the last strip, there is a letter saying, “you are leaving city limits” (42) which can be interpreted as a metaphor of breaking the barriers of the conservative nationalist discourse of Hindutva, limits established by a society in which men are the central role and women are left behind with challenging chances to be independent.

Chapter 10. Telling Herstories

10.1. Mythology Retellings to Challenge Conventions in “Broken Lines” (2015) by Vidyun Sabhaney and the *Royal Existentials* (2014-2017) by Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan

A further mythological retelling in an online format can be found in *Royal Existentials* by Falana Films, a creative film and animation studio based in Bangalore and founded in 2014. *Royal Existentials* is a weekly webcomic that shows stories of historical and modern problems using Indian classic art and images, written and produced by the filmmaker and writer Aarthi Parthasarathy. At the same time, the illustrator and animator, Chaitanya Krishnan, illustrates the strips. *Royal Existentials* constructs countercurrent situations through its feminist memes, which retell Indian mythology against the dominant discourse in which women have been historically represented in India. There are 177 strips published until January 12, 2018, although some samples which specifically deal with feminist mythological retelling dealing with gender violence and resilience will be exposed. This project exposes contemporary problems generally, so it does not include all the information from the Indian news. Its two key points are the approach to the different issues from an ironic and satirical perspective and the usage of memes as communication. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), the word meme is employed by Internet users mainly to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a “particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural stuff” (202), while in Dawkins (2016) states that a meme is the new replicator of human culture, a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation which propagate itself from brain to brain, like a gene. Nevertheless, mythology remains a rich source of intriguing and occasionally terrifying stories from which writers have attempted to draw. Many writers have explored both the subtle connections taken from mythology and the more direct approach of recreating or reimagining epics and converting them into more contemporary plots, with varied degrees of success.

“Broken Lines” by Vidyun Sabhaney is a comic which belongs to *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), done as a mixture of techniques ranging from black and white acrylic paints to cartoons, where contemporary-era ancient stories come alive in their magnificence. Sabhaney combines the traditional rectangular structure of

most comic books with several techniques, including comparing ancient scenes to contemporary stories, occasionally introducing real photographs, digitalised newspaper covers, and opening and closing with *patachitra* scrolls, which frame the story's context. Although Sabhaney uses *patachitra* scrolls to explain how history is blurred and repeated by humankind, the use of cartoons and photographs is essential for the reader's engagement. As described by Sabhaney, "Broken Lines" is "a particular comic, [which] grew out of [her] research into the *patachitra* tradition of Bengal which combines painted scroll and song to tell stories" (130), making this artwork rich and detailed thanks to the combination of techniques and the stark contrast of black and white, which keeps the reader engrossed throughout the book and prompted them to consider how similar our contemporary patriarchal society is to the one described in those ancient scrolls.

The story is opened with a black cover broken by three straight lines, such as the ones done by a printer that does not have enough ink, and four cracks appear in ancient scrolls as time passes (131). It might indicate that both contemporary and ancient stories are merging. The narrative in white over the black first panel, which occupies the whole page, clarifies the encounter:

It is difficult for me to keep track of stories these days. Having grown up reading books with a clear beginning, middle and end, stories without a resolution just don't stick. They tear, and begin to merge hopelessly into one another. I first noticed this during the media deluge which followed the gang-rape of a medical student in New Delhi in 2012. (131)

Nowadays, gang rapes are still happening in India, a fact which makes *patachitra* scrolls, where the role of women was conservative and purely reproductive, the order of the day. In panel 2 (132), there is the cover of a newspaper entitled "A Nation Shaken: Delhi sees twice as more rape cases than Mumbai" and the narrative line "Protests erupted: some aimed at amending laws on sexual assault and other just an expression of anger with no goal. Similar incidents began to be reported with greater frequency than before" (Sabhaney 132), which indicates an improvement of rapes reports but still insufficient. In panel 3, there is an illustration of Govindpuri metro station located in Delhi, with shadowed people walking, with the narrative line indicating: "unfinished stories were everywhere" (Sabhaney 132), referring to most of the unreported stories of sexual crimes and abuses that are hidden, and if they appear on the newspapers, they will only be the daily news, and the law will not go beyond the justice. The main character converses with a partner while both take the underground (panels 4-7, 132). Her partner

asks about an article sent to her, and the main character asks if it is about a finger cutoff. However, the partner does not know what she is talking about, and the protagonist starts thinking: “after getting home that day, I tried to remember where I had read that story. Unsuccessfully. Similar reports were on the front page of every newspaper and magazine. Nevertheless, that particular one was nowhere to be found. I couldn't have imagined it? Could I?” (Sabhaney 132). In this thought, the protagonist starts reflecting that nowadays many sexual assault stories are reported on the cover of magazines, but they do not have an ending. Society has taken a step towards considering victims and giving them the capacity to raise their voices, although there is no prison sentence for criminals. At the same time, there is such a high number of cases of rape in India that stories start to merge for the main character: stories from the past, which, unfortunately, are very similar to the ones happening right now concerning gender violence.

The subsequent panels (8-16, 133) explain the mix-up of gender violence stories and the cut-off fingers story origin. The narrative line clarifies, “a few days later, I received an email from the editor of a magazine that was publishing an article I has written based on my research into visual-storytelling traditions” (Sabhaney 133) and, in the following panels (9-16) the female character opens a file called “Bengali Patachitra”, which are the ancient scrolls she had been researching previously and where she had found sexual abuse stories similar to the ones appearing on the newspaper's covers. The author recreates a real Bengali Patachitra in which there is a woman with a finger mutilated as a punishment for a neglected act towards the cows. Sabhaney tells the following story next to panels 17-18:

The young woman without fingers was not from the newspaper but from my archive. She was a character in a story entitled ‘Gopalan’, which is told in the Bhirbhum district of West Bengal as part of the patachitra storytelling tradition. The mutilation is intended to appease the family's cows who this young bahu was said to have angered through neglect. It extended to the removal of her knees as well. A gruesome tale for other young bahus in the area. (134)

Sabhaney retells a mythological story throughout the introduction of ‘Gopalan’ patachitra, combined with the author's reflection within the narrative lines and framed by a contemporary comic with cartoons and panels. While the story of ‘Gopalan’ was created to educate the youth in ancient times, it makes us understand these behaviours are cruel and inviable nowadays, so why are women still raped as they were in ancient times? As Sabhaney explains in the following panels 19-20, these warnings were found in traditional narratives at the end of patas from Bhirbhum. They showed the population possible

punishment if they behaved wrongly and had a relationship to the punishments described in the Manusmriti, including genital mutilation or the tongue pierced by a sharp tongue (135). However, if these sorts of practices horrify today's society, why are some of these punishments against women still developing in some areas of India?

On page 136, Sabhaney turns the tables, providing a photograph of a pile of wrapped scrolls belonging to Khandu Chitrakar (Naya, West Midnapore) accompanied by four narrative texts which describe the positive usage since contemporary independent artists are using them to create reflections and new stories to represent new ideas and patrons. Then, she returns to several written cartoons spread over the whole black page (panel 23, 137), illustrating the evolution of communication across five iconic devices: scrolls, letters, newspapers, laptops and smartphones. In her description, Sabhaney adds:

I remembered these images [patachitra] as being part of my daily fodder of stories from the media. Was it simply because I subconsciously felt they continue to reflect our society? Or have I become to use to stories of unresolved violence that I could see no difference between a mythological tale and a report of a real crime? A voyeur in troubled times. (137)

The comic ends in the same manner it started. However, the old cracks from the scrolls have merged with the straight contemporary lines, and the picture might have become a mass of stories flourishing, remembering that society has not evolved as much as we think (panel 24, 138).

Moving onto the first post of *Royal Existentials, 001 – The Problems of Patriarchy* (2014), the strip opening the webcomic series contains four panels where the king Mughal is accompanied by a woman, presumably his daughter. The king, concerned about his daughter's distress, encourages her to confide in him, so she says, "Father, I worry. For women. In this patriarchal society, our rights, freedoms and expression have all been taken away from us. I am contemplating my future in these bleak times". Her father asks, "Is this because they forgot to draw your hands?". Parthasarathy and Krishnan satirically give visibility to one of the main problems of patriarchy: not listening to women and reducing their words to their physical appearance.

The strip entitled *134 – Feminist* (2017) illustrates a universal issue, although the source painting is the late 17th-century painting of Pandu and Kunti from Kashmir. Kunti is one of the leading female protagonists of the epic *Mahabharata*. The meme shows a dialogue along six panels between the couple. Kunti asks Pandu if he is a feminist and believes in gender equality, while Pandu agrees, but he does not want to be named a

feminist; in the words of Guha, “I am not sure whether I am a feminist activist. But I do speak up for women if I feel strongly about it” (appendix) It introduces the categorisation problem, the rejection of being named as ‘feminist’, activist and citizens who claims an equal society. However, they do not feel they belong to the feminist movement. This contradiction might come from the lack of knowledge about feminist theory and its defamation by some conservative political parties asserting a hostile doctrine of what feminism really is. Some other people are feminists, and they do not know they are.

The ironic warning strip is *151 – Exit Strategy* (2017). The original painting is called *The Timid Bride* from approximately 1800. It is anonymous and displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The strip contains six panels with the same painting, with different speech balloons, which warns that sometimes it is better to give up a conversation with a person who does not want to understand and open their mind:

Man: **Wait!** If you’re offended, why walk away? Why not stay and engage with what I’m saying?

Woman: Because I **don’t feel** that you will listen to my point – you have not inspired that **confidence** in me! [...]

Man: Okay, but... Just to be clear – was it **the sexism, the racism, the classism or the casteism** that **bothered** you?. (Parthasarathy and Krishnan 151)

The woman is thoroughly annoyed by the extremely old-fashion discourse of the man. Nevertheless, the woman chooses to go because the adverse ideas in his perspective exceed her mental health and energy.

There is a meme transformation in the ink painting *Shah Jahan with Asaf Khan* (1640), where the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan is with his father-in-law Asaf Khan. Mocking those who remember part of the history, *155 - Selective Memory* (2017) summarises in six panels what happens with the contemporary *Hindutva* discourse, which falsely idealises the Rig Veda Age as the period when women were treated in the same way as men, and they were even worshipped. As it is researched in the first part of the dissertation, it is incorrect, becoming a strategy to twist political discourse made up from the old Indian mythology selecting only some passages and Gods to empower its current ideology. The conversation is the following:

Asaf Khan: Selective memory is a **strange thing!** You choose what you **want** to **remember** and build a narrative **according** to that! Though sometimes, the quest for interpretation and narrative-building becomes **distorted**, and facts **are dismissed or erased!** The tendency to do that becomes a part of how you approach the **present moment** – with **bias and prejudice!** You’re doing it right now, aren’t you?

Emperor Shah Jahan: I didn't care for what you were saying. (Parthasarathy and Krishnan 155)

In the meme, Asaf Khan discusses the problem of selecting historical passages and framing them with another context. However, Emperor Shah Jahan is not listening to him, so the whole reflection is missing, and the Emperor keeps his truth.

Another example could be appreciated in *168 – Extrication* (2017), a Rajasthani painting from the 18th-century art of South India based in a rural area, where a woman removes a thorn from her foot. She also wears the typical Medieval Indian costume. Parthasarathy and Krishnan change the content, comparing the patriarchy with a thorn embedded in the women's feet and annoying them from walking their natural path. The woman, who is entirely conscious of the damage of that thorn, extracts it from her foot and pushes aside the patriarchy from her life.

One of the last publications is *172 Exhaustion* (2017). This painting is called initially *A musical mode (varari ragini)*. It was popularised in the early 19th century. It was painted in colour and gold on paper in India. In the image, there is an Indian woman with traditional clothes representing their traditional dance, suggesting that central India specialises in music and its poetical interpretation. The speech balloon says, "just need to stretch me out a bit because, wow, the patriarchy is exhausting!", so the painting is transformed by Parthasarathy and Krishnan adding a balloon and changing its meaning into a humorous strip, where the woman is showing her tiredness as a consequence of her feminist struggle against the patriarchal system.

10.2. Demystifying Bollywood in *Nirmala and Normala* (2015) by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam

The graphic novel *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) by the two Indian writers Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam is a unique example of an independent comic which deconstructs mainstream references and referents since the book tells two stories, one of them with the conventional main character, and the other one with her missing twin sister, and unconventional story which actually allows the reader to feel identified with. Author Sowmya Rajendran is an Indian living in Pune. She has collaborated with publishing houses, including Rupa Publications, HarperCollins, Penguin, HarperTulika, and Pratham. *Big Hero Size Zero: Gender Talk*, a work of

nonfiction by the author, was named an honour book at the 2016 Hindu Young World Goodbooks Awards. She worked as an Associate Editor for the kids' magazine Chandamama. She earned a gold medal for her English BA at Stella Maris College in Chennai. Later, she graduated with a Merit in MA Gender Studies from the University of Sussex in the UK. Niveditha Subramaniam is a freelance content producer, editor, and writer-illustrator. She has written teen fiction and picture books and illustrated a young adult graphic novel. The tale of twin sisters who were split up at birth is told in *Nirmala & Normala* (2014). While the other grows up in an orphanage, one of them wanders off and ends up in the arms of a filmmaker. It is a satiric parody of modern Bollywood films where women are frequently portrayed in unrealistic and impossible ways. Except for the first chapter, 'The Mysterious Midwife', where the authors settle the plot of the book, the rest of the chapters switch between a mainstream story and an unconventional one. In actual fact, *Nirmala & Normala* (2014) depicts two sisters: Nirmala, who is inspirational, always in a good mood, looks stunning, and kind to strangers without any apparent goal, and Normala, who was called that way due to her "normal" condition, she does not like the becoming wet under the rain, talking to strangers or being late and whose first goal is taking an important exam. While Nirmala represents the stereotype of the main character of a commercial teen movie, Normala may be the stereotype of a person in the real world. The gripping point of them is that their lives are compared every other chapter, evidencing the absurdity and unreality of Nirmala's life and the events happening for no reason.

Most of the feminist Indian graphic novels and comics which respond to the contemporary neo-nationalist discourse depict countercurrent stories out of the established canon. They have been categorised as independent comics whose discourse empowers alternative values and defends divergences towards gender identities. As stated by Hatfield (2005), underground comics are characterised by four fundamental conditions: they are published outside the dominant publishing market, break the periodical timing of publishing, introduce valuable lone cartoonist productions, and are full of the irony of popular and political characters. On the other hand, Susan Spiggle concludes that the strips in a mainstream comic, what she calls 'commercial', achieve the reader's sympathy by presenting a likeable character as the protagonist through a story which might portray a social reality with humour or arouse the reader's excitement, whose ambitions are materialistic or they just have a recreational or leisure role (something a bit superficial).

The main character's goals used to be obtaining a powerful status, romantic love, personal independence or recreation, and the means they use are determination or authority. Although the boundaries between mainstream and underground comics may be blurred, "One of the most notable corollaries of Hatfield's observations is that, like the underground comics that preceded them, the majority of early alternative comics were self-published" (R. T. Cook 153). Since the beginning of *Nirmala & Normala* (2014) by Rajendran and Subramaniam, in chapter 1, '*The Mysterious Midwife*', there is a clear boundary between the two sisters. The first baby is born smiling at her mother (7), while the second is born crying (8). Their mother dies after the labour. The fact of having been born with an opposite attitude sets the different lives Nirmala and Normala will have, although they are born in the same conditions.

Furthermore, Nirmala's splendid grin determines from the beginning will be the imaginary part of the graphic novel, whereas Normala will be an ordinary character. Despite this distinction, Nirmala's stereotype is found in mainstream culture, such as Bollywood films or any Indian canonised novel far from the ordinary audience. At the same time, Normala is closer to the existing reader, experiencing everyday problems destined to be illustrated in independent literature. Paradoxically, factual issues tend to be less accepted or even banned than fictional events. If this was not enough, Nirmala is sent in a bamboo basket (10) across a river arriving at the film director GVM's hands, who will direct her life, turning it into a teen film. Normala is left outside an orphanage and later adopted by a pair of nuns (13). After the paediatrician's diagnosis, "Baby is normal" (Rajendran and Subramaniam 13), her parents "were pleased. They took back Normala, for that's what they named her, to the orphanage" (Rajendran and Subramaniam 13). Throughout the book, each couple of chapters may represent the epitome of the main character and the mirror of an ordinary girl.

In chapter 2, '*Intellectual Woman*' (16), Nirmala is introduced, playing the role of the main character, according to Gym's script "intellectual woman: story, screenplay, dialogue, direction, GVM" (Rajendran and Subramaniam 16). She ironically appreciates the rain on her hair. Apart from looking perfect due to the director's guideline, her mole "travelled magically to the corner of her upper-lip" (Rajendran and Subramaniam 19), maybe as a symbol of beauty such as Marilyn Monroe, who has a mole above her lips. Although Nirmala's mole is a birthmark, it can be moved thanks to the fictional world. Everybody looks up to her when she goes on stage to the street (20).

In chapter 3, '*The girl with the Umbrella*' (21), Normala wakes up thinking about her college lessons, having breakfast and picking out "her oldest pair of jeans and a blue t-shirt that she did not like very much [with] an ugly red lotus bang in the middle" (23), opposite to Nirmala's typical clothes, feeling like a superheroine because she has the best umbrella for the rain. However, nobody looks at her in the street because people are on their own.

In chapter 4, '*Gas Balloons*' (27), Nirmala plays with a strange group of school children with a gas balloon. She asks for one balloon, and a boy gives her his heart balloon, so Nirmala kisses the child. She also promises to write them letters because, in fiction, this kind of bizarre act happens. Nirmala also helps a beggar woman with her baby to cross the street. She even stops the traffic. Finally, a young man falls in love with Nirmala "not only was Nirmala beautiful, innocent and brainy... She was also kind like his dead mother" (34). Love at first sight due to Nirmala's kindness and beauty is feasible for GVM.

In chapter 5, '*Strangers in the rain*' (35), Normala has the opposite behaviour. She is wearing an umbrella not to avoid getting wet, and "a bunch of school children [go] past her" (35). Without interaction, a car splatters Normala, and she insults it with "idiot!" (36), so she uses swear words as a typical person. She thinks about helping a beggar woman to cross the street, but in the end, she doesn't help because she could arrive late for her test. Normala crushes a man when she is getting onto the bus, but she doesn't give it importance, while the young man "had watched enough GYM movies to know this [the crush with a woman means she is the love of his life]" (40).

In chapter 6, '*The Modest Bike Ride*' (42), the young man called Rahul insists on dropping Nirmala on his motorbike. When Nirmala agrees, he has a flashback about life with her mum in which she tells him, "when you grow up, you must marry a modest girl" (45), and Rahul is illustrated at the bottom of the page crying with happiness. However, at the end of the chapter Nirmala still rejects him as a boyfriend.

Opposite to Nirmala, in chapter 7, '*What's your sweet name?*' (48), the unknown man, who later on will be introduced as Varun (in chapter 13), on the bus looks for Normala to ask her name, but Normala feels harassed because she doesn't know him. Another man called Roobesh relinquishes his seat to help her escape from Varun, and it makes Normala pay Roobesh attention.

In chapter 8, '*Mad(e) for each other*' (53), Rahul confesses to Nirmala that he is in love with her. Although she calls him mad, "the skies split open and a guitar [fall] into Rahul's hands" (55), so he sings, "you look so beautiful when you are angry" (56), reproducing a fictional stereotype of chasing a woman to make her falls in love with you. Moreover, the whole school accompany Rahul, singing and dancing (56).

In chapter 9, '*Checked-shirt*' (56), Normala is chased by Varun off the bus, and she tries to get rid of him thanks to her culture and usage of language. Fortunately, she arrives on time at her college, where she finds out Roobesh studies there in the Department of Physics.

In chapter 10, '*Test of love*' (62), Normala is sent letters and roses by Rahul. The author satirically leverages to point out that "she [is] allergic to pollen, but GVM never seemed to remember that" (63). Nirmala tries to avoid her destiny, which is written in the film script, and asks Rahul to jump off a cliff to prove his love, "she didn't particularly like this test of love ritual, but GVM was very fond of it, and it invariably made it to the script" (66). Above this narrative line, GVM is sitting down, holding a megaphone, and directing Nirmala's film. Another alternative illustrated love test (that should have been possible for the film) are the lover drinking poison, escaping from a train accident, or fighting against a lion. Finally, Rahul jumps off the bridge.

In chapter 11, '*Leap of faith*' (68), Varun still harasses Normala, telling her sentences such as:

Varun: All girls are the same! No means yes. You're very pretty when you get angry. Ask me to do anything. Anything at all. To prove my love.

Normala: Okey. Here's an idea. Why don't you leave me alone?

Varun: Anything but that... look, shall I jump off this bridge?

Normala: And of what use will that be to anyone? (73)

Finally, Varun jumps off the bridge. The main consequence of having referents in movies such as Rahul, who harasses Nirmala and it works in the film, even his surroundings support this behaviour, is that the audience keeps that in their minds, replicating it in real life, as it is the case of Varun pestering Normala due to GVM's unreal referents.

In chapter 12, '*The Master's Degree*' (78), Rahul is hospitalised and comes to his senses when Nirmala visits him. Even the doctor says, "It's a medical miracle!" (77) while Rahul answers, "Love is the only true miracle" (77), performing the romantic movie's cliches. Nirmala feels guilty about his fall, albeit she rejects Rahul's love since GVM

appears in her *bindi* with a sign which says “NO”, indicating she must deny Rahul for the film. She (magically) remembers she has to go to the US that night for a master’s degree. Even Nirmala thinks, “Master’s in what?” (79), recognising she is following GVM instructions. To finish the scene chapter, Rahul, who was at death’s door, “[gets] up with superhuman effort and [does] what he did best” (80), playing electric guitar choreographed by the medical staff.

On the other hand, in chapter 13, ‘*Eye-witness*’ (82), a policeman visits Normala at her college to interrogate her about Varun’s jump. However, the policeman shows to be more interested in knowing if Normala loves Varun than in Varun’s jump:

Policeman: [Varun] was doing this [jumping off a bridge] to prove his love.

Normala: What it proves is that he does not have a brain.

Policeman: So you don’t love him?

Normala: I don’t even know anything about him! Actually, I wanted to file a case against him for harassing me. (83-84)

Normala will focus her attention on Roobesh. In chapter 14, ‘*Across the Oceans*’ (87), “Rahul [catches] the next plane to the US... [finds] out which state she [is] in... And [identifies] her university without any problem” (88). This satiric description evidences the absurdity of mainstream productions, where characters are involved in events illogically without further explanation. Rahul asks Nirmala for marriage, but she puts up a fight, answering, “[she is] not convinced that [he loves] her” (90). Rahul still manifests his love by renting a calash and singing, “random Americas joined Rahul as he sang to woo his ladylove” (92).

In chapter 15: ‘*Coffee?*’ (92), “Varun [is] arrested by the policeman he was released from the hospital. This never happened in the GVM movies he’d watched” (93). The narrator meta reflects on the influence of canonised characters who appear in popular culture and perform a role that might be a real crime, such as chasing a woman. Normala is so grateful that she calls Roobesh to ask him to have a cup of coffee together, and after a while, holding onto the phone, he confirms the date. Normala tells the situation to her best friend, Aditi, and she mocks a small amount of her singing, “Normala and Roobesh sitting on a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G! (98), portraying a real common situation.

In chapter 16: ‘*Sare Jahan Se Acha*’ (98), Nirmala explains a small quantity of her Indian culture to an American classmate (who wonders why she is wearing a Saree in winter). Nirmala sings the patriotic children's song *Sare Jahan Se Acha*, written by Muhammad Iqbal in the ghazal style of Urdu poetry. After that, she doubts if she can

wear pants and sweatshirts, but GVM suddenly appears to remember that she is an intellectual woman, so she cannot improvise in the film or get out of the canon.

In chapter 17: '*Stupid Boobesh*' (104), Normala and Roobesh have a date and exchange their interests. Such as, in the real world, there are some of Roobesh's likings that Normala does not share, but, despite it, she "tried to be open-minded" (107).

In chapter 18, '*Heart-Throb Bandana*' (109), the implausible story of Rahul continues, "Rahul has become a football star in Normala's University. He checked his email to see if Normala had replied to his seventy-seventh love letter. Nevertheless, there was only one piece of news from his father. He was not enrolled in any programmes, but that was a minor detail" (109). Rajendran and Subramaniam's narrative lines are still sarcastic, highlighting the untenable plot of Normala and Rahul. Normala ordered Rahul to run naked after the football match, obliged by GVM, who continued inside her *bindi*.

After several days of hanging out together, in chapter 19, '*To ask or not to ask?*' (114), Normala wonders with Aditi if she is in a relationship with Roobesh because none of them talks about it. Although this questioning seldom appears in mainstream teen graphic novels because of the speed of the events.

In chapter 20, '*The President speaks*' (120), Rahul is in prison, and Normala gets him out. Even though Rahul does not have a visa and will be deported, he requires a phone call in which he speaks with Barack Obama. He tells of the police officer, ordering them to release Rahul under the slogan "Love and Only Love" (124), a mantra that will justify the couple's behaviour until the end of the book. After Rahul crash into a cupboard, "Normala wanted to laugh very badly... But she cried instead when GVM appeared in her third eye. She ran to the hospital in slow motion" (125-126). In order to continue with the unrealistic plot, Normala is obliged again to follow the script and contradict herself in performing her leading character role. At last, she agrees, "YES! Every time I said no, I meant yes!" (127), leaving clear the lack of free will for women in the mainstream.

On the opposite side, in chapter 21, '*Friends*' (128), Normala and Roobesh set out a common couple discussion about if they are just a friend or more than friends, in other words, if they have a love relationship or not. Their interaction speed differs from that of Normala and Rahul, who present unrealistic periods for each life stage.

In chapter 22: '*The Twist*' (133), there is a plot twist, and Rahul admits his father won't admit her because she is poor. There is a meta reflection about the different roles performed in different movies by Normala accompanied by an illustration of her as a

stripper “Nirmala had won the hearts of underworld Dons earlier, but that was in the role of a sexy undercover cop. She wondered how she was going to manage this one” (141).

In chapter 23: ‘*Restoration by pizza*’ (142), Normala and Aditi wonder why Roobesh does not show signs of life. After crying a bit, Normala decides to eat a pizza, venting her sorrows with food, a process some girls go through to feel better after bad news.

Rahul displays his attractiveness in chapter 24: ‘*The Magnetic Man*’ (150), appearing muscular without a t-shirt, facing his father’s mobsters. It is revealed that his father is a capo. At the end of the chapter, the mobsters, Nirmala and Rahul, unrealistically hold their hands under their slogan “Love and Only Love” (155).

Due to the apparent lack of interest shown by Roobesh in chapter 25: ‘*It’s over*’ (156), Nirmala decides to continue her life without him, wearing his most beautiful clothes, ignoring Roobesh in the college, an immature behaviour that could be attributed to a teenager because of her inexperience.

Nirmala tries to convince Khan, Rahul’s father, in chapter 26, ‘*The Great Khan*’ (164), begging her for an opportunity to show her value. Khan’s feebleness is his dead wife’s portrait (Begum), which rules every decision through divine signs. Undoubtedly, Begum throws a flower (168), and the capo decides to give Nirmala a chance to demonstrate her value. On the other hand, in chapter 27, ‘*It’s not over*’ (169), Normala is told that Roobesh dropped his mobile phone into the water so he could not answer any of her calls, so she raises their relationship again. Nirmala earns Khan’s heart by cooking an exaggerated breakfast in chapter 28, ‘*The Way to a man’s heart*’ (175), leading the reader to believe that just by manipulating food, anyone can manage a capo. Normala confesses she overacted with Roobesh in chapter 29, ‘*Skirt Power*’ (181) and goes to the hospital after being informed he has an accident.

The story of Nirmala and Rahul finishes in chapter 30, ‘*The End*’ (188), with a happy ending when Nirmala imposes two conditions on the capo, reducing the salt intake and giving away their money to the poor (190-191). Khan accepts that since the ending must be happy in a mainstream book and all the standards are illustrated (194), the whole family hug each other in a “group hug”. The book’s slogan is mentioned by Nirmala, “Love and Only Love”, and GVM is drawn with the thumbs up and the phrase “The End” on his jumper. On the contrary, in chapter 31, ‘*The Beginning*’ (195), as indicated in the title, Normala keeps a conversation with Roobesh in which they clarify the previous

misunderstanding, and they start again flirting, starting to get to know each other. Both ends and the stories are opposed, creating a clear contrast between the real and fancy worlds. Through the comments of the own director, who directs Nirmala, the ironical narrative lines of Rajendran and Subramaniam, and the mirror story of Normala, the deconstruction of the mainstream is straightforward. Furthermore, the creation of parallel stories provides an unconventional referent for readers, who may identify with Normala's feelings and behaviour.

Chapter 11. Sorority among Indian Women in “Mumbai Local” (2015) by Diti Mistry and “The Poet, Sharmila” (2015) by Ita Mehrotra

Although the trend of women supporting other women against patriarchal oppression has always existed, it was not until “the end of the sixties that the writer Kate Millett proposed the term sisterhood” (Cámara 1) to define this extended behaviour providing this word with a new meaning which went beyond the female academic group; she would use the term sisterhood to name “the union of all women without making a distinction between social class or ethnic origin” (Cámara 2). However, in the words of Gracia Alonso some years later, after having read ‘sisterhood’ by Kate Millett in English and the French word *sororité*, the Mexican author Mexican Marcela Lagarde proposes *sororidad* (sorority) to define the collaborative behaviour among women. According to C. Mohanty, solidarity is characterised by mutuality, accountability, and understanding of shared interests as the foundation for relationships between diverse communities. It emphasises voluntary cooperation and collaboration among individuals who have consciously decided to join forces and fight together rather than assuming a shared experience of oppression (7). Sorority would become a term to define the solidarity and support among women under a patriarchal environment.

In “Mumbai Local” by Diti Mistry, the second story of the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), there is a set of comic strips depicting an intuitive sense of sorority among Indian women in Delhi. No matter the cultural position or the social status, when the main character is in trouble, all women surrounding her gather to help. In the preface, Diti Mistry, a native of Delhi, explains her move and impressions when she arrived in Mumbai in an autobiographical comic strip. Due to India's heterogeneity and large dimensions, it is crucial to understand the differences between the two capitals, Delhi and Mumbai. The city of Delhi has 80% fewer inhabitants, 3% low-priced rents, and 152 more universities. At the same time Mumbai stands out for its safety, nightlife, 24/7 commerce, means of transport (particularly the easiness of public transport), and job opportunities among others (Versus). Because of these differences, the first impressions of the author towards Mumbai are a sense of “hardship and determination of people, [...] hustle and bustle [which] took [her] time to

adjust” (Mistry 12). This sensation is represented in the cover of the comic through a chaotic drawing of people, buildings, food and shops on both sides of the train tracks, which go across the sides of the page, and a traffic sign in the middle announcing “Mumbai Local” as a mess of stimulus and crowd, everything seen by the main character while questioning ‘How? Where? Who? What?’ just over her head as a thought (without the speech balloons), but at the same time, giving the reader a starting point to approach the story thanks to the order of the words over her head.

It can be observed how the author tries to connect the reader with the story (which is set in the busy life inside the Mumbai train) and with the characters (thanks to the reactions of the main character as an external observer or “outsider” as she defined her presence), to make both non-Mumbai and Western readers empathise (13-14). Both pages 13 and 14 describe women in a carriage that the author previously defines as a “Ladies' compartment, [...] with a certain energy that was quite different from all the other compartments” (Mistry 12). These women are physically different from each other; they have different clothes, hairstyles, and behaviour, doing all sorts of actions, showing the rich Indian cultural diversity. We can see women praying, putting on make-up, selling fish and fruit, preparing vegetables or singing. Each of these characters has her own individual life, customs, and concerns, each distinct from the other.

However, the main character is threatened by an insect (16-17). At that moment, the plot twists and all the women leave their chores and develop a function to protect the threatened character in the act of sorority. The main character compares them to the “efficiency of an army unit” (Mistry 17). It might represent an analogy between the patriarchal system, whose oppressive ideology mistreats women, and the different feminist struggles with different means to achieve the same goal: the abolition of a sexist society. India is a country with a multitude of rituals, customs and routines. Even within each community, each person has their own ideals and perception of the world. Although the feminist struggle is lived differently, as the different women who appear in this train, they all support each other in a resilient act showing sorority in the face of a unique threat, as in this case may be nationalism. It is in that moment of togetherness, as the author describes on page 20 when she herself feels accepted within that heterogeneous community, which could be a reference to belonging or not to the question of categorising oneself as a feminist, which is more than a question of name, is a question of reaching the goal through different means. On the authority of Mehrotra:

There is definitely a sisterhood and a friendship that has led to all the later protests organised by women, with women interviewing female leaders of different movements, protests, and struggles. Nevertheless, in some way, it's not just about them at all. They are so open about sharing what they're doing, saying who they are, and also about really giving space to others.

In “The Poet, Sharmila”, the author Ita Mehrotra illustrated the support amongst women figuring out Irom Sharmila due to the rights violated by the AFSPA. It is an autobiographical comic illustrating the sensations of the author Ita Mehrotra in her visit to her mentor, Irom Sharmila, during her stay in the Imphal Central Jail, where she was on a hunger strike after the “*Malom Massacre*” (Ravinder 2015) where AFSPA killed ten civilians. “Paradoxically, in all its variants, the nation-state, which is responsible for providing security to its citizens, is a repository of violent means, and has the legitimate authority to use them, and it has used them even against its own citizens” (Ranjan 442), albeit along the history of India there have been power abuse and rapes by the AFSPA.

In fact, “most of such rapes are inflicted with impunity by the armed forces members because of the protective provisions included in AFSPA. Such incidents never attract widespread anger because the victims are often from minority ethnic or religious groups” (Ranjan 440) whose sufferings include harassment, sexual abuse and gang rapes and violent attacks, although the “*Malom Massacre*” was such an extremely violent attack that was the straw that broke the camel's back for Irom Sharmila. As Mehrotra explains in the preface “the violence women face in Manipur is brought on largely by the strong presence of the military, who rape and loot at will with the protection of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act” (96), even though she claims although she feels fears, she does what she wants when she wants which is an excellent example of resilience together with her comic contribution denouncing the actual situation she faced, giving visibility to a feminist icon who spent many years shut in jail.

The comic starts with one of the main characters, Ita, sitting on her chair, updating herself with the news on the computer (97), with a severe expression, accompanied by her cat, who is lying on its bed in her studio. In the background, she has a set of brushes, a bookcase, three drawings, some notebooks, and a vase of flowers. Behind her is a bin with some sheets of crumpled papers whose charcoal trace is pressed down too hard, creating a dark zone. This complex trace will appear in the most traumatic panels along the strips. A speech balloon comes from the computer on panel two (98), providing the time in which the story is set and the context for her serious facial expression. In the

narrative balloon (panel 2, 98) it can be read a piece of news from the Indian newspaper The National Daily, published on the 9th of February, 2014, reporting the sexual assault of a Manipuri girl when she was at home (suggesting the army might have done it since they had the power of entering into citizen's homes). Then she reads another newspaper which informs Irom Sharmila started her 14 years of hunger strike against AFSPA (panel 3), meaning that after fourteen years since the beginning of her protest, abuse of power by the army is happening, as if nothing had changed. This fact discourages Ita and makes her remember her visit to Sharmila in a thinking balloon on panel 4. Putting off her glasses on the desk (panel 5, 98), she starts her flashback to four years after the present day introducing the harrowing encounter as "... and what a crazy trip it was!" (98). In the following pages, some of the lines delimiting the panels are non-existent, being the narrative balloons or the own drawing, the ones that define each panel. The first scene of her memory is about the flight ticket with Delhi Imphal, the 1st of May 2010 (99), a tiny plane flying, and her portrayal looking through the window, with a narrative balloon wondering Sharmila's feelings. She doesn't know if she has strong emotions when Sharmila would see her and uses the term "outsider" (99) to define herself. The term "outsider" is also used by Diti Mistry in her comic "Mumbai Local" when she travels by train in another city different from hers, Delhi. Both authors consider themselves outsiders since they understand the other deals with various problems and might have different identities, ideologies, traditions, moods, etc. from them. This conception is evidence that India is so heterogeneous that two authors brought up within it feel they are outlanders when they travel to another city.

On the other hand, it proves the sorority and respect amongst women since, from the very beginning, the main characters keep a distance, understanding that the others have issues that might differ from theirs, although they share the nationality. The capital city of Manipur, Imphal, is described as "a rice bowl, surrounded by hills" (99) a cultural reference to India as one of the leading producers of this cereal. The following narrative line (99) depicts the path Ita follows by bus to arrive at the Imphal Central prison across the Ima Keithel, a market owned and -run by women (*Ima* means mother in Manipuri) since the 16th century thanks to their self-reliance and independent attitudes to support their homes (Murthy and Kumar 2022). The road is dark and broken (panel 9, 99) and contains holes showing the jail's decadent conditions.

The security guard (panels 10-12, 100) is depicted with a moustache, cap and uniform, remaining to a Nazi, asking many direct questions with an accusatory attitude “Meet Sharmila?? That’s impossible for you!” (panel 10), “What group do you represent?” (panel 11), “Where do you come from? Show me your documents!” (panel 12). The author describes the interrogation as lengthy and mistrustful by the security guard: “After hours of questions, and with a great deal of suspicion, I was taken to meet Irom” (100). The room where Sharmila is admitted is in J.N. Hospital within the Prison Ward, according to the letters hung on the doors (panel 16). The obscure and terrific doors prepare the way for a shocking image of an intubated Sharmila doing a handstand (panel 17, 101) who invites Ita to sit down. Sharmila explains that doing a handstand, referencing asanas (the typical yoga position), keeps her senses alert (102), probably because the government locks her up. Then Sharmila recommends the typical food of Manipur to Ita (panel 19, 101) and remains Eromba, a traditional dish made of chutney.

Ita feels surprised since Sharmila has not eaten anything in years (102), but it does not stop her from talking about a common topic for everybody, like a city's food. Ita gives Sharmila a painting (panel 20), and Sharmila thanks her for saying she will hang it on her walls in her collection of pictures sent by all her friends around the world, something that gives her hope (102). With that comment, Sharmila points out the importance of art as a way of escaping, especially during a crisis or struggle, not only painting but also writing (103) because she is reading and writing endlessly. In her book (panel 21, 103), there are lines of peace “I’ll spread the fragrance of peace from ... my birth in the ages to come, to every nook cranny of the world” with the inspiration of books about Gandhi, Marx, and Poems of Manibur, representing the importance of the culture for Sharmila. Then her desire to be free is expressed (panel 22): “I dream of my life outside”. She explains her dreams about riding a bicycle, an innocent sport that nowadays is still prohibited for women in some remote Indian villages, while she imagines herself riding one.

However, Sharmila explains that she will be free and enjoy it when the violence of AFSPA disappears, and she will even meet her mother (panel 23, 103). Sharmila also reports that her grandmother was born in 1939 and fought in Manipur against the British during the second war. For Sharmila, her historical and cultural heritage is remarkable and has shaped her activist behaviour. This cultural reference is essential to understand Sharmila’s struggle. Women in Manipur have been involved in two wars called Nupi Lan, “which started as an agitation by Manipuri women against the economic policies of the

Maharaja and the Marwari monopolists, later on, changed its character to become a movement for constitutional and administrative reform in Manipur” (Yambem 325), the first agitation was in 1904, when women fought against the British because they sent Manipur men to rebuild a Police Agent's cottage and, the second one in 1939 when the British chaotically exported Manipur rice. Ita illustrates Sharmila’s memories about her grandmother struggling with “traditional weapons and [...] able to hold back the British forces” (panel 24, 103), where “mothers and sisters” (104) defended their rights.

Sharmila connects Nupi War with the current women's protests in Kangla camp against the army, pointing out a painting on the wall (panel 25, 104) in which it can be read, “Indian army rape us [in a placard]. Manipuri Mothers Sage Protest at Kangla [footnote]”. In the painting, five naked women are protesting without weapons. Ita describes Sharmila’s activism (panel 26, 105) as a way of resilience against the attacks her town has suffered over the decades by the army:

As Sharmila spoke of dreams, food, family and the struggle for peace in Manipur, I realised that she was a young woman first and an activist second. Her choices had indeed made her life different, and yet the longing to experience, love and grow was the same. The last thing I expected in the jail ward of Imphal hospital was to make a new friend. (105)

In the last sentence, the author is influenced by Sharmila and emphasises with her discourse revealing a sorority feeling similar to the one shown in *Mumbai Local*, not only within the last statement but also within panel 26, which frames the text where Sharmila and Ita are riding their bicycles across the hills out of jail. On the other hand, the handshake, which starts on page 105 between the two main characters where the hunger strike is reminded through Sharmila’s intubated wrist drawing. Furthermore, the whole page is put down roots, manifesting the importance of nature for Indian women again. After that, there are two transitional panels which close de flashback (panels 27-28, 106); in the first one, Ita contemplates de doors of the hospital’s gates next to the guard, who holds a submachine gun while in the second the bus is leaving the prison. In the present day, Ita appears exhausted, sitting with her head over her arm on the desk (panel 29, 106) with her glasses misplaced. Her cat is awake, indicating that some time has passed. The narrative line which says, “Back in Delhi, I followed Sharmila’s story obsessively. Snippets of conversation repeatedly cut through the clutter of exams and work” (106) is accompanied by the invasion of some branches and flowers across the window (similar

to the ones drawn in the previous page). The newspaper photographs about the Nupi Lan demonstration in 1939 are hung on her wall.

The eye-opener experienced by the author has influenced her to the point that she faces “empty roads” (107) in the same manner Sharmila created a “universe within that locked room” (107). The character of Ita goes down the nightly streets of Delhi, jumping and contemplating the moon with her cat confronting her concerns with a peaceful and robust attitude (panel 30-32). In the epilogue, the character of Ita finishes the story by imagining Sharmila and herself riding their bikes across a field, being in peace (panel 33, 108). The narrative text reports the deplorable situation of Ita attempting to commit suicide, adding, “what I was doing was a protest to gain our right to life. I am very eager to live. When they repeal AFSPA, I will eat something, right here, right now” (Mehrotra 108), reflecting the fortress of Sharmila and Manipur women.

Conclusions

Due to the fact that the laws and the government of India still promotes a solid national identity with conservative political discourse allied to Hindu traditions and morality, opening the gap to the study of alternative responses in popular culture is crucial. This way, we can integrate and reflect upon the heterogeneity of such a rich country and provide old and new generations cultural spaces liberated from the oppressions of traditional stereotypes, which do not encompass all the gender identities.

India is a diversified country, which has suffered from several invasions. Two of them have been crucial for its development in the twenty-first century. The first was during the Golden Age, with the Aryan Empire's invasion, promoting social divisions into the castes and extolling the pureblood or religion. The second one that influenced India notably was the British Empire, which established the British Raj along with the country, trying to change Hindu traditions just because they considered Indian citizens as wild people who had to be domesticated by the Western literate and educated civilisation. Due to the British Raj's oppression and the contrast between the two cultures, India reached its independence in 1949. The side effect was that during the British Raj government, a nationalist discourse acclaiming the Aryan myth started to emerge among the Indians since there was a sense of loss of belonging and identity during all the invasions.

Conservative influential men of high caste took advantage of the situation during the British Raj. Savarkar defined *Hindutva* for the first time in 1923, a term offered to represent the subsequent doctrine after the Independence of India lasting until the twenty-first century. The current government of India still promotes a robust national identity using a conservative political discourse allied to Hindu traditions and morality. It opened the gap of alternative responses in popular culture and is crucial to promoting an education of quality and equality, liberated from the oppressions of traditional stereotypes that do not encompass males and females.

On the other hand, before the Indian Independence, while the nationalist patriarchal discourse started to flourish, the first feminist organisations were settled in the capital and urban area. The feminist Indian movement was not as strong as the nationalist one. It was a new movement tackling not only a conservative Hindu society but also questioning the Western lifestyle and culture and defending an egalitarian society keeping folklore and abolishing castes and offering alternative femininities and masculinities.

However, even in the same country, women have different attitudes and worries, so they use different methodologies when they fight for a unique joint project: the elimination of abuse and discrimination. That is why it is essential to adopt an intersectional feminist approach.

Feminist scholars, activists, and independent artists and writers are fighting to abolish the predominant patriarchal standards in India, responding to and providing alternative approaches to gender-diverse identities in their publications and activism. Exposing women's vulnerability and transforming it into resilience, learning through healing stories and resisting in their defence of the movement for a better society are the main methods echoed in the corpus analysed in this dissertation. These graphic novels and comics, either printed or posted on the Internet, provide a glimpse of hope towards change against the neo-nationalist discourse.

In the graphic novel *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Vyam, Durgabai, et al., we read the story of one hundred years of fighting against the caste system led by B. R. Ambedkar. The story has been created from B. R. Ambedkar's notes and an interview with him, so the information there is factual. Although B. R. Ambedkar's story was set in 1901, when he became aware of the discrimination suffered at school, a contemporary character is waiting next to another who starts to tell Ambedkar's biography. This fact indicates that nowadays, there is an extended lack of awareness among a part of the population about their history, who, at the same time, are the ones who mass media and governmental campaigns may manipulate through the nationalist discourse of *Hindutva*. Even nowadays, dalits are still discriminated against just for belonging to an untouchable family. Although the caste system was abolished, statistics show dalits are victims of rape, harassment and abuse in this graphic novel, the lack of cultural awareness of the British Raj as colonisers is explained, and how it was so difficult for an internationally educated Ambedkar to access water, demonstrating the difficulties of scaling up in the caste system. The story also sets an example of how the individual's social circumstances directly affect their life and capacity to live, even to survive. It might suggest a reflection on the possible controversy of those discourses which use the term resilience as a slogan to hold people responsible for their wounds, as Sarah Brucke defends.

Focusing on the present day, in response to the current neo-nationalist spread ideology, Amruta Patil writes and draws a graphic novel entitled *Kari* (2008), where she

depicts a queer heroine living an ordinary life. The novel satirically reflects upon daily situations when she receives uncomfortable commentaries from unknown people and her conservative relatives, as well as upon her sexual desires and experiences as a homosexual woman who lives freely. Kari is a deconstructed gender character who heals her love problems after a breakup, death, working issues, and flatmates and exposes people's prejudices. She is an inspirational unconventional character that breaks the traditional gender expectations and dares to live a sexuality that is not only controlled by men or society.

The last graphic novel included in the dissertation is the ironical *Nirmala and Normala* (2014) by Sowmya Rajendran and Niveditha Subramaniam, in which two parallel characters live utterly differently. The story of Normala is logical and believable. It could be transferred to the real world, but the novel questions why mainstream productions, mass media and popular fiction promote the image of an unreal woman. The faithful women's referents offered by these communication methods are limited and rigid. They cling to constructed stereotypes of submissive women who worry about their physical image and perfect housewife abilities without any capacity for decision-making. Albeit, Nirmala is a girl promoting the stereotype of a traditional woman who wants to fit into society. Behind the character of Normala, there is a question of what the term 'normal' means. The book implies a comprehensive reflection on social referents and the concept of being average.

Priya's Mirror (2016) by Paromita Vohra et al. is an open-access comic that can be read online. It is the second chapter of the PRIYA project, with a protagonist whose mission is to achieve gender equality among the population and assist minorities. It is the product of a project of two comics, several children's books online in 3D, and augmented reality with Priya as the heroine. Mainly, *Priya's Mirror* deals with the victims of acid attacks from a feminist perspective, a missing topic in Indian literature. The authors provide extensive background for all the characters in the comic, something unusual in traditional literature. On the other hand, the male villain chooses to oppress women and kidnap them in a setting where acid attacks victims are marginalised by society, as they find their trauma challenging to heal due to their disfigured complexion. *Priya's Mirror* appeals to Goddess, although her tool is an ordinary object: a mirror. The backdrop behind this object is more profound since it can be used to reflect the image and, at the same time to remember (think) about yourself. Through its narrative lines and illustrations, *Priya's*

Mirror also provides visibility of acid attack victims who become resilient and continue with their lives and studies, changing laws and setting up businesses after being aware of their inner value.

The webcomic *Royal Existentials* (2014), by Aarthi Parthasarathy and Chaitanya Krishnan, is published independently every week (till 2018) as part of a satirical project which mocks politics, the capitalist system and society in general from a feminist perspective. The most exciting point is the connection of old Victorian-era pictures with the culture of memes. Thanks to its format, anybody can comment on their website, providing an anonymous discussion, so it is a safe place to express ideas through the weekly strip. Another feminist project is the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) by Priya Kuriyan et al., a graphic narrative which includes a compilation of fourteen comics written and illustrated by Indian female authors, who expose all kinds of references concerning Hindu culture and experiences of gender violence, vulnerability, and resilience. Published as a consequence of a brutal gang rape and homicide of a medical student in the city of Delhi, these comics turn into a fight for the common goal of eliminating the abuse, sexual violence and discrimination in India.

“That’s not Fair” by Harini Kannan reports with humour a family’s problem for having a dark-skinned female baby. It uses cartoons performing different roles and being exposed to human despair to fit standards, overtaking all the obstacles in spite of the abusive conventional mass media. Developing an outdoor life may be challenging for a woman, even in a modern and developed city such as Mumbai, as depicted in “Mumbai Local” by Diti Mistry. One of the most compelling examples is that there is an extraordinary coach for women instead of providing a special coach for aggressors or criminals. This different treatment towards women as potential victims still perpetuates constructed gender masculinities and femininities since it does not include ungendered people. Albeit, Diti illustrates a variety of cultural activities developed by Indian women who evidence the country's rich culture and the different traditions developed by each community. Despite this variety, when Diti suffers adversity, they all react similarly, creating protection for Diti, even if she is an outsider. “Mumbai Local” definitely illustrates a story where the feminist movement is loved in different ways, but sorority (equality, protection and support amongst women) is possible. There is another example of resistance in “The Photo” by Reshu Singh, where the protagonist tries to avoid the predominant patriarchal standards in India, responding and providing alternative

approaches to gender identities, and struggling and facing old traditions imposed by her parents, who pressure her to get married. However, this comic shows an encouraging protagonist who challenges her parents' perspective and avoids the loss of her self-identity, depicting all her attributes and future dreams out of the Indian canon along its pages.

Focusing on education, Soumya Menon draws a graphic narrative criticising how traditional educational charts ideal gender roles in her comic "An Ideal Girl". She uses sarcastic panels between the main strips that show the supposed good practice and illustrates the arduous effort women should develop to be considered at the same level as men. Yet, even when they 'reach' that level, they are criticised, victimised, and blamed. Furthermore, Menon exposes that men are the ones that need women to carry out their good habits; they need to be served, they need to be obeyed, and they need someone to take care of their families. "Ever After" by Priyanka Kumar introduces monsters in the storytelling. As Kumar expresses it, it is inspired by all the conversations maintained in different living rooms by rural women. "The Prey", a comic by Neelima P. Aryan, introduces an alternative story of a girl who captures her aggressor and avoids being raped. Although the plot and characters are explicitly illustrated, the protagonist, supported by her mother, has the cleverness to defeat the criminal, presented as a mixture of eagle, donkey and man. Women are hardly ever represented as those who defeat rapists. The goal of this comic is to support the idea that in order to evolve as a society, we need to invest on the education of men instead of representing women as sufferers who are portrayed as 'victims' with a negative, guilty and weak connotation.

"Asha, Now" by Hemavathy Guha illustrates a sexual harassment episode that is considered normal in the family homes. The victim feels guilty for damaging her family's honour. However, this story's final is crucial since she is supported by her mother, which implies a generational evolution. Concentrating on outdoor harassment, "Basic Space" by Kaveri Gopalakrishnan offers a strong woman struggling against the system, who draws a primary line between her space and the rest of the people to demand respect and freedom. In '*Someday*' by Samidha Gunjal, we find an empowered figure who embodies the Goddess Kali and fights against men, pulling up their heads. This is an inspiring reference to healing frustrations when men in the street harass women. Regarding myths, "Broken Lines" by Vidyun Sabhaney combines ancient myths and stories with the present day, and compares the story of sexual harassment and abuse

towards women, which have been repeated since a long time ago until nowadays, with the vision of the dead people in the news at lunchtime. In this line, “Ladies, Please Excuse”, Angela Ferrao reports the difficulties for women in job interviews, as the questions are mainly related to private lives. As satirically detailed in “Inner Beauty and Melanin” by Bhavana Singh, advertising significantly impacts the population. She creates visual messages that can be used to empower people to struggle and abolish prejudices and abuses of people against women and their skin tone.

It is a cheering comic belonging to a significant project supporting the dignity of Indian women because there is still a danger of speaking about universal feminism. Not all women share the same experiences, and they might have different concerns in their agenda. An example of a conventional woman who is not a heroine, neither a victim nor a sufferer, is the main character of “The Walk” by Deepani Seth, a woman who walks in the middle of the night towards a bridge. Although she is alone, she is not scared, and the comic suggests that towns should be places where a woman can safely walk alone. “The Poet Sharmila” by Ita Mehrotra shows a poet who has become an Indian symbol of liberation, fighting peacefully for the elimination of the army which does not protect citizens.

This dissertation has successfully achieved its main objectives by conducting a comprehensive study of the representation of women in the Hindutva discourse, within the framework of the Indian feminist movement. The research was based on an account of the historical sources that reflect the role of women in Hindu society, with a particular focus on how nationalism constructs the caste system as well as gender and sexual relations in India. In addition, our research provided an understanding of the evolution of India from the British Empire to the present day and the impact of feminist academic production in response to nationalist policies.

The second objective has been to contextualise the South Asian feminist movement in four phases. The three first waves were important to understand the relationship of this countercurrent reformist movement with notions of nationalism and with the influence of the British colonisation. However, attention to the current fourth wave became important, as technology has played an essential role in disseminating awareness of the social realities of India that are represented in the literary works.

The third objective deals with depicting how gender, caste and sexuality are represented within the visual culture in the graphic novels and comics of contemporary women authors. To achieve this objective, the corpus has been classified according to the topics repeated in each graphic novel and comic. Identifying common patterns repeated in each literary work has allowed their classification and subsequent discussion and analysis.

The last of the objectives was considered after making a meticulous selection of the corpus. Some of the works in the corpus were published while a compilation of primary and secondary sources for the theoretical part was been made. Due to the characteristics of the corpus, the best way to understand and compare the patterns in the works was to interview the authors. I had the opportunity to interview Harini Kannan, Diti Mistry, Priyanka Kumar, Deepani Seth, Ita Mehrotra, Hemavathy Guha, Angela Ferrao and Samidha Gunjal and have an enriching conversation about each of their works and the analysis confirming this dissertation's relevance.

Except for the case of Paromita Vohra, the rest of the writers have rarely granted interviews concerning the results exhibited in this dissertation. For this reason, it was excellent material to support my conclusions and the analysis of the works since they could give me feedback and an impression of my interpretation. We conducted an interview with Paromita Vohra, but it is not included in the appendix to this dissertation because it was published during the research in *Indial@gs*. However, the interview did not exclusively focus on *Priya's Mirror* but rather an overview of her projects and vision on social issues.

Throughout the research, I encountered several difficulties. First, one must be cautious when choosing the primary sources of information since, as this dissertation has shown, historical sources can be manipulated. For this, I have relied on Indian authors who support the feminist theory, comparing facts and ideologies between manuscripts and avoiding political propaganda. Within my analysis, I have tried to cover all possible sources of information, requesting access to many libraries and acquiring books that could only be obtained in print. When I began my research in 2016 to acquire many of the works, I had to wait a period since there were no copies available or they needed the English version, and I had to request it from the United States. On the other hand, regarding the interviews, it was not very easy to find their contact information. However, I was able to gather information within their circle of scholars, getting access to them to

request an interview. I got all the authors of *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) agreed to an interview. However, only half of them could be done in time to support this dissertation due to work problems and the working hours of the artists. One of our near future projects is to interview the rest of them and publish all the interviews.

This dissertation has allowed us to analyse and demonstrate the social reforms that have taken place in India and the current signs of the subordination of women in such a multicultural country. The originality of this research relays on the fact that there are not many studies conducted about independent comics and graphic novels produced by Indian women authors. The analysis of the literary works evidences the social claims and struggles of these writers-activists against a patriarchal system that established an ancient canon based on gender roles created with manipulative purposes. The opportunity to interview the authors and discuss their works and ideas provided originality to this dissertation and left future lines of research open. For instance, the forthcoming publication of an essay on independent graphic novels and comics through social networks and their impact worldwide. Another exciting topic is how new patriarchal practices are being structured within the internet and the feminist social movement which confronts these models, such as *mansplaining* through networks, forums, or podcasts.

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Appendix

Interview with Harini Kannan

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

The illustrator, Harini Kannan (HK), works alone and is based in India. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in Design from the National Institute of Fashion Technology in Chennai in 2012. Harini graduated in 2015 from Bangalore's Srishti School of Art, Design, and Technology with a postgraduate degree in illustration. She also completed a brief course in 3D animation at Chennai's Emagic Animation Company and Academy a year later since her area of interest is at the crossroads of digital fashion illustrations and cartoon animation. As a result, she has become quite skilful at creating animated GIFs and illustrations. Harini is a very active person, primarily through social networks such as Instagram.

The purpose of this interview with the creator of the comic "That's Not Fair" was to gain a deeper understanding of her comic and its place within the artist's body of work as it relates to my dissertation. Additionally, the interview will provide an opportunity to discuss the current state of feminism in India. The interview took place by Zoom on Friday, 29th April 2022, at 08:00 (GTM + 2).

The method used for this interview was a face-to-face discussion involving participant Harini Kannan and researcher Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz (RSM), regarding contemporary feminism in the graphic novels and comics format. This study aims to identify and collect data related to the field of gender studies. The interview was unstructured, with various questions, depending on the subject. By using the qualitative research method of an interview, which relies on asking a series of questions, the researcher has gained an in-depth understanding of the perceptions regarding feminist responses in the literary *oeuvre* known as "That's Not Fair", in addition to having obtained relevant knowledge resulting from the extensive answers given by the interviewee.

Kannan speaks English, Tamil, and a bit of Hindi. As she is fluent in these languages, and thanks to her education and experience in illustration, in 2015, she took part in the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) with her comic entitled

"That's Not Fair", a satirical story about the importance for women in India to have light skin even before a baby is born. That year she won the CII Design Excellence Award in Visual Communication. She also participated as an illustrator in the project *Learn Luxembourgish*, by Liz Wenger (2017).

RSM: Harini, you are a well-known illustrator. How has the Internet helped you in the publication of your work?

HK: The rise of technology and the Internet has benefited the art community. If you are professionally trained, you only need physical products like paints and easels. As a self-taught illustrator, I only need my iPad, Procreate, and a tiny square canvas. The messages are far quicker on Instagram and platforms like it. Then it is easier to share my visual ideas across those platforms. They help me to communicate and engage with my audience locally and globally. Digital portfolios are much easier to circulate and smaller, so you don't have to carry those high portfolios to design studios. The access is better worldwide for broader exposure. Using the Internet allows you to create a great portfolio.

RSM: On your website, you have a 'GIF Section'. What are the differences between a gift and a motionless illustration? What can you express with each?

HK: A GIF is a format used to compress animation and reduce image size. To some extent, the GIF quickly became a recognised format for creating short videos that go on loops. Illustrations are generally static, and if subjects call for more action, attention or exaggeration, then we have to make it a little dynamic to obtain a better mode for that engagement. For example, I made a series of my experience with Covid-19, and in one of the GIFs, the transition of cough to chest congestion is much more effective than a frame-by-frame analogue animation. Explaining this transition through illustrations like the ones you can find on Instagram, talking about each symptom, generates less impact on the subjects. Animation has a high impact, and it is closer to dual experience than illustration because we do not go through life in images, but through motion.

RSM: What do you think about illustration as the new means of communication?

HK: We can go back to the saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words". Nowadays, two pages of an editorial can be summarised with a bold illustration, and the reader can understand what the article is about quicker than reading two pages. Many international

magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Times* need an excellent visual cover to capture the attention quickly so that the reader will be more engrossed in what they must speak about. Then they go through what the editors have to talk about. Similarly, newspapers need cartoonists to lighten and sort out serious topics with satire, especially politics, when such an incomprehensible topic needs to be taken to the local population.

An illustration with humour would help them to lighten it up. Visuals also have a lot more impact than bubbles or text. These are the reasons why illustration is a strong means of communication. Even right now, emojis can be reduced to faster languages. Even the text we communicate is effectively reduced to one short caption in an emoticon. In my career, I have tried to illustrate school textbooks for faster comprehension. It is a way of breaking down many barriers in terms of language, and everyone can lend a language, which is vision. If you think about this idea, it is just a way of returning to the Cave Era or the Paleolithic.

RSM: Your projects show an extraordinary combination of colours, perhaps influenced by the various hues of typical Indian fabric, craftwork, markets, and cultural art in general. Have you ever noticed this? Also, how important is colour in expressing one's culture?

HK: As far as scholars are concerned, as my topics are bold, my choice of colours is bold too, and that subconscious choice of colour palette comes from my immediate surroundings. In India, you would see many environments filled with colour with a lot of psychedelic and gentle art. If I have to go back to an artistic moment, and then see my recent paintings, the majority of the subjects just come out purely because of colours. Like dancing in the cave, for example, where all the human art forms are holding hands together, and they are dancing. Colours play a remarkable role in conveying your desires and feelings to your audience. It might be obvious, but communication is bound to colours. Culture will always be a part of your expression. As long as you are rooted in your community, the subjects you take on will also be candid. Whenever you draw something, you cannot leave the culture to the side. It will be ingrained, and with every work you do, you give everything of your craft, and you cannot separate one from the other.

RSM: The illustration ‘*Columbus statue vandalized in central park*’ is an adaptation of the ‘*Landing of Columbus for the Capitol Rotunda*’. Along this line, there is a weekly comic called *Royal Existentials*, which retells Indian paintings from a feminist perspective. Do you think retelling history is essential as an answer to neo-nationalism?

HK: Definitely, that is correct. Going back to that century of history, it becomes an essential part of who you are right now, so you can’t leave out history if you really want to know the future. For instance, ‘*Royal Existentials*’ is more like a meme template. They choose a very static, old painting and then try to give it a funny and satirical connotation. It is a way of going back to Dadaism: posting the Second World War and then the art movement to cover it. People generally redefined aesthetics at that point. They didn’t want to believe in the beauty of the Renaissance. The concept of beauty totally changed during the great depression. That is why artists like Marcel Duchamp, in a way, vandalised the concept of art, and that is what we can see in ‘*Columbus statue vandalized in central park*’, in which I draw moustaches on the colonists’ faces.

What was considered beautiful 100 years ago is different now. Our aesthetics have evolved and changed through many events that we have come across in our lives. Another recent example is removing Columbus’s head because he represents the claiming of the land, having one race dominant over the other. Everything came to a point where they had to break free and find a root cost to all of it, and create an impression. Even in art, performance, or real life, when you keep digging completely into why things are happening the way they are, you always go back to history to find an answer. So, my illustrations are one way of satirically telling that Columbus was celebrated in the past, but he is not very celebrated now.

RSM: Have you ever felt undervalued as a female illustrator within your working environment or during your studies?

HK: No, I was completely fine.

RSM: You have recently exhibited your artwork independently in New York City. Have you perceived any similarities or differences in the public when they go to see your *oeuvre*?

HK: I was not physically present in New York during my show. However, the show had a great response among the locals, enhancing my career since 2015. The response I had in New York that year was emulated in India in 2018 or 2019. The acceptance of art is stronger now, including acceptance of the artist community and music community. Furthermore, the general celebration has been a lot better these years.

Similarly, I have exhibited in places such as independent comics based on gender-bender collectives in Bangalore. I was surprised by the response because some subjects are sensitive and could be seen as scandalous. Nevertheless, people were able to separate their notions and look at what artists were actually trying to say, and their acceptance of counter-perspectives also changed for the better. I am glad to see that the work I've been doing is finally gaining good exposure in India and the West. By focusing on the audience's background, people become attracted to these earnest subjects. I've realised that it is working well, which is a great thing.

RSM: You have lived in Chennai, Bangalore, and Bengaluru, among other cities. Do you think feminism is experienced in the same way in every state? Does it make sense to you to consider Indian feminism as heterogeneous? What I mean is, are there different paths to achieving social equity?

HK: Chennai and Bangalore are metropolitan cities, and many more women are working in the academic sector. Once you come to a level where men and women have to work in a city, or in an urban environment, there will naturally be respect because an educated working woman is not going to let go of her rights easily, and expectations about marriage have also changed. Nowadays, in India, we understand that a woman's place is not just in the kitchen. Instead of having a man on a pedestal all the time, we should reduce that pedestal and try to be on an equal level. We are achieving that.

On the other hand, in rural areas, women do everything city women do. They are strong and highly protective of children. At the same time, they are very stuck to the social constructs of what a woman should be. This backwardness is due to their being much more religious. They are subject to an organised tradition, and any thoughts beyond religion or the social construct are not encouraged. Whether they are ashamed of being a woman or thinking out loud, their character is involved. Sometimes, they do not want to be saved because women like structure. They do everything, including manual labour, but at the same time, women are so into a structure that even if they have one spark of an

idea, that they want to think about, and their surroundings are not cooperating with them, what can they do?

I think this understanding of feminism should come from men first because I do not know if this is just a passing trend, but in general, kitchens have changed a lot more in India since men started cooking. Being tied to the kitchen has been highlighted since men stepped into it. Nevertheless, and unfortunately, for feminism to gain ground, we have to start educating men to give women more rights, rather than women taking the rights, because women always have a problem negotiating their salaries, saying no, and being assertive. This type of behaviour happens both in rural and urban areas, although social constructs are a lot more rigid in rural areas, so whether or not a woman wants to escape them, I would leave it up to them.

RSM: In “That’s not Fair”, you illustrate the consequences of being a dark-skinned girl in India. Paradoxically, in European countries such as Spain, the more tanned you are, the wealthier you seem. Why do societies have this obsession with the skin nowadays? Do young people still hold this view or have they changed their attitudes?

HK: Skin complexion is not a story of today. We have to look back at history. From a historical perspective, we are bound to think that a light complexion is superior to a dark one, and at least in India, this idea stems from a long history of colonialism and self-hate. If someone tells you, “We are superior to you”, you have to do what they want. If someone is ruling over you, it is natural to feel self-hate because you tend to think you are less than that person, and then, what can you do to be at the same level? What can I do to be his counterpart? This is how the obsession with skin and colour appeared.

On the other hand, in Western culture, when you look tanned, it seems that you belong to the set of people who can take holidays and can go to islands or to Miami and can have a mobile phone because they are rich and have the money. So, what can others do in this case? What can those people who cannot afford to take vacations so often do? If you do not have the money or enough potential to make money, at least you can imitate the look, and here is where skin worries come in. In places where there has been colonialism, there is a sense of self-hate because you try to look like the upper classes. First, you observe what they can do, and then you think about what you can do to get there, so you start with the look, and then you start changing your body because you understand that this is where

respect comes from. The working class and anything concerning it are constantly put down. Unfortunately, this is how society is built, and I hope it changes soon.

I can safely say that Generation Z is approaching this issue more progressively to the extent that colour doesn't matter anymore. They see a variety of skin colours and recognise them, but they don't care about it, or they don't make a big deal out of it, and they don't let history influence their ideology. That is a great thing. Even now, focusing on the beauty industry, make-up comes with a broader neutral colour palette, suggesting that every woman looks in a certain way, and it is not white make-up anymore. Specific movements have a good impact, and I am glad for the upcoming generation because they accept society's deconstruction.

RSM: My first impression when I read the statement “That’s not Fair” is that the title is the cleverest I have ever seen. Indeed, I feel it summarises the story perfectly. How did you come up with ‘fair as bright’ and ‘fair as something related to justice’?

HK: I like using puns in general, even though it is considered the lowest form of humour. I love it. In India, we have a product called *Fair & Lovely*, a skin-lightening cosmetic with vitamins, and it reached a new height from the early 1990s to the late 2000s, especially in marriage ads. In India, we have arranged marriages where parents meet each other, and after that, they agree for their children to meet each other. It is very common in many places. Most marriages have “fair” as a requirement promoting the ideology of “fair” as “pretty”, which adds a point to beauty. In that way, their future daughters might live more confidently than the mothers since they might be lighter. Young girls are also brainwashed with the same movies on the importance of being pretty and how we are always swept away by prince charming. If you put everything together, you can understand the importance of being light-skinned for women. On the other hand, the word “fair” is heavily used in India. That is why I wanted to bring that to the title, to talk about my subject, and to mock the aspect of fairness with satire.

RSM: In the preface to “That’s not Fair” (39), you explain that dowry, skin tone and complexion are decisive features for the future of an Indian girl. This physical discrimination reminds me of the doctrine of *Hindutva*, an ideology oppressing women and encouraging the return of the Aryan glory. Do you think the *Hindutva* doctrine is still present in Indian society?

HK: Right now, things are approaching a grey area. The feelings at that point, when I did the comic or spoke a lot about skin complexion and dowry, and that if you are dark-skinned, you have to pay an extra dowry, go back to six or seven years. The doctrine of *Hindutva* has a slant on the ancient glories of the Aryan. The Aryans descended from Europe, which is the North. At the same time, Dravidians stayed in the South of India, so naturally, the colour aspect went there too because the Aryans were very tall, fair-skinned and svelte, whereas Dravidians were short and stocky. I am from the South of India, and I am darker in comparison to my Northern counterparts, so racism between the North and the South of India comes into the picture too. Beauty is a lot more idealised in the North, and even if I have to take on summer movies like the South Indian movies, for example, there is a continuous bias on choosing North Indian women for female leads because they are a lot more fair-skinned than women of the South. This means the doctrine of *Hindutva* is also present in the media industry. Unfortunately, some Indian women have to go through many skin-lightening treatments, trying to emulate what is considered to be the better race. It also concerns the historical part where the British came and subdued us. In India, we are divided into several states because we are so diverse, and there are internal conflicts between the States, and this was an excellent opportunity for someone else to intervene and be the leader. When that happens, we tend to think that the coloniser is better than us, and it happens because we are trying to solve certain internal disputes. I think it has a lot to do with our mentality, and maybe we don't appreciate diversity as much as we should. We should be able to solve this on our own, but we don't do it. It is effortless if outsiders do it for us, and that's the origin of our obsession with fair skin. Even nowadays, we still have an obsession with fair skin, although it is not as strong, and I hope we get through it and become better people soon.

RSM: With the publication of the comic “That’s not Fair”, you offer an alternative way of approaching a social problem through illustration. How important are independent comics, graphic novels, and editorials for artists who want to express their ideas without being banned?

HK: It is crucial, but unfortunately, in the current scenario, even independent comics are taken seriously by the ruling party. It means the government is issuing bans on freedom of expression, which generates a ripple effect. The ruling party eventually threatens independent comics and publishers. It is something negative in terms of expression and

in terms of sustaining our creative liberty. Things are not as brutal as they were with *Charlie Hebdo*, but we are worried that we might get to that point soon. I want artists to be independent, I want them to be able to express what they think, but I fear for their lives and careers.

RSM: “That’s not Fair” can help in the education of new generations because it responds in an ironic and funny way (although the problem is extremely serious) to the difficulties women suffer even before they are born. What do you think about including this comic in the educational curriculum of India and even worldwide?

HK: I’m happy as long as it's implemented in a positive way and people can have a dialogue about the future. That makes me very happy as an artist. We are moving toward an area where colour does not matter anymore, so my comic can be used as part of the strip or as a document about the experiences of a person who has gone through this situation. I’m glad that my comic encourages people to have dialogues about this issue and that they are able to reflect on how bad it is to discriminate against someone for their skin tone.

RSM: There is another comic in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) dealing with the fair skin issue called ‘*Melanin gets the message*’, by Bhavana Singh, but in a different way. Having these two stories is wonderful, because the physical obsession of women can be approached from two points of view. Have you read it? What is your opinion about it?

HK: I haven’t made an in-depth comparison of the two comics. However, having two different illustrators talking about the same issue means tone skin is a predominant concern for women, as we were the first to approach the issue in the early 1990s, as I mentioned before.

RSM: What is your impression of the feminist movement nowadays?

HK: Well, the feminist movement is happening very silently. It is happening at the same time as other movements. For example, there is immediate outrage on Twitter when somebody threatens the #MeToo movement or if anyone puts a woman at risk by creating scepticism or by shaming. Users immediately point out the bullshit, which is great. When public figures such as Gloria Steinem laid the foundation of the issue, they built the base

for future generations to struggle for the feminist movement. Nevertheless, we still have some wounds and barriers to overcome to make the future better for us, our nieces, our daughters, or anyone before and after my generation.

It is not just women but even men who are talking about the feminist movement. Thanks to the previous protests, a new culture is starting to form where women are benefitting. There are now more spaces for women who have suffered sexual harassment, such as forums, departments in start-ups, or technological institutions. People are consciously using gender-neutral prudence. These trends are helping women to improve their lives.

Interview with Diti Mistry

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Diti Mistry (DM) is an illustrator, accessory designer, artist, and filmmaker based in New Delhi. She graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Design and Fashion Communication from the National Institute of Fashion Technology in 2015. She has taken part in a feminist project aimed at creating a platform for young people to learn about sexual health and their rights to YFSRH services through digital media, in which she worked as an illustrator and graphic designer. A year later, in 2016, she participated in a summer residence program entitled 'Illustration as Visual Essay' at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She worked as an illustrator and writer on "Mumbai Local", a story within the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), in which she relates her experience with local women while travelling on the underground. The aim of the interview is to discuss the evolution of feminism in India and to analyse "Mumbai Local" from a feminist perspective.

This study has used an interview method with a questionnaire in order to gather data on contemporary feminism as depicted in the comic "Mumbai Local", created by illustrator and graphic designer Diti Mistry. It was carried out on Monday, 13 June 2022, at 11:42 (GTM + 2) by email. The aim of researcher Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz (RSM) is to gain an in-depth understanding of the conservative perspectives on the role of women within Indian society, as well as feminist responses in Mistry's literary work through a series of unstructured questions. This qualitative research method allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions through detailed responses.

RSM: You are an artist, illustrator and graphic designer. Have you ever experienced a sexist environment or being undervalued in your work because of being a woman?

DM: Yes, while one is pursuing an independent career choice, one has to learn to balance their financial situation in the art field and make sure that the client takes you seriously. There are very small things that can make you feel undervalued, such as being young or your tone. Sometimes clients take you for granted and do not make timely payments. I've had some really terrible experiences when it comes to following up with clients for

payments. And after some time, it really becomes embarrassing, and one starts to question oneself.

RSM: How is the popularisation of comics and graphic novels influencing adolescent and adult readers?

DM: I feel that sometimes the audience relates to the characters, images and stories much more than the actual text. And seeing how the attention span of people diminishes through the day, I feel comics and graphic novels help convey a serious issue in a much better way.

RSM: Do you consider Indian comics and graphic novels part of its literary culture?

DM: Yes, I grew up reading historical comics like Amar Chitra Katha, which helped me understand history and mythology more than the school textbooks.

RSM: Do you think the Internet is a good way to disseminate your illustrations, or do you prefer paper publications for your *oeuvre*?

DM: As much as I love paper publications, for me, the Internet is a better place to put my illustrations and build a portfolio to get clients.

RSM: Do you think feminist education could prevent harassment against women?

DM: I think feminist education would definitely help, but in India, this issue goes much deeper. We have to constantly talk about it and make noise. And we need to reach the grassroots level to educate and shake up the system. I work with local women from rural Delhi, and I observe how much daily harassment they face, which they aren't even aware of.

RMS: Who are your female Indian role models? And your international female heroines?

DM: Some of my Indian role models are Priya Kurian and Amruta Patil, while my international heroines are Maryjane Satrapi and Hallie Bateman

RSM: *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) is an anthology responding to a conservative perspective of the role of women within Indian society. In general, what do you think about the other topics dealt with in this anthology?

DM: I truly loved all the topics that were addressed in the anthology. One way or another, you can relate to all the stories written in the novel. The novel was the result of living with other women, where we spent ten days together in a remote part of Delhi, sharing our ideas and stories. Each topic covers the struggle with an emotion experienced by one of us, and it really is reassuring to know that we are not alone.

RSM: India is a heterogeneous country, as you illustrate in the comic “Mumbai Local”. What are the main differences between Delhi and Mumbai, in your opinion?

DM: Delhi is more relaxed and laid back. Life is slower compared to Mumbai. The City of Mumbai is constantly on the move, and as they say, it never sleeps. Also, people travel long distances to work, which you hardly ever see in Delhi. Mumbai is a bigger city, and people have to commute long distances to work every day, but Delhi is much smaller and geographically round, so travelling is much faster. People are more into their own lives, and they have their own space, whereas Mumbai is crowded without not much space, so in Delhi, people are also part of each other lives.

RSM: How did the idea of creating the comic “Mumbai Local” come about? Why did you choose a comic format?

DM: I grew up in Delhi and moved to Mumbai for my graduation. The shift to a big city took time: adapting to the bustling city, and chatty people on local trains. When I started illustrating the storyboard, I saw the city as an outsider, and over time I felt I hadn't really opened myself up to experience the city. My friend told me a story about a bug entering the train and how it climbed onto a woman, and other women helped her get rid of it. Using this incident as an inspiration, I built my story around this situation in Mumbai Local Women's Compartment. I used the bug as an intruder into women's space and I built my story of sisterhood around it. I sometimes find myself expressing my emotions best through comics; even any situation, memory, or moment. I felt the comic would create a sense of adventure and transformation of the protagonist.

RSM: One of the ideas illustrated in “Mumbai Local” is the sisterhood of women. Could you define what this term means to you?

DM: I’m an only child, and I’m very attached to my mother. I’m also surrounded by some very powerful and beautiful women in my life. And they all bring a sense of sisterhood to me. I manage a brand where I work with local women in my city who create my products. In “Mumbai Local”, women come together to help my character get rid of a bug. Likewise, in my life, I have experienced strong female energy that has helped me to move forward and become a stronger person.

RSM: In the preface, you mention “doodling their complex identities”, referring to Indian women. Do you think it is difficult for a woman to define her identity nowadays due to the spread of *Hindutva* ideology?

DM: It is certainly a struggle. However, as much as we try to be liberated, living around people who are still stuck in older times and follow outdated norms gets difficult. It’s hard to have those kinds of conversations and express yourself fully because you know that somewhere you’re being judged, and your opinion is not accepted or is not ‘ideal’.

RSM: In the preface, you also describe the Ladies’ Compartment as having “a certain energy that was quite different from all the other compartments of the train” (12). Could you explain that feeling?

DM: As illustrated in the comic, you can see house chores being done on the train, buying groceries, vegetables, cleaning supplies, and even raw fish and crabs! The energy is really different. You can see all kinds of emotions co-existing in a single compartment. You see women arguing over space, celebrating, purchasing, and sleeping. Everything you can imagine. That’s what makes it so special, and the energy can be quite overwhelming. I’ve travelled in the Delhi underground and in the Mumbai Local, and the energy is completely different. One sees women involved in their own lives, glued to their phones, silent. Whereas in Mumbai Local, the ladies’ compartment was filled with conversation and sounds of different activities.

RSM: Has the publication of *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) been difficult in India? Can you find it in libraries?

DM: It was received very well among a certain liberated crowd in India. And I saw the novel in all the independent bookstores. I'm not sure if I have seen it in libraries.

RSM: Comic and graphic narratives have helped a lot in the classroom, offering alternative values to young people. What do you think about including “Mumbai Local” in the Indian educational curriculum?

DM: I believe it would be a great idea since we need more teaching related to community building for young audiences so they can develop a supportive attitude and compassion toward one another. It would help people to not be afraid to open up and seek help when in need and be less critical of the world, and that care and compassion can sometimes come in the most unexpected way and from anyone.

RSM: Is “Mumbai Local” aimed at rural or urban communities?

DM: It's both. The 'local' addresses the crowd from all walks of life. The train commute is used by rural as well as the urban community.

RSM: At the beginning of “Mumbai Local”, the character was described as “the outsider” (15), but at the end, the character “wanted to belong” (20). To what or where did she want to belong?

DM: The character is from a different city and struggles to find her people or tribe. She travels around the new city, trying to find her connection, and struggles in the search. So, she finds a certain kind of peace in pointing out little irritants, and she is critical of all the things around her. She wants to accept and adapt to the new city, but with her own awkwardness, she is unable to be part of it. She wants to become accustomed to the fast pace, culture, language, and people so she can be comfortable and not feel awkward.

RSM: In “Mumbai Local”, there is a progression from women’s diversity to unification (to protect the main character). Do you think there is an analogy between this story and the feminist movement in India?

DM: India is a diverse country, and you can see people from all walks of life. And now that women are learning to live independent lives, they feel embarrassed about seeking help when they have a need. You create your own boundaries, and it's not possible to imagine the power of unification or getting help from strangers. I've seen so many women

struggle in their personal lives, and their women's tribe lifts them up and helps them gain the confidence to rebuild their lives and move away from the toxicity in their life.

Interview with Priyanka Kumar

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Priyanka Kumar (PK) is an artist, illustrator, visual storyteller, and muralist based in Baltimore, MD. She also works as an adjunct professor in the Illustration program at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Priyanka posts the latest news about her work on Instagram. She graduated from Jadavpur University with a Bachelor's Degree in English Language and Literature in 2013. She also has a Master's Degree in Art History, as well as a Master's Degree in Fine Arts - MFA Illustration. Kumar's graphic narratives and comics have been published in multiple anthologies, including *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), *First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India* (2016), *Where Do My Thoughts Go* (2018), and the collection *Bystander: Stories, Witnessings and Observations from South Asia* (2019). In her artwork, Kumar examines female friendships in urban environments. These are imagined or alternative stories in which figures were taken from Indian mythology and art to shape the landscape of futuristic cities with map-focused animation, printmaking, cartography, and transformations in the context of south Asia.

The aim of this interview is to discuss the following: her “Ever After” contribution to the anthology *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015); the freedom women have as creative professionals in India in the fourth wave of the Women's Movement; her vision of feminist issues in India; and her perspective regarding the analysis of her *oeuvre* in the dissertation. The researcher of the present study has gained a thorough understanding of the alternative identities or lifestyles for women in India illustrated in “Ever After”, by using the written interview as a qualitative research method, which is based on asking a series of specific questions. She has also gained pertinent information from the interviewee's lengthy responses. The participant, who is artist and illustrator Priyanka Kumar, and researcher Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz (RSM) used a written questionnaire to discuss current feminism as it appears in the fanciful comic “Ever After”. The purpose of the present research is to describe and gather information regarding gender studies. An assortment of questions is asked throughout the unstructured

interview. The questionnaire was filled out on Wednesday, 8 June 2022 at 18:00 (GMT + 2) by email in a shared docx in Google Drive.

RMS: As an artist and illustrator, you have worked on graphic novels, comics, and murals. Could you tell me about the creative process of each one? What can you express with murals that you can't convey with comics or graphic novels? When and where can we use each of them?

PK: With murals, I have found that it is primarily the scale and surroundings that make the piece: it is a way for art to be viewed by more than one person, so experiencing it by the community becomes the main focus. With comics or graphic novels, it's an inward kind of experience: they are meant to transport an individual viewer into the story.

The creative process for each varies because of this. With comics and graphic novels, I find myself being more intimate and introspective with my words and visuals. The form also tends to flow in a direction, so I find myself paying attention to how they will be read by the viewer (from left to right, or top to bottom, or what happens when a page is turned), and I have to organise the visual information accordingly. With murals, I want the viewer to stay a while and just experience the piece while standing in front of it, so I focus on creating one free-flowing image where beautiful and vibrant things are happening all at once, and the viewer is free to move through the image as they like.

RSM: Do you think the comic is a good format for approaching youth? Are we currently living in a visual period of fast cultural consumption?

PK: I think we live in a cultural moment where it is the video, rather than the comic, that is globally the most consumed format. Comics have always been popular and will continue to be so, especially with young adults, but it is more likely that the majority of young people today are watching animated videos instead or experiencing stories through video games. Comics and the act of reading them tend to slow the action down, which is the opposite of how the visuals in videos work. But in both cases, creators are in charge of how things like movement, action and story work.

RSM: Does the public pay more attention to an image rather than text?

PK: Largely, yes. We forget that mass literacy and the universal ability to read a script is a relatively new development in human history, and there are still many countries (like

the one I come from), where written text is not comprehended at the same level as spoken words. Of every living person on this planet with the ability to see, if you picked one at random and presented them with visual communication of any sort, the chances of them being able to comprehend the image at some level is way higher than them being able to read the script or language that forms the text.

RSM: Do you think comics and graphic novels are a new way of reconnecting with readers who do not fancy literature? Are these formats something you would introduce in the Indian educational curriculum?

PK: They aren't really new forms if you move beyond the idea of Westernized, panel-focused superhero stories when it comes to representing the idea of a comic or graphic story. Illustrated manuscripts have existed across cultures for centuries, even if they were not accessible to everyone. A lot of architecture and public monuments around the world have images that can qualify as silent comics or visual narratives with text, if you go beyond the idea of a comic as a paper-based publication.

India, more specifically, has an incredibly rich and very *maximalist* visual culture – public communication, as a rule is always visually focused because of high levels of illiteracy. Oral storytelling has also always been part of the culture in addition to illustrated images. I believe the biggest issue with the standard Indian educational curriculum is that it still vastly depends on an archaic colonial system and pedagogy that promoted literary reading and rote-based learning as the way to educate a child.

Outside of school, Indian children are consuming visual information in their physical geographical spaces on a regular basis, and comics in vernacular languages are very popular. The question is how to provide visual narratives in an educational sense which will be culturally accessible and relevant – I don't necessarily think reading a difficult literary text in comic format is the answer. However, comics and graphic novels could definitely help capture children's attention and interest in topics that are either avoided in teaching (like sex education) or supplement areas that are deliberately disregarded in the educational system, such as history and literature, for instance. They are also a great way to engage in difficult conversations about ethics and philosophy – for teaching conceptual thinking, I believe visual examples are best.

RSM: How important is it for an artist to introduce their culture in their work? Is their final work part of their identity? How would you define Indian identity?

PK: I believe it is up to the artist to decide if their work must reflect their cultural self or not. It is also up to them to decide if their art is part of their cultural identity or just a way of self-expression. I always get asked this identity question, and I have grown tired of it. I do not think I would be asked this question if I were a white artist from the northern part of the globe.

RSM: The doctrine of *Hindutva* has been reflected in BJP in its ideology. Could you define in your own words the concept of *Hindutva*? Is it still an ideology supported by people in India nowadays?

PK: *Hindutva* is essentially a way of positing a geographically-based identity that is religious, cultural, and national, revolving around being a Hindu: a true 'Indian' is one who partakes of this 'Hindu-ness'. If you've read Ambedkar, you'll realise that in India, there is no single experience of Hinduism or even such a thing as Hinduism in the first place. The geographical territory now known as India is very much a composite of multiple diverse communities with different faiths and beliefs that started being lumped together under the banner "Hindu" during colonial rule, and the name just stuck as a type of classification. For the layperson who might not have investigated the history of their faith or identity, especially in a post-colonial context, it makes sense that they identify as Hindu because when they were born, they were categorised as such.

As for *Hindutva*, specifically the approach that the BJP is championing, it is reductive in a way that cannot be fully discussed within the scope of this interview. The propaganda machines that the BJP employs, which are extensive and very well-funded, have done a fairly thorough job of convincing a large part of the populace that *Hindutva* will safeguard their interests. So, it is most definitely finding a lot of support among the population, and, if anything, it is growing stronger to the point of being categorised as a type of fascism.

RSM: Do you think we are living in a feminist society? Is there still discrimination toward an alternative identity or lifestyle?

PK: If we have to generalise, I would say no, because there is not just one feminism, and the fight for equal rights across genders is not a monolith. Western feminism's attempt to equate its struggles with post-colonial, global south movements is a sure way of losing

the nuance. Across the globe, our stories are interlinked with imperialism and colonialism, but for the global majority of women, the story of Western feminism is a very unhelpful lens for evaluating social justice movements for gender equality in drastically different contexts. As for the second part of the question, in India, I would say yes. If you are not an upper-caste heterosexual Indian man, life will likely not be easy for you, no matter how conformist you are. And if you are at the lowest intersection of caste and gender in India, which is how power is determined— if you are a Dalit woman, for instance, you face the most structural violence.

RSM: In some of your projects, you illustrate stories with vegetation, the world of the sea, and even outer space. Do you think your drawings are connected with nature? Are they a space where humankind and nature coexist peacefully?

PK: I would say that is idealistic. I dream of natural spaces, and the inner world that my images depict is populated with natural life. But I grew up in a densely populated city, and my experience is very much that of an urban Indian dweller, so I feel like any organic life forms I show are a form of escapism.

RSM: In your comic “Ever After”, you explain that the story began thanks to some of your family memories. Memory and identity are interconnected concepts, not only between the ideas themselves but also as they are linked to ‘tradition. How important are these three concepts for you as an artist? Also, how important are these ideas for the Indian population, in your opinion? Should they be immutable, or can people change them?

PK: I can’t speak for an entire populace of 1.3 billion human beings, so I’m not comfortable answering how important these are for the Indian population or how they should be perceived in general. My experiences are my own. Socio-economic and geopolitical factors evidently influence them, but they are ultimately not standardisation of a token Indian experience and never will be.

I am more concerned with memory than with identity and tradition. The reason for this is that identity and tradition are bound to creep into any work I make unless I consciously decide to exclude them. My natural state of illustrating my experiences will reflect my background and upbringing if I am creating representational art. “Ever After” was an exploration of how our inner worlds and fantasies are often a way of shedding the

identities and traditions imposed on us by the physical realm in which we exist. Of late, I have been leaning toward depicting the stage where this escapism has been achieved, and what remains is memories of traditions and identities: if you abstract these two, what remains of the memories? They are all interconnected, but how can you distil them as an artist to tell more nuanced stories? I've been pushing my work toward exploring this in the years after the comic was published.

RSM: In “Ever After”, you illustrate women thinking out-of-the-box, with their unconventional world escaping from reality. How did you come up with the original idea of blurring lines between fiction and non-fiction and the introduction of monsters?

PK: Through the things I read, watch, and experience. I have always been influenced and fascinated by magic realism and the metaphysical, as well as popular science fiction and fantasy. Also, the mythologies of my land are rampant with monsters! I think the comic was born out of mostly trying to create two contrasting realities, and a middle-aged Indian woman discovering a love of sci-fi through television broadcasting emerged from it.

RSM: One of the features of “Ever After” is that it does not contain words or letters, just panels in a series of strips, which is a feature that makes it universal since all people can see the illustrations and do not need to know any language. Is this something that was planned? Do you think it encourages people worldwide to read it or makes reading easier?

PK: Yes, it was definitely intentional! It started because I was thinking of silent comics and how they could be very effective in a country like mine, which has a large population of people who are not functionally literate. Part of creating the comic was to challenge myself to tell a story that had nuances for those who were familiar with the context (like the ads and shows that are aired on Indian television). But even if you did not know the content, it was understandable and “readable” as a series of visuals.

RSM: In “Ever After” and other projects such as ‘Garden Variety’ (on your Instagram stories), we can see explicit sex scenes. Is sex something common in mainstream Indian graphic novels and comics? Do you think the illustration of sex is still taboo?

PK: The Indian approach to sex in our current moment is very much a repercussion of regressive colonial-era laws imposed during British colonization. The British were responsible for enacting laws against homosexuality. They were instrumental in making women wear blouses along with saris for the sake of modesty (women went bare-breasted before that). They classified genders according to what they knew, which resulted in a lot of transgender people being criminalised, for example. The reason sex is always implied and never shown in Indian cultural media today because it is a form of morality and self-policing that grew during colonial times. It is very much a PTSD of sorts. If you look back to earlier times on the subcontinent, the visual culture around human sexuality is more open and descriptive, and I'm not just talking about the Kama Sutra. There is so much more! The other thing that is not spoken about is how surface-level conversations about sexuality are always avoided in Indian culture, yet the country is preoccupied with sex. There is graphic pornography in every Indian language possible, including magazines and novels. You can find them being sold at railway stations in the country. There is sexual innuendo in all varieties of cinema from India. Behind closed doors, everyone talks about sex. It is just not acceptable to publicly exhibit knowledge or desire of it because of the fear of repercussion – and you can most likely trace that to punishment and violence enacted by the caste patriarchy (before the British), as well as colonial censorship (by the British).

RSM: In the projects mentioned earlier, you also illustrate alternative sexual desire, queerness, and female masturbation. How important is it nowadays to give visibility to sexual alternatives and the deconstruction of gender identity?

PK: I believe drawing my experiences with sex as a queer Indian woman is one of the most obvious and important ways in which I can personally negotiate how my body has been policed by patriarchy and colonisation. No one else will do it with the same accuracy, so why not draw our own experiences?

RSM: Do you consider “Ever After” an example of resilience against neo-Hindualization, since it encourages women who are trapped in their routine to empower themselves and follow their own path?

PK: I honestly think that might be for others to answer! I was thinking less about the routine and more about the lack of social support if you decide to leave and follow another

lifestyle, which is why the comic is open-ended. And this lack of social support has existed for a very, very long time in India.

Interview with Deepani Seth

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Deepani Seth (DS) works as a designer, illustrator and researcher. She creates illustrations for academic purposes such as congresses, posters, and book covers, but she has also illustrated for *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015) with her dark story entitled “The Walk”. She studied a Master’s Degree in Design at the National Institute of Design in Bangalore. Her specialisation is designed for digital experience, but she has never actually worked much in the digital realm. Her work has mostly involved a lot of real-world systems, such as education, healthcare, and child care. From around the end of her master's and through all of her jobs, her work has mostly focused on design research. She first worked in the development sector for about four or five years and later shifted to the private sector of consumer goods, service apps, and similar products. That is how she makes her living, as she cannot yet live from her drawings and illustrations. For nearly all of the drawing and illustration work she has carried out, she is either paid very little or nothing at all. As such, her work exists as a result of working in these two environments. She is currently trying to apply for a PhD program.

The goal of this interview is to discuss some of her work, especially “The Walk”, from a feminist point of view and to see the perspective of an insider who can report on the reality in the streets experienced in Indian society. The method of conducting a qualitative research interview through an online, face-to-face meeting via Zoom is an effective way to gather information and insights about a specific topic. In this case, the topic is contemporary feminism in the fanciful comic “The Walk”, and the participant is artist and illustrator Deepani Seth. The interview was conducted on Friday, 6 May 2022, at 14:00 (GTM + 2). The researcher, Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz, used a variety of questions to explore the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in the comic and to gain a deeper understanding of the themes and ideas presented in “The Walk” from the artist’s perspective. Overall, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the representation of contemporary feminism in comics and the creative process behind it.

RSM: You are an expert in three different fields: design, illustration, and research. How did you succeed in three fields with your contributions? To what extent are these fields interconnected?

DS: Actually, I am not much of an expert in any of those fields. I have just been working in them for a long time. The field in which I have worked the longest is design research because that's where I make my living, so it is also the most consistent. There are several months when I don't draw, but I have to work to make a living and so on. In all of these fields, especially design research, I learned on the job with people who were more experienced and trained than me. Learning about design is essential. I have always worked in modest organisations with 20 to 50 people at the most. I've never worked in a large organisation, and often you get to handle more responsibility when you are in a smaller place. I had to come up with research methods and methodologies for projects even when I was not a very experienced designer or researcher. I also had the chance to work directly with people who were much more experienced than me. I could work with the CEO of the company, who was an established academic, or with the clients, who had been researchers for several years. In fact, we designed research that helped a lot with our drawing. It's mostly been a very individual kind of journey. Besides, the important mentorship that I got has been in spurts, in bits and pieces. When I was working on "The Walk", I had mentorship from Priya Kuriyan and Larissa Bertonasco because there was a workshop that preceded that comic. So, during the workshop, of course, Priya and Larissa were mentoring a bunch of other young girls and me. Even after that, they continued to give feedback, so I learned a lot from them. Later, I worked on a set of illustrations for Thomas Crowley's book. Thomas had gotten a residency in Stuttgart, and he managed to invite me there for a few weeks. So, the Saudi artists that were part of the residency helped me create a style for that collection of books. It's been through these chance encounters with different people that I have managed to do whatever in terms of drawing. I've been trying hard to find the relationship between what I do as a design researcher and a drawing artist because not finding that relationship also feels like it's compartmentalising my life, and in a way that's not comfortable. So, I've been trying to draw scenes from my research for the last three or four years. That's what I've been doing. It's still very two-dimensional, and I'm currently trying to explore how I can use drawing as a means of research. I am trying to apply for a PhD program to see if I can pursue that line of thought, as this is something I truly want to investigate right now.

RSM: Nowadays, illustrators and designers usually have their professional profiles on social networks such as Instagram or on a blog. Although some of your works appear in books and articles and even some scholarly websites when announcing a congress, as far as I know, your *oeuvre* is not published on social networks. As an artist, why don't you use social networks? Where can we find your publications? What are some of your more recent illustrations and designs?

DS: On the one hand, I'm just not good at social networks. I have an Instagram account, and I check that about once every three months. I have two or three posts on it. I'm not especially interested in social media, or maybe I'm just not very good at it. On the other hand, when I see my work, I like it to be printed. Ideally, I would love most of my work to be in print or physically exhibited or distributed.

RSM: I have found two of your masterpieces that have caught my attention as a teacher. Both of them are illustrative schemas: The first piece is the one you drew on a whiteboard at CKS in 2013 about the wealth and complex ideas at the READ Alliance association, while the second one is *The Anatomy of a Pogrom* (2020). Although they have different origins, I strongly believe these types of compositions are quite useful within the educational field. What would you think about including your illustrations in the Indian educational curriculum to explain cultural facts?

DS: These kinds of mappings are kind of special. I believe that since I drew the mapping in the READ Alliance association, these kinds of summaries have become really important in my research, because they help me analyse data, information, and ideas that we gather. There's usually so much of it in qualitative research. Placing them together in certain structural formations using metaphors, for example, can help make sense of what I'm looking at, and it helps me articulate what the research is saying. There is value in such material, and I'm not talking specifically about my material, but about the idea that using visual information and graphic-based material in education and teaching is beneficial. What's also really interesting or might be valuable is to understand how students of different ages and different backgrounds work with image, text, and language. We have a lot of research on language learning among children, but we don't have enough research on how children learn through other means, whether it is visual, olfactory, or hearing. Using visual material is always supportive, especially because in a country such

as India, language is a very tricky thing since the language we speak is not necessarily the language we write or read, even if one speaks Hindi. For instance, the Hindi I speak is very different from what I read in a book or a newspaper. There are several examples like this. Language changes every 60 kilometres. The dialect changes, and the words and the way they're spoken change, whereas the standardised educational format makes it easier to reach the audience. It's difficult to create content that's very customised to region and culture, although maybe focusing on different modalities would be useful.

RSM: Do you think illustrations and infographics contribute to the democratisation of art?

DS: Definitely. Illustrations and visuals, including film, are a more accessible form of communication than pure text. I strongly think that using visual materials can make communication easier, whether in education or conveying information that is more accessible and inclusive.

RSM: In the process of creation, do artists include at least a small part of their culture or does culture influence the artists' final work? How important is it for artists to include their own culture in the final work? Could you define what Indian culture is for you?

DS: It's impossible to create work that does not include oneself. But it's not necessarily about revealing oneself and where one stands. In my work, while I'm writing about someone who lives a very different life from mine, I'm also writing about myself. In "The Walk", the main character is female and is based on a woman I met in Bihar, at least 24 hours by train from Delhi, where I was living at the time, so I did the work. The woman is married and has two young children. They are a low-middle-class family in a very small town. She's a beautician. I am none of those things, and I'm quite different in terms of class and culture. I spent a whole day with this person, and what was most important for me that entire day, from morning until night, was when she walked home from work. The reason that was so important is that it's a part of my day. I'm familiar with going home after work and going through the city. Of course, her city is very different from the cities I have lived in. I have stayed in much bigger cities, and she lives in a very small town. But I think in making a selection of what to focus on in her story, I'm revealing who I am, where I come from, and the ideas that influence the ones that are important to me and

myself. For that reason, I think it's impossible to create something that's not about yourself, whether it's individual, cultural, social or ideological. About the second question, I cannot define Indian culture because I don't think there is one single Indian culture. The person whose story I've illustrated is an Indian woman, just like I am. Both of us are north Indian women; we both speak the same language but different dialects, but our cultures are drastically different. Not only because of social-economic status but also because of where we live, what we believe in, and how we choose to lead our lives. If I knew more about her, I would discover even bigger differences. I don't know if that's the case for countries that are smaller in size, but it's true for places as large as India.

RSM: Can you name a contemporary cartoonist whom you consider a role model that inspires you?

DS: Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the first women cartoonists to have a comic panel of her own in a daily newspaper. Her books are amazing. She's a role model for me. Looking at her work is just like looking at the history of the feminist movement because she was also writing and creating at a time when there were quite a few women cartoonists in the public sphere. Her style is marvellous, almost like dark humour.

RSM: In 2015, you illustrated a comic called “The Walk” for *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). Initially, the story was in English, although, as you explain in the preface, it was also translated into Hindi by Ujjal Utkarsh. Why did you want to publish the story in the two languages? How important is this story for Indian women?

DS: I literally wanted it to be in Hindi. When I was preparing the draft, I wrote it in English, and somehow it didn't seem to sound right. Hindi is also the language of the character, or the real person, upon whom the character is based, and everybody else around her speaks Hindi as well. However, the publisher required the works to be written in English because they wanted them to be read more widely. So, I wrote it in English and asked Ujjal Utkarsh to help with the translation. Eventually, it became a bit messy because I felt there was too much content in each frame. After all, I had not planned to have two sets of speech bubbles in the frames. If I had the chance to do it over again, I would either do it in Hindi only, or try to organise the page layout better to accommodate two languages.

RSM: Although the comic starts as a nonfiction story, you explain that any woman could identify with it. Do you think this statement could be transferred to the feminist movement since the origin (nationality), time, and the path taken in supporting the movement are not relevant? In other words, would you say the feminist movement is heterogeneous since each activist supports it in a different way?

DS: The feminist movement in India is definitely very fragile. It has a very long history, and over the last few decades, it has also been drastically transformed. There are several different ideologies within Indian feminism. The feminist Indian movement is very heterogeneous, and those differences are crucial. Also, those differences have often brought about conflicts between different people or various groups, all of whom may subscribe to the idea of feminism. For each of them, feminism translates differently. Feminism is also a changing movement; the effect of feminism in the present day is very different from the feminism of the 70s and the 80s, even though some of the questions they're struggling with or the issues they want to solve may be similar. For instance, in India, caste identity is a question that the older upper-class feminists did not address or take into consideration. Similarly, queer feminism is markedly different from more mainstream heterosexual feminism. Several questions are very specific to the queer movement, which mainstream feminism may or may not have struggled with. There have been different flows that come out and go in and intersect, and sometimes there are conflicts between them. I don't know if my work is important to feminism at all. Personally, it's too early to tell. I haven't created enough work, and I have not explored my politics enough to even think about it having an impact on anybody other than me. What is important for feminism or any progressive politics is the ability to tell your own story or just to be able to tell stories. In the case of "The Walk", it is me who is an upper-class, Anglophone, city-dwelling female who's telling the story of a woman who doesn't have the many privileges that I have. If I were courageous enough, the story would have been created not by me alone but with much more active participation with the woman whom it's about. However, I don't think that's the only way we can create equality. One of the things that's very important and valuable to me is a sort of emergence in the past four or five years of artists of different media and formats who identify as dalit but whom all identify as backward caste people whose work is very much about the lower caste

identity. These are people from different backgrounds, such as city-dwellers, upper-class dalits, and rural tribes people. Works by Tulika Publishers or Bhai Tara Books, where Adivasi or tribal artists are the primary illustrators, give more visibility than other movements. Their unique form, medium and style of illustration are very impressive.

RSM: In the preface, you categorize “The Walk” as fiction because, at first, it was a story that was alternative to your reality. However, as the story draws on, reality overcomes fiction, blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Would you say depersonalising might allow readers to identify more with the main character’s problems?

DS: The process of making this story helped me better understand the person it was about. I didn't feel identical to her, but I understood how some of the things that the two of us are seeking are very similar. My concern is more about my relationship as a researcher and a drawing artist with the people I work with or the people whom my work is about than with the readers. I'm not so concerned about how my work is perceived or how it affects somebody who reads it. Making the work is an important way of learning, a better understanding of somebody else, and a better understanding of my relationship with them and how I feel about them.

RSM: In “The Walk”, you show different panels of the night walk of the main female character with scenes of strangers’ lives. Do you think people might identify their own problems by observing and empathising with others? If so, do you think it’s important to offer feminist role models and related stories in popular culture so people will be aware of gender violence?

DS: It's important to have multiple stories; as many different kinds of stories as there are lives, whether or not they're feminists. Feminism, or any critical idea, such as critical race theory, might come in here to emphasise the importance of these stories, which often involve people whom you hear from less or who tend to be more invisible, whether or not there is a clear message of feminism or any kind of progressive ideology. It's essential that whatever one's experiences are, it is essential that the stories of as many different people as possible are conveyed, articulated, read, and heard.

RSM: The female main character in “The Walk” feels secure in her job in the beauty salon, and she even laughs with the clients and her workmates. How important is sisterhood among women, especially in the feminist movement?

DS: Sisterhood among women is basic in my personal life. Some of the people who have kept me alive are women, and also men, but because the question is about women, I think there is a certain way in which women that I know care for each other that is both material and emotional, and that is incredibly significant to me. In some sense, that is the basis for any sort of feminism. Feminist movements, like a lot of other progressive political movements, sometimes lack a sense of personal care, and a focus on the individual. The queer movement has that problem too, because individual vulnerabilities and experiences are so important that they sometimes are not taken into account by the politics of that ideology. For instance, not all communist or Marxist-Leninist groups would have personal and interpersonal care written into their manifestos. However, with a feminist group, I would expect to find traces of a plan that takes care of individual issues along with the pages that describe their agenda.

RSM: Along with the pages, the charcoal trace becomes darker. Would you say it’s related to the depth of the main character’s thoughts and reflections?

DS: Literally, it has to do with the progression of the day into the night, together with the transformation of the spaces the person occupies. It goes from being in a very well-lit indoor space to being almost on the outskirts of the city. By the time the story ends, the night becomes more pronounced, and the landscape becomes darker. I guess I hadn’t thought of it in that way, but in some sense, it also becomes more and more personal. It goes from the character’s surroundings (laughing and talking with people) to her being almost entirely alone with the river. As you have mentioned, you could relate that to her internal thoughts, or how she's feeling in those moments. The landscape is a powerful part of the story. It's about her relationship with the physical spaces that she occupies, whether it's the beauty salon, market, city street, river, or bridge. These places are her witnesses, or her companions, when she walks home every day. One of the reasons why this particular part of her day was so key to me was because before I started the research, when I was doing my secondary research preparing my questions. So on, I thought that concern for personal safety and security would be the most important thing on a woman's mind when she's returning home from work. Nevertheless, after spending time with the

character, which was a period of absolute freedom where she doesn't have to be at work, but she's not at home yet, I realised that she's part of the city. She's walking through its spaces; she's seeing everything; she's maybe talking to some people, maybe not talking to others. So, it's the moment of being free of the relationships that otherwise define her life very strongly, but also about having a relationship with spaces that we may not see at first as important in our lives, as I never thought that it would be important to look at the street, the Bazar, or the bridge that one crosses, but they play an important role in her everyday life.

RSM: While there are many speech bubbles in every panel when the female character is in the same room as her husband, she doesn't speak, and there is only one speech bubble for the male that gives context to the situation. The main character's feelings are not taken into account by her husband. Is this a gender violence situation? How common are these strips in real life?

DS: I don't see it as gender violence, but I see it as conflict and complications in their relationship. I met the husband of the woman, and that's how he's represented in the story. Also, he's actually a very sweet person, but in their relationship, like in any relationship, many questions and issues are not talked about. There are many wonderful things about the relationship that was relevant to me. For instance, talking about the fact that her husband frequently travels on work-related assignments, and she's the person who sorts of holds things together at home. She's responsible for the children, going to work every day, keeping the house, taking care of the house, and everything. In that sense, there is both functional and emotional loneliness, which is what I tried to portray. As solitary as she is, it gives her freedom and liberation. There is also loneliness because her partner is not able to be there as often as she needs him to be or maybe as often as other people's partners are around. I just see it as the difficulties of people who are in a relationship.

RSM: Do Indian women have a safe space for their expression? Do they have safe spaces to report gender violence (institutions, the Internet, or society)? Do you think feminist education could prevent harassment against women?

DS: The experiences of Indian women are so varied, with more factors than you can imagine. What's also ironic is that I know women of different classes, social groups, regions, and language backgrounds, and almost all of them have faced varying degrees of

sexual harassment, whether it is casual on the street, at home, or at the hands of partners or colleagues. Whatever legal instruments we have for addressing these issues are absolutely insufficient. They're not sufficient even to help women who are in privileged positions. Getting access to redemption, justice, or closure is almost impossible for privileged women, so the situation for less privileged women is undreamed. There are safe spaces, but in my experience, those safe spaces are more informal than otherwise. There are also legal measures and instruments of the state that have been created specifically to support women. One of the most important moments in Indian contemporary feminist history was probably in the 70s or 80s when women came together to protest against harassment because of dowry, and a law was created in the Indian Penal Code. Women achieved a new right, which is that if a woman complains about being harassed for dowry, she will be believed. In this particular case, the accused is guilty until proven innocent, which means that the woman's word is privileged over the people she's accusing, whether it's a man or another woman. There are legal instruments, and a lot of these legal instruments have been fought for very strongly by what can mostly be called feminists and the feminist movement. However, I personally know many women who have experienced different forms of harassment, especially in the workplace, and for these women, legal instruments do not work very well.

RSM: How important is it to offer feminist responses to neo-nationalism, seeing this concept as the news spread by the doctrine of *Hindutva*, which oppress women?

DS: It's of great importance to offer whatever kind of responses we can to neo-nationalism and neo-Hindualization. Not only coming from feminism but coming from every kind of progressive, humanistic ideology. What might also be interesting is to look at how we understand it because there are people who believe in *Hindutva* and believe in a certain idea of feminism, or at least a specific idea of women's liberation. To me, that sounds like a contradiction, but to them, it's not. While to me, feminism and *Hindutva* are completely opposite to each other. There are lots of people who support both. For example, the queer movement has a very strong right-wing component, which is both economic right-wing as well as religious right-wing. To some of us, that makes no sense, although there are people who are part of it, and to them, it makes sense. I have a serious problem with the idea of neo-Hindualization or the particular form of Hinduization. It seems to be extremely powerful in India right now, and I completely disagree with it.

Interview with Ita Mehrotra

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Ita (Sunandita) Mehrotra (IM) is an educator, researcher, and visual artist based in India. Ita attended the Mirambika Free Progress School, a ground-breaking experimental educational setting that strongly supports holistic development, learning through the arts, and independent study. She graduated from St. Stephens' College, Delhi University, with a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy (Hons.) in 2010. She was given the opportunity to participate in a student exchange for one year at SciencesPo Paris. Ita obtained a Diploma in French Art History and Culture Studies at SciencesPo. She went back to India to complete her master's degree at the Ambedkar University Delhi School of Culture (2014). Ita's 2017 MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Arts and Aesthetics focuses on feminist graphic narratives in modern India. On the other hand, strong independent publishing companies in the nation, including Zubaan Books, Goethe Institute, Yoda Press, and AdAstra Comix, among others, have published and displayed her work. She is currently the Director of Artreach India, a non-profit organisation that provides arts and artists to underserved regions with limited access to traditional education. She frequently commutes to far-flung villages and unusual towns for tasks related to research and Artreach's programs while residing and working in New Delhi. She engages in the socio-political changes around her and explores their unique stories as she develops graphic narratives, non-fiction comics, illustrated texts, and animation.

The aim of the interview is to talk with Ita via Skype and speak about contemporary feminism in India in connection with her career, focusing on the memories of her visit with the Poet Sharmila in the Imphal Central Jail, an experience that she illustrates in the comic "The Poet, Sharmila", in the anthology entitled *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). Conducting a qualitative research interview through an online, face-to-face meeting via Skype is an efficient strategy for obtaining data and insight into a certain topic is to. In this case, researcher and educator Ita Mehrotra is the participant. The subject is the *Hindutva* ideology and the concept of identity in the book "The Poet, Sharmila". Researcher Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz (RSM) examines the difficulties Indian women encounter while expressing their artistic vision through

literature and the integration of feminist education into the Indian curriculum, using a variety of questions. The interview was held at 1:00 PM (GTM + 2) on 15 June 2022.

RSM: You work as a visual artist, art researcher, and educator. Is it possible to educate the population through art from when they are young?

IM: I think it's specific to the kind of communities I'm working within India. They are communities with a lack of resources, which have low access to mainstream education. Actually, mainstream schooling is too high-pressure and has so many subjects that the students are not able to deal with them because there isn't enough help. Whether it's because the parents do not have enough education or because the school doesn't give students enough attention, a lot of children in India and in other developing countries who are first-generation learners just don't fit into the mainstream education system. In these places, when you go in with creative media, visual storytelling, and theatre with games, they work really well. They are useful not just for traditional skills, such as reading and writing, but also for building children's confidence in saying, "Oh yeah, we can do this" and "Oh, we love to learn because learning isn't about pressure and scolding; it's also fun. And it's something we can use and make something of ourselves".

So, we make programs within village schools, as well as in urban slums in Delhi. I'm based in Delhi, and my team works mainly in Delhi. From experience, I know artwork as a way to show children that they can do things themselves and also that these creative skills can go a long way to even finding a career. There are photographers who come out of our programs; there are designers... Mainstream education won't offer you that. Even if you get through school, you're stuck. These young children from low-resource areas have to start earning, so they get stuck in these kinds of low-skilled jobs, which are really frustrating because they don't like it. As we're talking right now, after COVID-19, after the extended lockdown in India where a lot of the children couldn't access online learning, in this country, we are seeing an increase in the education gap between the few who have access to private and online education, and the many who have no such access. At the moment, the organisation where I work has demanded and claimed that our program and art could play a massive role in bringing back these children who have dropped out of the system, together with offering them well-being in connecting this kind of holistic way of thinking and education, so that the whole body, the child, is growing. Both the brain and the mind are growing and learning skills. From the experience of the work I've done and

the work that other educators and artists have done with me, it goes to show that art has a huge role in education. In my own life, if I hadn't been introduced to art in school, I would have been a wreck.

RSM: You have experience in publication with independent publishers such as Zubaan Books, Yoda Press, and AdAstra Comix. Is it easy to publish feminist concerns, such as gender violence and resilience in India?

IM: It's really good that there are these strong independent publishing houses in the country, and many of them, like Zubaan Books and Yoda Press, are run by feminists themselves. As an organisation, they promote this kind of work. Neither mainstream publishing nor mainstream media anywhere in the world encourage women's work in telling hard-hitting realities of misogyny and oppression. There is a strong feminist movement in the country that has led to feminist media houses, and they're very popular; they sell very well. Whether it's academic institutions, students, or libraries, they will house these books. It plays a role in the way culture is shaped. They influence popular mainstream media as well, to a certain extent, so it's a tussle. I don't think the mainstream media is a feminist media that encourages women to speak out. If so, we wouldn't need things like #MeToo. There are people who will encourage it, and you have to find them. I wish there were more. There are quite a lot in cities, especially in New Delhi, but not in all of India because it is very diverse. If you go to a small rural town, you probably won't find a lot of these, but even in smaller areas, there are very strong media houses. There's one called Khabar Lahariya, a rural press media organisation that has women reporters in very rural areas in backward parts of the country, such as Bihar or Jharkhand. These women report on the ground in these villages about rape, harassment, and women's work, among other topics. So, what do women in villages do? The understanding is that men are labourers, farmers, and the ones who do all the work. So, there are very interesting traditional roots in our rural economy. In a city like New Delhi, and even in other metropolitan cities like Mumbai or Bangalore, you'll find really strong feminist-led organisations. There is a voice, and it's powerful. There are new women comics creators, storytellers, and podcasters who are finding their way and giving different opinions.

RSM: With the publication of your work in English, you can reach women worldwide and inspire them to live the life they want. Are you aware of the

importance of language in your comics? What about the importance of images, since everybody, including illiterate people, can get the message?

IM: Focusing on *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). At that point, I definitely felt that images had a power that got through to everyone more than words, or at least in conjunction with the text. It's like words that are created when visuals and text meet. It's all-encompassing. You feel embedded in the sentiment of what's being said; you're not just reading a description. I've always felt this is also my language. It's what I do. It's not just about what others might feel. It's about how confident I feel about a certain way of working. For me, it's always been about withdrawing into our text, and the words matter to me a lot. I find language accessible to me as a way of walking through, talking about, or coming together on difficult issues. Bringing visuals and text together in a graphic narrative format is something that has stayed with me and grown into a journey for many years now. It's grown from my first work, and in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!*, I felt I could bring this together as a story, and definitely, the hope is that different people, younger and older, who are maybe not so comfortable with reading a book, might read something that has pictures with a bit of text. In this context, there is little text on a page. It's literally 250 words or something like that. What happens when you use such little text is that only significant things can be written, so you won't have extra words. You really have to boil it down to find the essence of what you want to say. That also becomes powerful because you don't have 10,000 words to use. You have 250 words that mattered the most to you, and that's why you kept it there. So, when somebody's reading it, you're only showing very poignant bits of text. It's engaging because if you don't say much with words, you read a little bit and have little bits of drawing in between, so you're given clues. And if it's a difficult story about your work, like my story, both drawings and text help. My story is about activist Irom Sharmila, and it could be a really big book. There are books about her, but if it's just this little bit of text and bits of drawings, fragments of the story, it means I'm inviting you to enter this world and fill in the gaps with your imagination. There's no right or wrong in that. I'm not saying that you're making fiction out of it, but as a viewer-reader, the power to place yourself within the narrative is where the work of thinking together can begin. I don't just want to give information. I'm not making propaganda. It's a way of putting things out there and thinking of what might happen when somebody else is thinking. That, for me, is a much more interesting dialogue than just lots of text or just a big painting.

RSM: You are used to travelling to different cities in India to help children in education. Do you think feminist education in the Indian curriculum is possible nowadays?

IM: It's so far from reality. Mainstream education itself has only taken more right-wing turns. We have a right-wing government, and it is bringing in an extremely aggressive, male, and misogynistic environment. Partly due to its *Hindutva* ideology and the promotion of Hinduism at the cost of other religions, they see women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and any of that as radical and not positive. They've made changes in textbooks as well, only giving examples that are anti-secular and misogynistic, which show men working more than women. Women are meant to run the family. That's very much what this government believes, and in every little cultural production or educational aspect, what they keep saying is that women are supposed to raise their children and run the family. That's what is driving the country backwards at the moment. Education is controlled by the government, and the massive drive is backward, not forward. There is the education here, but there is also segregation. There are some elite private schools that follow international standards, like anywhere else, so they follow international baccalaureate programs. But those are only for a few of the rich, so the masses of the country go to government schools. Schools that are government affiliated follow the government textbooks, and those are the ones that have gone backwards in the current system. There are really good alternative schools run by activists, NGOs, and artists, and these are sometimes for rural children. However, there are very few. The masses in the educational system are using backward textbooks. Education is not going forward. Is India any closer to a feminist education system? Right now, not at all. In the mainstream system, I would have to say that, sadly, there are artists and activists who are struggling to carry out their work. There is always an undercurrent, which is very strong. Activists, artists, writers, and theatre people are always pushing at the system. We're an argumentative country, we love to debate, and we love to protest, so there'll always be the other side. But we have to acknowledge that, at the moment, there's a very backward push by the forces that are very strong on the right.

RSM: Comics and graphic novels are pretty new formats in literature. Can we offer alternative education through comics and graphic novels? Do you think this format is easier for sending the message to the youth?

IM: Using visual stories works especially well in developing countries where there are first-generation learners who have dropped out of education. I strongly believe that seeing the work I've done, whether in cities or villages across the land, not just for very young children but for those who are grown up and haven't had access to education, is really gratifying for me, as it's something they can do immediately and something they can also look at, as it's very visual. It can work for adults and children.

RSM: In India, many supporters still support the *Hindutva* ideology. With this background, what are the challenges that Indian women face when they want to express their art and focus their work on achieving equality and empowering other women?

IM: The government controls the educational system at present, and this backwardness is turning into an aggressively patriarchal state, which is something you can see in the streets right now. I go out into the streets of New Delhi, and there are more and more of these aggressive gangs of boys only, who have been given free rein to move around like sharks, blaring Hindu music, and they look like they're ready to beat people up: they're very aggressive. And this is the top leadership of the state at the moment. They literally claim that the size of their chest is a sign of how great they are. It's a backward turn. It's not just about being anti-secular, but about being extremely patriarchal, and that is definitely not an environment that supports the work of women as feminist voices in cultural production. The work never ends. My recent work, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2019), is about the past. It came out three years ago. The book documents the movement against anti-secularism, in which Muslim women have organised across the country. These protests started at a place called Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, with Muslim women saying they are completely against the law brought in by the government that makes it impossible for a Muslim immigrant coming to India to seek citizenship but invites immigrants from other countries or other religions to seek citizenship. It singles out Muslims, and even Muslims within India, who are saying that India questions their citizenship, even if they've been here for generations. At this time, it's not possible to do any work, bring out a book, and find the right publishing house. There are voices when I

go into these places, like the Shaheen Bagh women. They are the ones who are leading the country. At this moment, I feel justified when I see these women who have organised enormous protests against what the government is saying. So many thousands of people are gathering across the country. The government is not helping at all to promote the voice of women. Nevertheless, despite the authority and patriarchy of the state, feminist voices are surging. It would be great if the government allowed a free voice, but as the opposite is true, women are rising up against the government. When the government was pro-feminist, feminists were doing other things. They were working for education, peoples' rights, housing, and various things that are still to be done. But at this moment, those voices are having to fight against the curbing of basic human rights in the country. The work of feminists continues, but what it's doing, how it's asking for support, how radical it is, and the nature of it at the moment is focused on challenging state oppression.

RSM: Do you use online platforms such as your website and social media to discuss feminist issues and raise awareness among your readers? What are some of the most common misconceptions about feminism in India that you have encountered?

IM: I don't use online media so much because I like to do things a little more slowly. I sit with paper and my drawing equipment. It takes me a little more time. Publishing in books or in independent scenes for small exhibitions, books, and publishing houses, is what has worked for me. I've also done small jobs on essays for new websites, and that's given me more work. There's one called *The Wire*, which is a perfect media house in India, where I published something at the same time, *Drawing the Line*. The same activist, Irom Sharmila, was the protagonist of a second story that happened a few years ago. There are artists who are challenging work every day, and many of them choose to go online, and it can work. Using Instagram only really does work. Using Twitter to gather support and post things also works. I don't usually use all kinds of media, but I used it when the protests broke out against the government two years ago in India in the winter of 2019. That's when I started relying on it. There were very few artists and people writing about the protests, so I just made a few posters at that time and posted them on Instagram and Whatsapp, but just to friends. It was fascinating to see how it went to many more people than I thought. Just telling people this was happening was a call to action. I saw people going to the protest afterwards, so sometimes these sites can be a mobilisation tool, just by saying, "Oh, tomorrow there is a protest or something is going on, and we need to get

there just to channel people into doing something”. Currently, it's also very effective as a way to organize and spread the word that it has worked. I have used it at times for these specific moments. I don't really like my own website. I hardly have anything going on there, so I really shouldn't keep it going.

RSM: One of the ways of approaching and understanding gender identity is through the deconstruction of traditionally feminine and masculine roles that have been established as conventional. With this argument in mind, how would you define the concept of identity? What is Indian identity for you?

IM: I don't think there is a single answer at all. I definitely think a person's identity goes through life with endless stereotypes and conventional thinking of what genders are supposed to be and whether the labels given at birth are based on gender in every life experience. I constantly criticise it, and the feminist movement across the world criticises it too. Our lives are governed by these boxes and classifications. Moving out of them is an extremely difficult task because you first have to realise that they're not natural. On the other hand, I lived in France for a year, and I don't think it's true that India is more gendered and has more stereotypes than any other part of the world. They just different kinds of stereotypes. For instance, in the kind of clothes that women and men wear, the differences within that are still extremely prevalent around the world. Even something as simple as how you dress, how you look, and how you're supposed to behave are things that cut across the developed and underdeveloped parts of the whole world. In the Indian context, there is, of course, a rigid patriarchal structure, beginning with family and marriage, which is moving into women's work in education and the public space. Throughout one's life, you either accept those limitations and therefore propagate them because the moment you accept them, you are also part of keeping that system intact, or you don't accept them. If you don't accept them, then you're always fighting against them. You're always having to question it and come up against various rules, whether it's in the family or in a public space. Things happen when traveling through the city, when you're in your educational space, in your workspace. Even in French circles, the way guys behave is different from the way girls behave, so you're constantly tackling the problem. I see myself in that space of constantly questioning and confronting. This idea of Indian identity is almost a conventional stereotype that the mass media and mass culture would

like to promote. In Bollywood, there are stereotypes of how an Indian woman might behave and what she does throughout her day, with a lot of family values. It just doesn't show the reality of women's work and how they actually are in the country. They live, survive, and work. There are many of us who go against these stereotypes and challenge them every day in our work. The question is not what Indian identity is for me; the question really is whether or not there is an Indian identity. It's such a binding constraint to think of. Even the person who grows up here saying, "India is the biggest secular democracy in the world", is contradicted by the notion of the modern state, which is extremely controlling. Especially right now, nationhood is a term that's used by the right wing to claim that there are no different Indian identities. Feminists claim that they don't want to say they are good Hindu Indian women. I appreciate my culture very much and my association with this country, the diversity of voices, and the diversity of women's work. It's amazing how women are able to organise, not just in their own lives with the children and family they support through their work, but also their voice, which is very clear about the economy and politics. It's great to see the way women actually are in this country because not only are they strong in shaping the economy and history, but they also have the strength with which they speak about what politics should be. That's what I associate with India; diversity and resilience; not any sort of mass stereotype at all; and these challenges as well.

RSM: In your comic "The Poet, Sharmila", you describe the memories of your visit with Sharmila in the Imphal Central Jail. And you explain how she altered your ideas about nationhood, struggle, unity, and the body. Can you explain in what ways you changed your ideas about these concepts?

IM: It's been about ten years ago since I traveled there. She was in a part of the country that's quite far from New Delhi, in the northeast of India in a state called Manipur. She was in the jail of the capital city of Imphal. She was in prison because she was on a hunger strike against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), but they were saying that she was trying to commit suicide, which is illegal, so they dumped her in jail. Then, they forced fed her through a tube. The point is that growing up in New Delhi, you're given this idea of the country as being one unanimous whole, as a big democracy of unity and diversity where everyone loves the country, with a sort of picture of almost everybody speaking the same language, reading the same newspapers and literature, and so on. You

grow up with that kind of sensibility, and as Delhi is a metropolis with people coming to find work from all over, you see people from the North, South, East and West, all living together. One of the most important parts of the experience with Irom Sharmila was the change and travelling to a region that is worlds apart from what I've grown up with. It was very important for me to be able to shatter this idea of a unanimous country that is fed to us, which is instilling a forced patriotism without our consent. Knowing that there are very different parts of this country and that they don't connect in many ways but are actually against each other if we go into the northeast, as in the state of Kashmir, there are politically challenging spaces because the ethnic communities in the northeast don't want to be associated within the democratic nation of India. They want to be separate, so there are military groups that are armed and underground, and they create threats, but the threat is something a lot of the people will support because they don't have their basic rights met from the country. So, it's very complicated, and in answering the problem, instead of using dialogue and democracy, as is supposed to happen, the Indian state goes in and forces the region to be part of the country, and they use that force not just once but every day. Therefore, you need armed forces to be surrounding the entire area, but this heavily militarised state, which is not protecting against another army or infiltrator from another country, is actually going against its own people to control the country; to be able to secure it, to tell the world that we have a nation. You're actually continuously creating a nation by force, and the army not only does this, but it also rapes, loots, and has free rein to do what it wants. So, the meeting with Sharmila shattered the idea that I was fed for a very long time, and it showed me that common people need to take measures which are so radical and extreme, like going on hunger strike for years on end just to be heard, because otherwise, you wouldn't get any news from these parts of the country. If you're in the controlling centre of the country, like New Delhi, you tell people that we're a good, happy democracy, but you don't show what's happening, the struggles of the people in that country. When activists like Irom get international support, then people in India know what's happening. That's what happens when you get an award for peace. She got The Magsaysay Award as a peace activist, and then even people in India noticed a lot more. Of course, the surroundings, the geography, the military context, and being in that space with an informer helped me break away from this idea of nationhood. Then, going into the jail to meet her, and seeing what an activist needs to do to their body to be heard, and so on. It was a whole second portion of it. Moreover, there was another important factor

involved. It was a difficult time for me because I was 17 or 18 years old and had just finished high school, and it's that transition period in life where you're asking who you are and what you are going to do, and then you come across the fact that everything you believed in, in terms of democracy and nationhood, doesn't exist. So, these experiences shaped me as a person and my radical ways of thinking. For that reason, it was crucial, and I am thankful that I could do it because otherwise if you grow up in New Delhi and you have a privileged education with good learning, you think you've learned everything, but you can basically not know anything. So, at least I had some understanding from the kinds of books I read and by listening to activists and authors. It's a whole different thing to travel, to visit a prison and so on.

RSM: In “The Poet, Sharmila”, Sharmila explains the story of her grandmother fighting against the British in 1939 during the Second World War. How important is a heritage to you? Do you think that when history is taught at schools, it is altered?

IM: I only got to know this story when I went there, and the researcher I was with was writing a book. For me, I was learning first-hand from meeting people there, from the museum. It was all about history, which I knew nothing about, and I think it's so important. Also, there were so many strong people at that time. Women fought these wars and defeated the British. Also, just the fact that women were able to do this is incredible. I wish they were part of every history textbook, at least in school. People would know that this happened. It's wrong not to include it. These are huge parts of history, so it's not there in the textbooks, for sure. It's not in our school curriculum, and I wouldn't have known about it if it hadn't been for researchers, going on this trip, and reading the book later. I hope these events will be there, but it's going to take some time for that to happen to have this true history in textbooks.

RSM: One of the messages of your comic “The Poet, Sharmila” is the importance of sisterhood. We see it in the story of Sharmila's grandmother and your feeling of friendship while speaking to Sharmila. How important is sisterhood among women?

IM: With activists like Sharmila, it's something infectious. It's really powerful to imagine that somebody can take on the state and bring so much attention to the issue, and to carry out these struggles. I remember it so clearly, how she was in jail, being force-fed through a tube, and yet she's laughing and talking about food and things she loves. All these

images she's hung in her jail room, which are cut-outs from magazines and newspapers. There's a deep human connection. There's definitely a sisterhood and a friendship that has led to all the later protests organised by women, with women interviewing female leaders of different movements, protests, and struggles. In some way, it's not just about them at all. They're so open about sharing what they're doing, saying who they are, and also about really giving space to others. That's something that women also have to understand early on. Because when they're organising things for the family and society, it's always through this interdependence. It's through coalitions because the only support that many women have had is from each other, especially in rural, developing countries. It's a type of situation where if a woman takes a stand, the only way she can do it is if she knows there will be another woman to help because it means sometimes going against your family, your parents, friends, and bigger networks of organisations. That definitely creates a very strong feeling of comradeship, of friendship.

RSM: The way Sharmila struggled against the AFSPA was through resilience. In fact, she became an icon for the feminist movement worldwide. However, it might be frustrating for her that after 16 long years of a hunger strike, there is still sexual abuse against women by the army. Paradoxically, AFSPA is a group that is supposed to defend the nation. What's your opinion about this point? What's the next step in approaching this fight?

IM: There's so much politics involved. It includes the northeast states, I think six of the states in the northeast, and then Kashmir, and in a way, it's a similar situation, where the national armed forces are in control, and they have the upper hand in Kashmir and in the northeast. But then there are very different pictures about what the politics and the issues are in the northeast. There are a lot of ethnic groups and minorities, many different kinds. Each ethnic group has its own militia and underground organisation. Then in the north, in Kashmir, there's a fight against what they claim are terrorists trained in Pakistan, who are supposedly controlling the Muslim military and organising these armed attacks on people who are from Pakistan. On the other hand, the Indian government has a claim on Kashmir and Pakistan. Then, there are separatist movements in Kashmir, so the thing is. Obviously, there's no one response to what should happen with our AFSPA, but yes, as you said in your question, the national army forces are raping and looting, and they harass the common people, both women and men, and they sexually abuse underage women,

married women, and even older women in their homes and in the streets. This is also because they're from the army that goes into the north from other states. They go in from very different cultures and are sent to the northeast, where they have no association with the people. If you go from the south of India or from the north of India to the northeast, you don't know the language, and you don't understand the food, the culture, or anything. They're posted there for a long period of time, and of course, they're very aggressive, and they know they have the upper hand, so they can avoid lawsuits if they have enough reason to shoot someone on site. Obviously, even if there is a threat from separatist groups and ethnic struggles, the fact that the army has these powers and that they are not accountable for rape and looting has to be challenged, and the courts have to take action. Now, just like in the past, these actions cannot be justified by blaming separatist groups and militias and saying that they are the ones who are tearing the country apart. No, it's the army who is doing this, and there is absolutely nothing that can justify the way the army has behaved and is continuing to behave to the present day. Every day there's something on in the news, some cases of shooting people, some cases of rape, and in most of these cases, we will never know how many people were raped or killed or what happened. The law has to take responsibility for this situation, and these soldiers need some major sensitivity training. Also, there's absolutely nothing for aggressive men with guns who are sent off to a culture that is not theirs, and this kind of life is obviously deeply frustrating for these men as well. None of this justifies what they do, but this is the situation, so how do we train people to be human beings? How can this kind of vile and extremely aggressive military system control army training of their own people that will change their attitude through education, sensitivity, and gender training for the people sent there. Also, the judiciary and legal systems have to charge people if there a case is reported. It's very difficult for a woman to accuse a soldier of a crime. The bigger challenges of our AFSPA are much more complicated political questions such as political questions, such as how can you eliminate a defensive army completely in a nationalist climate? Other countries might claim Indian territory. China is always waiting to claim Indian territory on the northeast side, so can the army completely go away? Will Kashmir be taken by Pakistan? By China? Those political questions are much bigger, and I honestly don't think I can even get into all of that or even answer it. But in terms of what to do about rape and harassment by the army, I think anyone could say that enough wrong has happened and that basic measures could be put in place, but they aren't in place. Rape

is a crime, but it's there, and it's legal. What the army is doing is not okay, so it's a question of putting into action what needs to happen, but that doesn't happen. We're a very corrupt country.

RSM: How do you think the feminist movement in India has evolved over the years? What do you think are the most effective ways to tackle gender-based violence in India? Have you noticed a change of mind in new generations toward the feminist movement?

IM: From the little experience I have about the feminist movement in India in the 1980s, there was a huge rise, especially in New Delhi, in feminist groups and organisations. They used things like street theatre and did a lot of work to build awareness and bring up these questions. There were also laws that were passed against rape and dowry, so they were very instrumental in the 1980s as organised collectives in shaping rules and rights for working women. Over time, I feel there's now, at present, it's very dissipated. There's no organised collective feminist movement like those, and it's much more diluted. But the use of social media has helped individuals to raise their voices. The same types of movements can happen again with something like the #MeToo online movement. It was an enormous call that went out to academics, artists, media personalities, and people in the government. The feminist movement is very active, and there are a lot of artists and young, creative professionals who cannot even say whether it's a movement or not. Women today feel freer to speak up at some level, and this is more likely to happen now than even 20 years ago. The tools are here, and the ability to use social media and connect with platforms is something that wasn't possible in the recent past, so some progress has been made

RSM: What are the most pressing issues facing women's rights in India today? How do you see the future of the women's rights movement in India?

IM: Because of this really strong, fascist, right-wing government, one of the biggest challenges is what Muslim women are facing in the country. It's something that we can't shy away from, which is the threat to Muslim women's education in the country. Nowadays, education is not even available to these women in many parts of the country. If Muslim girls wear a *hijab*, they are not allowed to sit in the classroom, they can't come inside, they can't study, and they can't take their exams. Every day there's a new protest

in a new part of the country against an attack on a Muslim woman. If she's a protester or if she has been part of student activism, she and her family are severely harassed. The case we're following right now is that of an activist in Uttar Pradesh, whose house has been broken into and her family arrested (this is an especially large threat to Muslim women in the country): it's a double threat, because they are Muslim, and because the *Hindutva* government is hunting down Muslims. Also, as a woman in a patriarchal state, the government just can't accept the fact that Muslim women are speaking up. At the moment, we are giving support and solidarity any way we can, and we are trying to tell this government that not everyone believes what they say. So, that's a major one, and in general, as we were talking about earlier, there is a rise in misogyny because the regime is so strongly patriarchal, so it will take a long time to bring back what happened in the course of history with the feminist movement in the past so that women today will have more voice and public recognition. You can see that there's been a backward movement and an attack on these freedoms, and that's been a global problem since the lockdown. There's been a worldwide attack on those who spoke up in the #MeToo campaign. At the moment, there is a bit of a backlash from the patriarchy. It's amazing how big these waves can be. At present, there is a rise in patriarchal misogyny, so you feel like Muslim women are definitely under this enormous threat, as also the Hindu system. There's the upper caste, the lower caste (which is the lowest level), outcasts, and dalit women because it's a Hindu government, but it's for all Hindus. It's a government that is only for a certain sector of upper-caste Hindus, so again, here we see a growing attack on dalit women's rights and more rape cases are coming out. The police are also turning a blind eye. You can't report cases, so when it comes to minority women, they're extremely under attack at the moment by the country. It's been that way forever, but it has sharply increased under this regime. Because of that, the failure of the economy and the lockdown as well, have made things much harder. When there are hard economic conditions, this kind of fascism really breeds because people don't have what they need and are struggling for their basic rights. Where are they going to turn? To the courts? To the police? It's the perfect time to oppress people. We have to see these sharp realities on the ground. It's about minority communities at present and what women are facing with the convergence of anti-secular and fascist policies with the oppression of women within the country.

Interview with Hemavathy Guha

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Hemavathy Guha (HG) is a Delhi-based senior artist who is currently creating artwork in mixed media using buttons, needles, thread, and acrylic with a canvas as the base. She initially displayed her artwork in Chennai in 1986, where she was welcomed. As a member of the "Madras art club," she had previously participated in a number of group shows. When she graduated from college, she was greatly influenced by impressionists' paintings and worked briskly with many colours and strokes. She joined the community artist's studio in the Garhi Artists Village, New Delhi, where she worked in printmaking and painting studios for two decades. Hemavathy won the first Young Artists Award from the Delhi-based Vadhera Art Gallery in 1991, as well as the All India Award by AIFACS for best painting in 2010 and again in 2014. She has held 18 one-woman exhibitions in several parts of India and has also participated in several renowned national and international exhibitions. She believes things are changing gradually, but more in urban areas with educated girls than in small cities and villages. She is very concerned with international human projects such as "Offering of Free Food", on which she was working in 2012.

The aim of this interview is to discuss her interests and inspirations as an artist since she is also interested in writing, as reflected in her story "Asha, Now", which appeared in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). The approach used in this study involved a two-step process for conducting qualitative research. The first step was a written interview, which allowed the participant, Hemavathy Guha, to provide detailed responses to the researcher's questions at her own pace, and in her own words. The second step was an individual meeting on the Zoom platform, where researcher Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz and the participant could discuss and reveal further explanations of the responses provided in the written interview. The study intends to highlight the approach to trauma and resilience when overcoming an ominous experience, as well as the depiction of these themes in her comic "Asha, Now". Through a written interview and follow-up meeting, the researcher hoped to gain a deeper understanding of Hemavathy's

artistic career in India and how her experiences have influenced her work. The interview took place on 21 June 2022, at 2:00 PM (GTM + 2).

RSM: What are some of the challenges that Indian women face when it comes to gender equality? What inspired you to become an artist and feminist activist?

HG: I am writing from my experiences and observations. In India, in the majority of households, there is a clear demarcation between the way a male and a female child is brought up. A female child is gradually taught to help the mother in the kitchen, clean up the table after everyone finishes a meal, dress modestly, and in many cases do outdoor work like fetching milk, groceries, and anything else the family might need, depending on where they live. A female child living in a rural area will fetch water from the well or collect firewood, and also help with the farm work, while a male child never enters the kitchen, and if he does so, he's taunted as doing female work. He is not expected to clean up the table or help in general cleaning of the house. Both girls and boys might be given the freedom to play till a certain age, but once the girl comes of age, she normally confines herself to the house learning domestic chores. The daughter even washes everyone's clothes, including her brother's. On the brighter side, the boy is taught to take care of his sisters and made to realize that he is responsible along with the father for their weddings and expenses too. Once the girls get married, they carry on the tradition of doing all the domestic work while the husband goes out and earns money. While this is the norm in India, things are changing gradually. But it is only among the urban educated, where slowly the girls want their husbands to share all the work since they are also earning. Even in the office, women have to work harder and prove themselves before they can be promoted. There was no such thing as 'inspiration' for me to become an artist. Our family was an orthodox brahmin family from the south of India where more importance was given to education and everyone chose to become a doctor or an engineer. Choosing fine arts as a career was unthinkable. However, we were made to read English classics, appreciate music, and become refined. Right from childhood and as far as I can remember, 'visuals' in the school textbooks attracted me more than the texts. When I received my class books, I would open them and search for pictures and promptly copy and draw and paint them on any paper I could get. Whatever pocket money I received, I spent on buying colours from a corner shop near my house. I am not sure whether I am a feminist activist or not. But I do speak up for women if I feel strongly about it.

RSM: You have been living in capitals such as Tamil Nadu, Delhi, and Chennai. In a heterogeneous country such as India, is the feminist movement experienced differently?

HG: I do not think there is any feminist movement per se in India as it exists in the west. In Metropolitan cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai, things have changed gradually. In the sense of how families and societies treat or bring up their children based on their gender. This has also led to girls demanding more equality on par with boys. For example, some schools do not allow their students to wear jeans, so the girls demanded that boys should also be banned from wearing jeans! These are just some examples. But the situation is not the same in rural areas. Yes, down South people are more conservative, while in the North of India, people are more accommodating.

RSM: Your contribution to art has been extensive since you took part in the exhibition in 1988. How have you evolved within the artistic field since you started (techniques, topics, materials, etc.)? How has the public changed over the years? Do you feel they are more open-minded?

HG: I first exhibited my works in 1986 in Chennai and received a good response. Prior to that, I had taken part in several group exhibitions, as I was a member of the 'Madras art club', and from the first exhibition, the press appreciated my paintings and wrote about them. Since I have been working in this field continuously since 86, my work has evolved quite a lot. When I left college, I was fascinated by the impressionists' paintings, so I painted vigorously with strokes and a lot of colours. This was also due to the fact that in our college, impressionists' paintings were shown to us frequently and we were influenced by them, rather than by our own rich tradition of miniatures and folk paintings. Once I was married and had a child, it was difficult to protect the paintings at home from the child, so I spent more time doing printmaking at the studio. The prints could be left there, and we could also participate in international biennial print exhibitions more easily than in painting expos. During the early 1990s, I participated in many biennales, and I even got invitations to send works rather than by selection only. Almost every day, I received an 'aerogram' from abroad with an invitation to participate in their biennial or triennial. It was thrilling to receive these letters. People used to appreciate my work early on, and they do even now. In the contemporary art field in India, I find the public has

started appreciating new media works also. Yes, things have changed, from what is considered 'art' to how collectors buy.

RSM: In your arts and crafts work, you use many kinds of materials, and everything is made by hand. You also recycle and use ecological materials. Do you feel connected to nature nowadays? Do people take their time to enjoy art, read a book, or express themselves? Is technology an intrusion in our lives, or is it helpful?

HG: In my paintings, I have used lots of materials, as I feel it brings more life and texture to my work. I have also realized the damage that humans are doing to nature and our planet, and I would like to highlight this problem. I also plan to use more eco-friendly materials. Art has never had the kind of audience that you see in the cinema or at a music concert. Yet people do visit exhibitions and also read books. Technology is not an intrusion; it is the way we use it that is important. But I prefer human relations and use less technology. I think the computer and emails have been a blessing to people like me who find it difficult to travel all the time. It helps to communicate like I'm doing with you now.

RSM: How important is cultural heritage? Do you express part of yourself in your final work?

HG: Cultural heritage is important. We must know our heritage, which is quite ancient and rich. We can also use it to express contemporary themes in our artwork. Some artists are doing that. At present, I am more involved in global issues, which is why my artwork deals with universal themes. I am saddened by the war in Ukraine and the student who shot down small children in Texas. I cannot do much except pray that the world will become a better place to live in. I believe too much emphasis on borders and individual nations is the root of all our present-day problems. As an artist, I wish I could move and travel freely throughout the world without restrictions!

RSM: In India, there were political parties defending the doctrine of *Hindutva*, which suppresses women. Is *Hindutva* still present in Indian society?

HG: I don't think Hinduism suppresses women. We had a woman Prime minister in the 1970s, and before that, legendary queens. Legally we have a lot of rights. Now, even

women have been inducted into our armed forces. However, the mindset of society has to change.

RSM: You have given visibility to LGBTQ communities, explaining their difficult situation, especially transgender life in India. How important is it to give them visibility? What about using the correct LGBTQ terms? Would it help everybody to understand there are alternative identities outside of the established patriarchal canon?

HG: As part of my art projects, I work with different communities. Transgender is one of the communities I have worked with. During the past few years, a lot of things have changed in their lives. For example, when we fill in an application form, there is a column for transgenders too. They can now have an identity card that helps them when they transition from male to female or vice versa. The transgender act has also helped them a lot.

RSM: In your *oeuvre*, there are many characters without a face, such as the ones in the comic “Asha, Now”. Do you think depersonalization makes stories universal, thereby making the process of identification easier? How important is the identity for you? What is the concept of Indian identity?

HG: As I have explained, my paintings deal with global issues. I do not show facial features in my paintings, as they can belong to any country. I don't think my art should have an 'Indian identity'. Artists belong to the world. Depersonalisation makes stories universal.

RSM: How common is sexual abuse in India nowadays? Do you know if there are more girls than boys who are sexually abused? Apart from “Asha, Now”, how common is it to talk about sexual abuse in literature? Is it taboo? Do you know of any other Indian literature that deals with this kind of problem?

HG: I do not have any statistics about sexual abuse in India. I guess it must be the same as in other countries. I suppose boys and girls are both abused, but boys do not report it. Years ago, people would never talk about sexual abuse, especially incest. Elders in the family would try to hush the matter to protect the family's honour. But these days, people have slowly started to recognise that it exists.

RSM: The story of “Asha, Now” is not only about a crime suffered by a woman, but also about the trauma that will last forever. Do the victims have a safe place to heal this trauma in India? Are there legal ways of denouncing family sexual abuse?

HG: There is no place where a victim can reach out to heal this type of trauma. She has to live with it for life. You can file a complaint legally, but many people do not want to go against their own brother or father.

RSM: At the end of “Asha, Now”, we can see Asha saving and protecting her daughter from her uncle. Do you think all women who have suffered sexual abuse help the next generation? Do you think there is a sisterhood among women in the youngest generations?

HG: Yes, I believe those who have suffered understand the problem better and help the next generation.

RSM: Do you think the introduction of feminist literature such as “Asha, Now” in the Indian educational curriculum would help to educate children with different values and recognize current problems happening in their families?

HG: Yes, I think it should be introduced in the school curriculum, but I never thought of it like that. In India, parents and siblings share rooms due to a lack of space. This could be one of the reasons for sexual abuse in a family. Children should be made aware of these things.

RSM: Even though she is the victim, the character of Asha does not have the support of her family and she has to leave the house, but she still makes new friends and continues to protect her daughter from the criminal. This story makes you feel empathy with her and transmits two feelings: frustration (since nothing can be done to stop her brother); and empowerment since you feel you want to support her. Did you want to express these emotions?

HG: There is a slight error in the writing of the story as it appears in the comic. It is written, ‘She told her father, but did not find support’. What I wanted to write was, ‘She tries to tell her father through some incidents, but is unable to convey the problem, as she

herself is too young to understand what is happening'. Yes, I wanted to express both frustration and empowerment.

RSM: What do you think are some of the biggest obstacles to achieving gender equality in India today? What are some of the changes you would like to see in India when it comes to gender equality?

HG: Perhaps the main obstacle is women themselves, as many women still feel they have to be subservient to their husbands and do all the domestic chores. They have to fight for their rights and achieve gender equality.

Interview with Angela Ferrao

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Angela Ferrao (AF) is an artist, cartoonist, and illustrator from Mumbai. The major part of her *oeuvre* is online, mainly on social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. She has made a commitment to online publication instead of print newspapers and magazines, as new technology is seen as a new tool for artists and illustrators. She graduated in 2010 from Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University with a Bachelor's Degree in English. She has worked as an editorial cartoonist for a daily paper in Goa. Her cartoons have also appeared in other print publications and academic magazines. However, the reason she has been able to obtain that work is due to her effective use of social media. She has been diligently posting her work for over a decade and continues to do so. In her view, digital platforms give unknown artists and content creators a wide audience and an endless platform to showcase their work and talent. The comic "Ladies, Please Excuse!" by Angela Ferrao, was published in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), and the story addresses the difficulties women have in finding a proper job compared to men.

The approach in this study was to use a qualitative research method through an email-based written interview. The participant in the research was artist and illustrator Angela Ferrao, and the researcher was Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz. The interviewee was asked to share her views on social and political concerns pertaining to India, specifically focusing on the *Hindutva* ideology, the current Indian educational system, and the discrimination against women depicted in her artwork, "Ladies, Please Excuse!" The interview was conducted on Saturday, 28 May 2022, at 22:00 (GTM + 2), and the answers provided by the interviewee were used to gain a deeper understanding of these issues from an artistic perspective. The research aimed to provide insights into the impact of these social and political issues on Indian society and the role of art in raising awareness about them.

RSM: How is the popularity of comics and graphic novels influencing adolescent and adult readers?

AF: Comics were always popular while I was growing up in the 70s and 80s. We had many comics and short illustrated stories from English and American literature. I haven't seen the same distribution of comics. I see a decrease in the publication of comics. I cannot comment on the impact of comics on youth, but I can say that I was influenced by the artwork in comics. There were different genres, and now I have to say that much of it was propaganda. My understanding of colonisation was zero from reading American Westerns and War comics until social media really started to publish various historical accounts and stories that aided in my understanding of my own place in the idea of nation-building.

RSM: Do you think Twitter is a space where users can have a deep discussion about politics and social issues? Would you say an online space such as Twitter offers more freedom of speech than an international congress?

AF: I can't say I have read or been involved in any meaningful discussions online. At most, they have been informative and certainly show different perspectives. There is freedom of speech on Twitter, and the anonymity it provides allows some nasty trolling too.

RSM: How has the feminist movement affected India in the last fifty years? Apart from associations and NGOs, have you noticed a change in government policy?

AF: I'm not well-versed enough to comment on this.

RSM: You also illustrate children's books with Fuloos, a baby camel who is the main character. Do you think children can be educated as free thinkers? Are they being educated as free thinkers in the current Indian educational system? Can authors offer children different values through their stories so that children can choose the perspective they want to develop during their lives?

AF: Yes, authors can offer different values and perspectives through their work. But not all writing is for learning. It is also about telling a story, engaging a child, and opening their imaginations. Language. I prefer a good story. Perhaps it's because I'm a Catholic,

and we already have a religious teaching. So, I think most authors would create stories that resonate with their background and perceptions...the good ones, of course.

RSM: Do you think feminist education could prevent harassment against women?

AF: It depends on what you mean by the term “feminist education”. Personally, I don’t know how that would help unless it is also supported by stricter laws and support from both men and women.

RSM: The rise of a controversial, neo-nationalist ideology among the population since India gained its Independence has been one step behind the achievement of social equality. Do you think there are enough well-known feminist role models in India today? Is the doctrine of *Hindutva* still supported by some citizens in today’s society?

AF: Again, here, my history creates a different perspective. I am from Goa, a state that was part of Portugal for 450 years. I am also Roman Catholic, which puts me in a tenuous position to respond without sounding victimised. I will agree, though, that there is overt and covert support for *Hindutva*.

RSM: India is a rich country that has suffered many colonisations through the centuries, the last one being the British, which devastated part of the essence of this society. After gaining Independence and with law reforms, political parties have been defending the concept of “identity” from a patriarchal perspective, referring to the times of the Aryan Empire, when women were the victims of oppression. What is the concept of identity for you? What is the true role of women in society? Do they have the same opportunities and rights as men nowadays?

AF: Talking or writing about India has to refer to a time before colonisation. One simply cannot continue to view an entire sub-continent as starting from a few hundred years of colonisation. The sub-continent pre-existed the arrival of various invaders. My identity is Goan Catholic. My concept of identity is language, land, and culture that create a tie to the place with which you have shared history. The role of women in society has changed from woman working inside the home to outside the home. In other words, the woman has to pay the price for her economic foray into a patriarchal world. Rights and opportunities depend on your social position, caste, and society.

RSM: In your comic “Ladies, Please Excuse!” you illustrate the story of Jenny, a woman with qualifications who is asked about her private life more than her professional career. Indeed, women rarely have access to decent financial security and healthcare. This effect is known as the *bamboo ceiling* or glass ceiling. What are the official institutions doing about this problem? Is there a safe way of reporting this discrimination against women?

AF: I can only say that any law is as good as its implementation. For a woman to complain about workplace harassment, she has to come from a high position in society, a caste, or a class for the authorities to be cognizant of her complaint. Of course, there are anomalies, but they are not the norm.

RSM: In “Ladies, Please Excuse!” it seems that men have a type of comradery, living in a circle no woman can break through because men stand up for other men. However, I don’t find that type of comradery among women. Do you think if women protected other women and had a sisterhood among them, we could obtain an egalitarian role in society?

AF: I think women do help each other to a large extent. How else would we all have progressed thus far? Building good networks is good practice in both professional and private life. How these networks will function in creating an equitable society is not something I can say is assured.

RSM: Do you think the exposure of youth to real situations through literature, such as the comic “Ladies, Please Excuse!” would raise awareness? Would you include your strips and comics in the educational curriculum to offer alternative values to children and to the population?

AF: Yes, exposure to real-life situations through literature like “Ladies, Please Excuse!” could create a talking point and perhaps an insight into employment hurdles women face. I would be happy if my work could be part of the educational curriculum, which might help in creating awareness about gender inequality.

RSM: Do you think there are topics such as sex education, menstruation, and alternative identities that are still taboo in schools? Are these topics taboo in Indian mainstream literature and films?

AF: I could not give you an educated answer to this question as I am not in the system. I can say that in mainstream India, those topics are not taboo, although, of course, the bite has to be blunted.

RSM: India is large and culturally wealthy and varied. Is the feminist movement experienced in the same way in every city and town?

AF: Your question has the answer. The sheer size and diversity of India cannot allow a single solution or movement.

RSM: Could you recommend a safe space where alternative responses to neo-nationalism are offered to readers or to the audience? (comics, graphic novels, podcasts, female artists, etc.)

AF: I would hesitate to recommend any place safe from surveillance today, but we don't let that stop us from having our say and hoping for the best.

Interview with Samidha Gunjal

Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz

Samidha Gunjal (SG) is an animator, illustrator, comic book creator, art tutor, and cartoonist. In 2007, she received a Bachelor's Degree in Architecture and Design from Bhanuben Nanavati College of Architecture, and since then, she has been employed in India as an educator and illustrator. She excels in a variety of artistic disciplines, including graphic storytelling, kids' comics, book illustrations, and printmaking. She is a freelance artist who operates her own studio, Studio Dhamisa, in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. She draws inspiration from feelings, natural myths, and private experiences. She loves expressing her art through many channels and social networks.

The methodology used in this study involved conducting qualitative research through a written interview by email. The participant in this study was illustrator Samidha Gunjal, and the researcher was Raisa Rafaela Serrano Muñoz. The purpose of the interview was to obtain further information and insights about the artwork "Someday", which appeared in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015), and to discover more about the harassment women still encounter on the streets.

The interview consisted of a set of questions aimed at understanding the artist's perspective regarding the themes and messages depicted in her artwork. Questions were also asked about the creative process and inspiration behind the piece. The interview was conducted on Friday, 27 May 2022, at 12:00 (GTM + 2), and the answers provided by the interviewee were used to gain a deeper understanding of her artwork and its meaning. The researcher analyzed the responses provided by the interviewee and used them to supplement the findings of the study. The information obtained through the interview helped in comprehending the artist's views on the topics depicted in her work and how it relates to wider social issues. The study aimed to provide insights into the role of art in raising awareness and starting conversations about important social and cultural issues. By using an interview as a qualitative research method, the researcher was able to gain a more personal and profound understanding of the artist's work and what it tries to convey.

RSM: You are an illustrator, graphic designer, storyteller, printmaker, animator, and artist. You are also the founder of Studio Dhamisa, where you illustrate mainly comic books for children. Would you say we can offer inclusive and feminist education to children from the time they are very young? Would it change society in the future?

SG: I truly believe that we can and should offer inclusive and feminist education to children from a young age. In Indian households, the family is still male-dominated, and females are considered secondary. If we can educate kids in their developing years, that can really help change the scenario at the grassroots level.

RSM: You have considerable experience in visual fields. Would you say your cultural heritage has influenced your art? Do you find a part of yourself in your final work? How would you define Indian popular culture?

SG: Though I have never studied art or art history, my work is mainly inspired by culture and mythology. Most of my art is self-expression, and there is a noticeable similarity between me and my artwork. India has a very rich art and cultural heritage, and it's constantly evolving, adopting new trends, and being more inclusive.

RSM: I imagine Samidha Gunjal is an independent studio where you can express yourself freely. Would you have the same freedom working in a mainstream publishing house of graphic novels and comics, especially if you were approaching stories from a feminist point of view?

SG: Luckily, all the graphic novels and comic projects I work on give me full freedom to express my ideas, choose visual styles, and be creative. Mainly, they come to me for that reason. Sometimes I have to draw with constraints, especially while drawing children's books. I have to keep things simple and easygoing to get approved by the publishers. But I make sure to add a feminist point of view, very subtly through a parallel storyline or by using supporting characters and props in the background.

RSM: Comics and graphic novels are the most recent literary formats. What can you transmit through them that you can't convey with traditional literature such as novels and poems? In other words, what are the benefits of illustration as a means of communication?

SG: Nowadays, everyone is constantly in a hurry and has very little time for reading. Graphic novels and comics are visual narratives that you can read quickly, and even if you don't read the captions, the visuals say a lot. Personally, I feel it's a very effective way of telling a story, which demands less time from the reader. It navigates, helps the reader to visualize, and triggers desired feelings in a short time span. For that reason, I feel that the illustrations and all the visual forms are the most effective means of communication.

RSM: Would you like to include your children's illustrations and future illustrations for an older audience in the Indian educational curriculum? Do you think if we offer students values that are alternatives to the conventional ones taught at schools, they might have the opportunity to choose the way they want to behave?

SG: When drawing for kids, I don't really aim only at kids, but at all ages. Each story or storybook always has something for everyone despite age. I personally enjoy reading children's books and I always find interesting things in them. There are life-changing lessons hidden in those simple stories. Learning would be less boring if we could add more visual and interactive aids to education. It would definitely open more doors for children to choose from.

RSM: Your social networks display a large amount of your work. We can see your illustrations and designs on Instagram, Facebook, and Behance. On the other hand, you have a Studio where you edit and publish printed books. What are the benefits of publishing online versus printing a paper book? Do you find the Internet a good channel for reaching more people?

SG: Internet is best way to interact and reach out to a wider audience. I use social media platforms to share my work, but many times people show interest in owning the artwork or the book. Printed books are the best way to take a break from the Internet, and you can still enjoy the art and story in solitude.

RSM: Do you think the Internet offers safe places for women to share their work and for the audience to express themselves? Are there safe spaces or institutions in your country where women can denounce gender violence?

SG: I feel the Internet offers a safe place for artists to share their work and for audiences to express themselves freely. but there are a few disadvantages related to copyright, etc. Even still, it's safe because you aren't physically present and can work and express yourself from a safe place away from the actual platform. Personally, I feel more comfortable interacting with people in virtual meetings than in person.

RSM: Due to the rise of neo-nationalism, some political parties have taken advantage of the situation, especially after India gained its independence, by spreading the doctrine of *Hindutva*, an ideology that mistreats women and defends a distorted concept of Indian identity and arouses feelings of nostalgia for the Aryan Empire. Are there still supporters of *Hindutva* among the Indian population? How would you define the concept of identity?

SG: I don't like to bring politics or casteism into my work. All the work I create is neutral about all these issues, but it still fearlessly expresses itself. Identity is not just about ideology. It's also about how you think, behave, share, give, respond, help, and choose to live your life. I don't know whether this makes any sense.

RSM: Throughout human history, women have faced several issues, such as menstruation, liberation, and sex education, which seem to have disrupted society. Are these subjects still taboo in India? Are they depicted in popular literature and films?

SG: Today's citizens are more open about all of this, but it's still a taboo subject in small towns and among conservative families. There are films and literature that focus on these topics, but the audience for this type of art, who are open to this kind of inclusiveness, are very small.

RSM: You've lived in cities like Ahmednagar, Pune, and Bombay, where you've been exposed to a variety of cultures of each city and town, and your cartoons reflect those experiences. Do you believe the feminist movement in India is manifested differently in each city?

SG: Yes, there are striking differences in the cultures of each city in India. As Mumbai is a very large metropolis, people are more open-minded and less intervening. Ahmednagar is a very small town, and people there are very conservative and judgmental. Pune is a

mix of both. Feminism is manifested differently in each city, depending on culture, education, politics, and the financial status of the city.

RSM: In your comic “Someday” (2015), we see a daily scene that the majority of women still suffer nowadays, as men objectify us, and nearly prey on our lack of control. However, the main character of your story becomes Kali, who confronts the situation and frightens men. How important is the retelling of mythology as a way of increasing resilience and overcoming traumas?

SG: I’m sure this has been happening in our culture at the grassroots level for ages. Females are always objectified and considered a liability. But at the same time, all our goddesses summon Rudra Avatar at times of injustice or war. Devi and Kali are two sides of the same coin, and they coexist in every female. While nurturing the female side, they only focus on evoking Devi with ideal behaviour and never encourage facing the Kali side. Even teasing might be considered the most common and mildest form of sexual abuse, but it causes deep wounds in the tender minds of young girls. In most families, they teach a girl to stay quiet in such situations, and they encourage her not to react. But women need to be nurtured to fight back against these *roadside Romeos* with courage, and they should be taught basic self-defence techniques.

RSM: In “Someday”, there are three panels on page 152 where men are whistling and going closer toward the woman. In the first panel, they are looking at her, pointing at her, and whistling. In the second, they appear in torn clothes, as they are becoming a kind of monster. One of them even has his tongue sticking out of his mouth, and the woman is becoming smaller and naked. In the third panel, all the men are big monsters, raising their arms, with their genitals exposed and their mouths open. The real situation might end in the next scene with a gang rape, but Kali appears. Is the appearance of Kali the desire every woman has in these kinds of situations? Do you think the invocation of Kali appears in real life in the form of sisterhood among women?

SG: The scene you mention is a symbolic visual depiction that is used to portray the severity of the situation. It’s not that evoking Kali at that particular moment will be helpful every time. but if we nurtured Kali’s characteristics and fierceness from the very

beginning, this would help women tackle such situations bravely. At the same time, we also need to nurture boys and teach them to be polite and respect both genders equally. The politeness of a female is always considered consent, which has often led to mental and physical violence, whereas impolite, fierce, outspoken females face a comparatively lower amount of *eve-teasing*. We need to make them mentally and physically strong to be able to confront any situation.

RSM: The feminist movement today seems to be more focused on the importance of women in society than on men becoming aware that they need to behave like human beings. In other words, the violent aggressors are usually men, but the system seems to be focused only on helping the victims of violence. Do you think that in addition to offering help to women, re-education spaces should be offered to men?

SG: As I mentioned above, along with protection and empowerment for women, we also need to educate men in society. We need to teach males to be more sensitive, respectful, and supportive of both genders.

RSM: What are the most important concerns confronting women's rights in India today? What do you think the future holds for the women's rights movement in India?

SG: The constitution has provided Indian women with equal rights, but the enforcement of those rights is not carried out equally. Most women don't even know what their basic rights are! We need more awareness, education, and support at the grassroots level. Even educated women don't learn about rights until they start higher education. They need to be made aware of these issues while growing up.