Tracing the Iconographic Shifts in the Retellings of the Mahabharata Stories Across Two Distinct Mediums

Kusum Bhatia
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government PG College, Ambala Cantt. (Affiliated to Kurukshetra University), Haryana

Abstract: The research paper aims to examine the transformational process of adapting the *Mahabharata stories* across two distinct mediums. Specifically, it will analyse the transition from B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* television series (1988-90) to its portrayal in Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012). The purpose of the research paper is to analyse the market trends that drive the iconographic shift in the retellings of *the Mahabharata*. It aims to examine the publication policies that govern their production as well as their cultural significance as commodities. The primary objective of the research paper is to evaluate the cultural significance of these two retellings as products as well as the interconnections between culture, religion, politics, and industry. This endeavour aims to address the primary research inquiries regarding the reasons and methods behind the evolution of the content, structure, and principles of these literary pieces. The study will also analyse both the graphic adaptation and the televised version of the epic in order to pinpoint their main parallels and differences with their literary progenitors. By applying the theories of Scott McCloud and Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, the research intends to recognise the potency of visuals and images in reconstructing cultural history. Therefore, the particular approach employed in this study will also analyse how the utilisation of B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* as a tool for nationalising Indian culture is succeeded by its graphic depiction that caters to the globalised viewership.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Religion, Culture, Politics, Adaptation, Technological Shifts

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are often regarded as two of the most ancient epics that have remained relevant throughout the ages. These epics have gained enormous popularity and profoundly impacted several domains, such as literature, historical narratives, and theological debates, particularly within the South Asian region. These epics have gone through innumerable alterations over the centuries, all of which possess their own validity and authenticity.

In relation to this evolutionary trajectory of the epics, Romila Thapar expresses her perspective that the epics "began as oral tradition, were more informally memorised [than the texts which formed the Vedic corpus] and frequently added to and were converted to their present textual form in the early first millennium AD" (Thapar 98). In essence, it can be asserted that these epics have provided abundant material for numerous verbal recensions, didactic verses, puppet shows, literary adaptations, dance forms, dramatic performances, critical exegesis, and orally transmitted narratives, all of which have greatly influenced the lives of countless individuals. The primary objective of this research paper is to examine the transformational process of adaptation of *the Mahabharata stories* across two distinct mediums. The study specifically examines the transition of the epic from its depiction in B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* television series (1988-90) to its portrayal in Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012). Both B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-90) and Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* (2012) provide distinctive perspectives on *the Mahabharata*, so the prime objective of this research paper is to trace the variations in their mediums, visual aesthetics, narrative strategies, cultural influences and intended audience with an aim to trace the iconographic shifts in both retellings.

Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the historical backdrop surrounding the two mediums in which the epic was transformed is necessary. To begin with, it is essential first to analyse the market trends and publication policies that have prompted the iconographic shifts in the retellings of the epic in two distinct mediums. The inception of broadcasting across the nation can be traced back to 1959 when it began as an experimental initiative. During this period, television broadcasts focused primarily on educational and informative material, with the specific aim of catering to the

needs of young people and peasants. During the 1970s, Doordarshan, which had previously functioned as All India Radio's television division, transformed into an autonomous entity. After the successful execution of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) during 1975-76, television sets were allocated to specific villages, thereby expanding the range of programmes. Indian television made a significant turning point in 1982 when the 9th Asian Games were broadcast live in colour for the first time, prompting the installation of numerous additional transmitters throughout the country. This marked the beginning of the mainstream acceptance of television as a source of entertainment. In this particular scenario, the government has given its blessing for Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* (1987-88) and B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-90) to be shown on television (Sengupta 152-53). The television series *"Mahabharat,"* directed by B.R. Chopra, was broadcast on Doordarshan in a total of ninety-one episodes, spanning from October 2, 1988, to July 14, 1990.

On the other hand, Comic books, which have experienced varying degrees of success as a commercial enterprise in India, are well acquainted with the practice of reinterpreting Indian mythology and history. Comic books have had a well-established presence in India, with notable prominence during the 1970s and 1980s, primarily through the widely recognised *Amar Chitra Katha* series. Pran and Anant Pai are credited with pioneering the comic book industry in India (Jain 3). The gradual decline of ACK over the 1990s resulted in a noticeable void within the Indian comic book industry. However, publishers such as Campfire Comics have embarked on a comparable endeavour of acquainting the Indian audience with myths and history. The emergence of major publishing houses such as Penguin India and Harper Collins India, alongside newly founded publishing houses motivated by ideology and institutionally financed projects, has given rise to a distinct category of authors known as independent graphic novelists (Sharma 166-67).

The term "graphic novel" gained popularity in the 1980s with the publication of three major works: *Maus* (1986)*, Watchmen* (1986-87)*, and Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986)*. Orijit Sen's 1994 publication, *River of Stories*, is widely regarded as the pioneering Indian graphic narrative. Amruta

Patil's graphic novel, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012), aims to reclaim narratives that have been marginalised within the dominant discourse of *the Mahabharata*.

The shift from B.R. Chopra's interpretation of *the Mahabharata* to Amruta Patil's "*Adi Parva*" represents a significant change in the way the epic is depicted and comprehended across many artistic mediums and contextual frameworks. This transition signifies a substantial progression in the manner in which the epic narrative of *the Mahabharata* is recounted and analysed. The two retellings exhibit disparities in their media and their method, style, and emphasis on different facets of the narrative. This paper envisages an investigation into these iconographic shifts in the two renditions of the epic.

In order to evaluate the alterations in iconography, it is imperative to begin by examining the narrative techniques utilised in both renditions of the epic. *The Mahabharata* narrative has been deeply ingrained in India's cultural heritage. The timeless narrative has been revived for the medium of television, undergoing the processes of recording, reimagining, and serialisation. The process of serialising a story involves fragmenting the narrative into several distinct episodes. Every episode lays the groundwork for subsequent episodes. The aforementioned characteristics of serialisation are equally applicable to the telecast of *the Mahabharata* on Doordarshan. B.R. Chopra opted for an episodic framework, splitting the storyline into numerous episodes. This facilitated a more comprehensive examination of the narrative, characters, and occurrences. Serialisation strategically focused on the anticipatory nature of the audience, who exhibited patience in awe of witnessing their preferred narrative segment materialise on the television screen within the confines of their home environments. Doordarshan served as a platform wherein the core narrative of India was reiterated on a weekly basis, reinforcing the significance of *the Mahabharata* and offering a renewed depiction of the role of television (Mitra 101-102).

However, Amruta Patil, in her graphic rendition of the epic, has relinquished her authorial power by positioning herself as an agent for the narrative. She refers to herself as the contemporary 'sutradhar' of her work of fiction in order to adhere to the old Indian tradition of oral storytelling. Patil explains in the 'Author's Note' to Parva her inclination for the act of retelling stories by

emphasising that "Cosmic tales are like fish tanks in their need for continuous aeration" (Patil 259). One of the unique narrative techniques employed by the author involves shifting the voice of narration throughout the story. A female protagonist has been personified by the author, endowing her with the traits of the divine deity Ganga. From a mythological perspective, Ganga is renowned as the unemotional progenitor of all beings. The purpose of this personification is to retell the epic from the perspective of a woman. Another distinctiveness of this visual adaptation is evident in Patil's deliberate choice to focus on retelling only the introductory book of *the Mahabharata*, known as the *Adi Parvam*, rather than attempting to encompass the entirety of the epic narrative. Patil raises questions in her vivid account of the epic's first book. The primary emphasis of the narrative is on the *Astika Parvam*, which constitutes the 5th section of the *Adi Parvam*. This particular section of the epic recounts the tales pertaining to the conflict between reptiles and birds, as well as the event of the oceanic churning that led to the creation of the world. There is no cohesive storyline, meaning no central characters, protagonists, or antagonists exist. The fatal and immoral defects that humans and demi-gods are built of are the sole sources of characters, ideas, and morally instructive lessons to be gleaned from them (Singh 1-3).

In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the shifts in iconography within the two retellings of *the Mahabharata*, it is imperative to undertake an analysis of the linguistic elements, dialogues, characters, and other relevant factors. These factors contribute to the distinctiveness of each version in the broader array of retellings of the epic. The distinctiveness of *the Mahabharata* television series on Doordarshan is evident in its ability to effectively depict the narrative, surpassing other adaptations of *the Mahabharata* in terms of its impact and potency. The factors contributing to this phenomenon include the intricate nature of clothing, the linguistic elements employed, and the melodic compositions utilised. Television soap operas are commonly recognised for featuring recurring characters and their frequent appearances on a weekly basis. A similar occurrence was observed in the context of the television programme *Mahabharata* as well. The actors and actresses who assumed the roles of Krishna, Draupadi, and Arjun had minimal semiotic baggage associated

with them at the commencement of their performances. The majority of the individuals picked for the roles were sourced from a newly available pool of candidates, frequently consisting of individuals who had not previously garnered public exposure (Mitra 103).

The television series employs a metaphysical narrator named Samay, or Time, to provide comments on the societal issues prevalent within the nation-state. It has also incorporated social commentary at various junctures throughout its episodes. For instance, the Ekalavya story of arcs and the Game of Dice highlight that while the series provided opportunities for commentary and discourse on topics such as women's rights and casteism by employing aesthetic elements from the social melodrama genre, it simultaneously restricted and limited those opportunities. The serial employs colour schemes that bear resemblance to those commonly found in calendar art. The main characters in the serial, including Krishna, the Pandava brothers, Bhishma, Drona, and Kripacharya, are seen wearing garments in lighter shades, predominantly white and yellow. Conversely, the antagonists, such as Duryodhana and Shakuni, are portrayed donning darker and more intense hues, such as black and crimson. In the context of less significant characters, the television series had more creative freedom and incorporated additional layers of meaning through the actors' performances. Paintal, the actor portraying Shakuni, provided clarification regarding his decision to incorporate a limp into Shakuni's character. This addition was intended to serve as an outward manifestation of Shakuni's inherent deceitfulness, complementing the constant presence of a pair of dice in his hands. The background music underwent a modification upon the entrance of Shakuni on the screen, serving to convey the cunning nature of his character. In a similar vein, props assumed a notable role in conveying meaning on a surface level. Weapons, for instance, came to symbolise individual characters within the narrative. The mace, for example, represented Bhima and Duryodhana, while the spear was associated with Yudhishthira. Arjuna, Karna, and Bhishma, on the other hand, were identified with the bow and arrows, while Krishna was characterised by the *sudarśan chakra*, a divine whirling discus.

In his analysis of comic books as a medium and artistic form, McCloud delineates the core elements that constitute them, namely panels, conclusion, space between panels, temporal shifts, hues, and characters. The understanding of creative expression in comic books necessitates the inclusion of these essential components. McCloud's scholarly interest leads him to direct his analysis towards the study of iconography, a concept he deems fundamental to comprehending the essence of comics (Singh 10). According to McCloud (1993), the character or icon in a cartoon serves as a metaphorical vacuum that draws in our identity and awareness. This is accomplished by employing a reductionist approach to the depiction of words and recurring renditions of well-known concepts and visuals from culture. Consequently, the reader has the knack of discerning a distinct affinity or kinship with the fictional figure (36). The application of theoretical principles from McCloud to analyse *Adi Parva* exemplifies the potential for theory to be utilised in the analysis of graphic novels. The *Adi Parva* employs the use of hues to establish a clear differentiation between the past and the present. The present temporal context, during which Ganga is recounting her narrative, is depicted using contrasting tones of black and white in charcoal medium. The flashback storytelling is depicted using a colour palette consisting of pastel tones of blue, green, and yellow, which serve as symbols of opulence and abundance. However, this represents the general temporal scope of the novel. The novel demonstrates a unique approach to representing time. For instance, when Ganga says, "Vinata's wait was to be a long one" (Patil 47). Vinata is seen in close proximity to her two eggs, referred to as her "brood," which throw elongated shadows upon her, serving as a symbolic representation of her enduring and patient anticipation. In the very next panel, "Shadows lengthened and shortened, and the shapes of mountains changed" (Patil 47–48). The idea that "five hundred years" have passed is illustrated on a single panel of a single page, which captures and freezes the past as well as the present at the same time (Singh 11).

When analysing the composition of sections, frameworks, and gaps in Parva, one can discern that the artistic design and stylisation are intricately constructed with rigorous attention to detail and imaginative implementation. Gutters serve as symbolic representations of "gaps" that prompt readers

to engage their imagination and participate in creative conjecture. The reader is afforded the opportunity to exercise autonomy in constructing meaning through the various arrangements of panels and the gutter. In the particular episode where Ganga recounts her own narrative to the audience, a solitary frame depicting a 'splash' is observed. She says, "Eight times I was heavy with child. Seven times…. I lowered the babes into my watery body and set them free" (Patil 184). Nevertheless, in the following page, divided into three sections, the reader becomes fully absorbed in the dread of Ganga's next course of action: the act of immersing the eighth child into the river. The initial panel depicts aquatic creatures submerged in a body of water, while the subsequent panel portrays a newborn child enveloped in a pristine covering. Lastly, the third panel presents a back view of an individual, unmistakably identified as Shantanu, who has arrived to intervene and prevent Ganga from carrying out her plainly abhorrent action. Immediately after this scene, the reader undergoes a moment of "closure," during which they are capable of deriving a cohesive comprehension of the information they came across a few sections prior (Singh 12-13). Patil draws on the enduring Indian practice of transmitting epics through visual representations and adapts art to include digitally reproduced pictures, thereby contemporising the medium. Her work is characterised by sketched, drawn, and painted elements that demand a deep comprehension of the intricate layers of meaning conveyed through her deliberate selection of lines, colours, and graphiation. Patil's artistic style is distinguished by her inventive utilisation of multiple mediums and incorporation of miniature forms.

Patil's portrayal of the characters facilitates a greater sense of relatability for contemporary viewers. The attire of the many characters had to accurately represent Indian identities, whether they were national or regional. For instance, Gandhari is adorned in a kaftan, a garment that bears resemblance to the traditional costume of West and Central Asian regions. Adorned with traditional Kashmiri jewellery and situated inside a customary Central Asian interior design, the portrayal of Gandhari, the empress of Gandhar (said to correspond to present-day Kandahar), diverges significantly from her televised representation in the popular B.R. Chopra production. In the televised

adaptation, her appearance has been modified to align with Sanskritised and Hinduised clothes. The rationale behind the choice of attire for Kunti remains ambiguous, as she is depicted wearing a white saree with a crimson border, which is characteristic of Bengali tradition. The artwork seen on page 69, also known as the 'splash', portrays Garuda in a manner that bears resemblance to the artistic style of ancient Egyptian civilization. The backdrop of the artwork incorporates a mask that draws inspiration from the traditional practice of Southeast Asian shadow puppetry. Moreover, the appearance of the shadow puppet, which prominently looms as a backdrop in the artwork, holds symbolic importance as it represents the perpetual existence of the Creator (Singh 14-15).

Patil's use of modern vocabulary, whether scientific or otherwise, adds a contemporary feel to the narrative of the Mahabharata, in addition to the numerous and multidisciplinary analyses of artworks and imagery. Both readers and creators of comics sought cultural authenticity in the depictions. The expression of Indianness was manifested through the use of numerous dialects. This deliberate blending of conventional and classical elements allows for the assimilation of mundane aspects with profound philosophical themes, thereby facilitating a temporal transformation of mythology into the present era. Contemporary terminologies, such as "multiverse", "genetic data", "blip", "fractal", "filaments", "cosmos", "positive particles", and "velocity", are employed alongside mythical terms like "indrajaal", "adi", "devas", "asuras", "tapas", "kaalkoot", "naglok", and "yagna", which Patil intentionally refrains from translating within the primary text (Singh 15).

Another element that elucidates the distinctiveness of the renditions of the epic in two distinct mediums is its form and structure. In the context of televised serialised programmes, it is customary to include a segment that serves as the structural framework for the episode. It is imperative to thoroughly analyse this particular segment of the serialised programmes. The episodes of *the Mahabharat* on Doordarshan commence with the emblem 'B.R. TV', symbolising the production entity responsible for the serials. The signature section immediately follows the aforementioned content. The trademark portion commences with a visual depiction of a battlefield, wherein combatants mounted on elephants are actively involved in armed conflict. Amidst the auditory

presence of resonating cymbals and clashing armour, the voice-over iteratively echoes the term '*Mahabharata*' three times, with each occurrence accompanied by the visual manifestation of the word on the screen, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the battlefield. Subsequently, the credits are shown. During the continuation of the credits, a voice-over is employed to reiterate the underlying essence of the narrative, which centres around the necessity of heavenly manifestations such as Krishna. Following the conclusion of the credits, the visual transition occurs when the image gradually fades into a depiction of the universe. Accompanying this visual shift is the emergence of an ethereal voice, representing the concept of time, which proceeds to deliver a concise introductory statement pertaining to the serial. Subsequently, the programme commences and endures for an approximate duration of 35 minutes. The conclusion of every episode is characterised by a musical composition that serves as the auditory accompaniment for the term '*Mahabharat*'. It also serves as a reminder to the audience that they have been engaged in the narrative of Bharat, which can be interpreted as a tribute to the heroic figures within the story. The advent of serialisation has facilitated the recurring presence of these images in Indian households. No other rendition of the epic exhibits a comparable level of organisation, wherein a distinct segment consistently reiterates the same themes in each narrative. Therefore, the process of serialisation plays a crucial role in the televised adaptation of *the Mahabharata*. The television series not only presents the narrative to the Indian audience on a weekly basis but also employs a repertoire of recognisable individuals, visuals, and melodies to reinforce a particular interpretation of *the Mahabharata* narrative (Mitra 104-107).

The narrative framework of the *Adi Parva* is characterised by its intricate nature. Patil adeptly avoids delving into the intricacies of the narrative style. The question with regard to historical precision concerning *the Mahabharata* has been the subject of thorough examination and remains influential in the ongoing politically charged dialogues surrounding Hindu belief systems. Patil adeptly traverses this historical shroud with a combination of simplicity and fluency. She avoids the narrative complexity found in the original epic by resolving it through the use of one vivid image.

This rendering portrays *the Mahabharata* as a unified narrative that encompasses various stories, which are conveyed by the Sutradhars (Singh 5). *Adi Parva* begins with Ganga saying:

> There are some things your forefathers didn't want you to forget. So they sent the story down through the mouths of the sutradhar–storytellers who carry the thread. We are an unbroken lineage of storyteller nested within storyteller. When I open my mouth, you can hear the echo of story tellers past. (Patil 2-3)

The significant aspect in this instance is the lack of allusions to Naimisha, Saunaka, or Ganesha, who were actively involved in transcribing the epic by Vyas. In contrast to the original version, the retelling of the story commences with Ganga apprehending two colluding thieves who had intentions of pilfering a wandering cow. She then persuades them to serve as her listeners as she recounts a series of narratives (Patil 6).

The epic has undergone alterations on multiple occasions in order to accommodate the preferences of its readers or audiences. The involvement of the reader can be seen as a pivotal factor in the process of adapting the epic from its televised version to its portrayal in graphic form. The notable aspect of the television serials was the phenomenon of simultaneous viewership, wherein a vast number of individuals engaged in the collective consumption of a particular programme for a duration of four years. As the phenomenon of epic watching gained popularity, individuals and communication attempts were discouraged during the designated time frame of significance (Sunday 9:30-10:30 a.m.). Additionally, fuel stations ceased operations, and urban areas were devoid of activity as the entire nation congregated in front of their television screens to see the unfolding of their collective historical narrative (Sujala Singh 81-82). According to Rajagopal, the phenomenon of gods appearing on the television screen is often regarded by many individuals as a *darshan*, which is "what one partakes of when one sees a deity, or someone of exalted status … the deity gives *darshan*, and the devotee takes *darshan*; one is 'touched' by *darshan*, and seeks it as a form of contact with the deity" (Rajagopal 93).

The incorporation of the reader as a significant literary tool in *Parva* aids in expanding the plot of this piece of work. Ganga's narratives are derived from the ambiguities and inquiries presented by the collective audience. Folks continuously submit inquiries to her in order to verify her authenticity. Similar to an exemplary *Sutradhar,* Ganga captivates the audience, compelling them to attentively absorb her words. The narrative's framework is effectively metaphorized through its image of the "Indrajaal" (Singh 7). Ganga states "Were you to look closely into the heart of any single ruby, you would see reflected in its polished surface every ruby in the Indrajaal… Infinite reflections" (Patil 100). The reader is presented with a collection of interconnected narratives. The audience depicted in the novel serves as an essential source of input that drives the development and reflection of the narrative. The novel does not imply any moral instructivism. The reader or audience is afforded the autonomy to interpret as they see fit (Singh 8). The narrative progresses by means of engaging "interactivity" between the storyteller and her audience (Patil 99).

Thus, the objective of rewriting the epics is to recognise the cyclical nature of time and the commonly used "history repeats itself" motif in order to adapt the narrative to mirror the current era. It may be argued that the retelling of famous narratives has two primary purposes. Firstly, it ensures the continued presence of these narratives in the collective consciousness of a specific region, group, race, or nation. Secondly, the act of retelling allows for intriguing opportunities to experiment with stories that already exist. By engaging in this process, the narratives can be transformed into a fresh collection of tales that captivate the creative faculties of both the artist and the audience.

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