

How contemporary female graphic artists are addressing patriarchy

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the role of female graphic artists on the internet and the response they receive in their efforts in smashing embedded patriarchal systems. There are also initiatives such as Take back the Tech, which educate internet users about their rights and what steps – legal or otherwise – they may take when someone indulges in hate speech or issues threats.

Artists like Aarathi Parthasarathy, Rachita Taneja, Priyanka Paul, Sarah Naqvi and Maryne Lahaye (to name a few) create comics that question the status quo. This paper proposes to explain gender-based violence through their work and examine the impact that comics can have on recipients. It's important to note here that gender-based cyber violence targets only those women (or people who identify as women) who have access to the internet. Direct users of the internet are predictably at greater risk of violence.

Through their comics, Aarathi Parthasarathy with Royal Existentials and Rachita Taneja with Sanitary Panels, are questioning social practices. Priyanka Paul's Instagram feed is called Artwhoring, where she writes strong prose arguing for an equal world, a world that is just and fair. Gaysi Zine, spearheaded by Priya Gangwani, fights homophobia valiantly in a society that loves to condemn homosexuals and would have them "cured" had it been within their ken. These practices find their way onto the internet as well, where even questioning patriarchy is equated with questioning humanity. All this while the acts perpetrated by mostly men are questionable themselves.

Through this paper, I'd like to highlight the impact women have on the internet, and how their presence can make people sit up and take serious note of gender-based cyber violence.

Introduction

"The best thing about being a woman is that it's a man's world." These words were uttered by the unexpected underdog of the movie *Aaranya Kandam*. Yasmin Ponnappa, who essayed the role of Subbu, the sole female protagonist of this 2010-released Tamil movie was caught in an abusive marriage. She escapes the marriage, commits a convenient murder, and comes into the possession of a lot of money – money that would make her life easier. The reason I cite this dialogue is because it rings true even in real life, and particularly in today's time.

Cinema is art in motion. Actors breathe life into characters that are written by someone possibly creative, who hopes their words and thoughts find takers. Artists too, in a way, seek takers of their work. They spread their work through the different mediums that exist, and in the process, hope to make a difference. And when an artist's work becomes a social commentary, when it holds up a mirror to habitual perpetrators, our dormant society can no longer afford to stay silent. Our society that is populated with people whose sentiments are waiting to get hurt, people who don't waste a single opportunity to outrage about whatever's on the menu that morning, people who actually fear they'll be treated the way they've been treating others, people who spew vitriol under the garb of anonymity or hyper-nationalism, because that's exactly what the internet offers them. And that's how the internet empowers them.

In that realm, female, and female-identifying artists, regardless of sexual orientation, arguably have the shorter end of the stick. But that hasn't prevented them from expressing

themselves. Observing their work will reveal one common thought – “it’s about time”, or as a recent movement against sexual harassment started by the women of Hollywood goes, “Time’s Up”. They’ve had enough, and will not wait to give it back. It’s heartening to note fairly young women create work that in turn creates conversations. They’re smashing embedded patriarchal systems. Initiatives such as Take back the Tech educate internet users about their rights and what steps – legal or otherwise – they may take when someone indulges in hate speech or issues threats.

Artists like Aarthi Parthasarathy, Rachita Taneja, Priyanka Paul, Sarah Naqvi and Maryne Lahaye create comics that question the status quo. The reach of the internet allows these women to connect with viewers across the globe. Gender violence – direct and subtle – is reflected in each of these artists’ works. It’s important to note here that gender-based cyber violence targets only those women (or people who identify as women) who have access to the internet. Direct users of the internet are predictably at greater risk of violence.

Crafting an alternate universe

Comics provide an escape route. They open up avenues that we didn’t know existed. They’re an excellent medium of distribution, for even the most serious of issues can be broken down by virtue of comics. Through their comics, Aarthi Parthasarathy with *Royal Existentials* and Rachita Taneja with *Sanitary Panels*, question social practices. Priyanka Paul’s Instagram feed is called *Artwhoring*, where she writes strong prose arguing for an equal world, a world that is just and fair. *Gaysi Zine*, spearheaded by Priya Gangwani, fights homophobia valiantly in a society that loves to condemn homosexuals and would have them “cured” had it been within their ken. These practices find their way onto the internet as well, where even questioning patriarchy is equated with questioning humanity. All this while the acts perpetrated by mostly men are questionable themselves.

The series “Sanitary Panels,” started by artist Rachita Taneja in 2014, deals with Indian double standards. The art in “Sanitary Panels” – named so because when Taneja was struggling to name her creation, she noticed a packet of sanitary napkins in her room – is rudimentary, in that it only has stick figures and speech bubbles. Taneja’s observations and critiques are spot on. For instance, her comic on “mansplaining,” the term for men who believe they know more about a topic than a woman, introduced by cultural critic Rebecca Solnit in her landmark essay “Men Explain Things to Me.” The first panel in one of Taneja’s comics (they can be accessed on a Facebook page called Sanitary Panels) has a woman present an idea. The second panel shows a man repeat her idea and the fact that he has a penis. In the final panel, we see applause for the man, and the woman in a facepalm mode. Taneja’s art is simple and has the resonance of truth.

A recent comic by Taneja begins with a man stating that he’s a feminist. In the panel that follows, the woman he’s talking to tells him that while being a feminist is a great start, he had done some problematic things in the past that he could work on. The third panel has the man staring blankly at the woman, and in the final panel, he retorts, “No one asked you, bitch.” His personality reeks of toxic masculinity, and the inability to accept that he – a man – can do anything wrong. The comments to this comic had viewers recall times that they met with people – women and men – who while they identified as feminists, refused to associate themselves with “third wave feminism”. One commenter spoke of a time at work when she was expected to cut a cake and serve her male colleagues. It was assumed she’d do a better

job – in this instance, the domestic chore of serving food – by virtue of her gender. While the examples cited here do not speak of explicit, physical violence, they aim to draw assumptions about women, to paint all women with the same brush – and that *is* a form of violence.

Another artist confronting feminist ideas today, and has been doing so for a while, is Mumbai-based Priyanka Paul, who puts forward evolved, cogent arguments for her beliefs. Her graphic series, titled “Artwhoring,” is available on Instagram (the account has over 18,000 followers), and it’s seething. Paul has received threats from Hindu fundamentalists for her artwork, because she drew goddesses (including the Hindu deity Kali) as modern women. And anyone in India would know how blasphemous it can be, to depict gods and goddesses as anything *other* than gods and goddesses. Paul however, is unfazed by the threats, and the criticisms. In one of her works, titled “The Bleeding,” she depicts the lower body of a menstruating woman with unshaven legs. This is a direct jab at patriarchal norms that continue to prohibit menstruating women from entering places of worship, as the women are considered impure. Paul’s creations are usually accompanied by either a poem, or prose. For the Indian Republic Day, celebrated every January 26, Paul created a graphic for the Reconstruction Surgery Foundation, an organization that works to rehabilitate acid-attack survivors. The graphic depicted three persons, all scarred by acid. It’s not uncommon in India for jilted lovers, mostly male, to throw acid on the person, mostly female, who said no. However, Paul’s accompanying verse says, “Men and Women, with bruised egos shouldn’t have the option to use acid for this brutal assault.” No one is free from ego and anger.

In yet another post, Paul draws a bunch of female faces. All these females have different complexions and have their eyes shut. The accompanying prose describes how women are compared to canvases, to be painted, but the women don’t want that. The women are painters themselves, they are the artists. Her prose ends thus,

“If I’m a canvas, your art sounds like
hypocrisy,
If you truly want to paint my stories
In oil and acrylic
You wouldn’t want to keep me hidden,
Wrapped
Trapped
Unidimensional
In/on fabric”

What comes across in Paul’s art and prose is her deep understanding of what she’s writing about - she knows how the Indian society functions and she’s unafraid of calling it out. Even if she doesn’t belong to the community that she chooses to write about, Paul understands. Her efforts aren’t hollow. The number of likes her posts receive run into four-figures on a regular basis. And the audience seems to belong to an age when people develop an understanding of the world they inhabit. It’s an age where we learn sensitization, where we know how and why each individual is an equal.

In order to understand a space they don’t occupy, Aarthi Parthasarathy (who is a member of feminist collective Kadak, and runs a production company in Bengaluru called Falana Films) and Bengaluru-based artist Renuka Rajiv created “Aloevera and the Void” in

conversation with Purushi, who identifies as a transgender woman, but has not physically transitioned yet. (“Purush” is Sanskrit for “man.”) The graphic is a collection of conversations and reflections of belief, god, and exclusion. There are discussions about whether Purushi believes in god and turns to god or visits a temple in times of difficulty. Purushi is candid in her answers when she says that her problem is money, which she won’t get by visiting a temple. She turns to sex work when there’s a difficulty. The entire graphic builds on Purushi’s beliefs and her life as a transgender woman, where one is further exposed to the Indian caste system and how it has an exacerbated effect on the trans community.

After the infamous Delhi gangrape of December 2012, Delhi-based feminist publishing house Zubaan published an anthology called *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*, which was the result of a workshop conducted to get responses from women graphic artists. The collection narrated different stories that resonated with women, such as facing discrimination for being dark-complexioned, being coerced for sex-selective abortion, and forced marriage. Much of the work has the doodly, strategically amateurish look typical of many contemporary independent comics. Every story brings out the resilience of the women, in some cases overtly, in other cases more subtly. Like many independent comics made today, most of this work is or comes across as semi-autobiographical.

Appropriately, Parthasarathy’s personal feelings and beliefs lace through her work. She created a web comic along Mira Malhotra, fellow graphic artist from Kadak, called “Personal (Cyber) Space,” which addresses the abuse subjected to women online. The comic shows a woman sitting in front of her computer screen and read one news report after another on gender violence, in addition to sexist comments. It ends with a panel reading, “If one says something, there’s the fear of hateful response. But if one doesn’t say something, isn’t that silence counterproductive? So what does one say?” The woman wants to say something but knows she’ll only receive vicious bile in return, and so she leaves the comment section empty.

Parthasarathy has strong political views, which gives voice in her weekly webcomic series called “Royal Existentials,” where she repurposes clips of vintage art with speech balloons added to capture an ordinary citizen’s angst over various problems in Indian society. It has both a national and international context. In these comics, she has addressed oppression. For instance, one comic portrays a case of selective outrage. A character talks about how “smashing patriarchy is hard work” and how it’s important to “stand up against oppression,” while getting her feet massaged by another woman. And when the foot massager talks about “caste and class hierarchies,” the first woman brushes that off by asking her to continue massaging her feet. The subtly conspicuous jab at selective outrage and double standards is refreshing.

The artist in Parthasarathy addresses the #MeToo as well. This comic has two women talking to a man, with one woman telling him why she decided to come forward with her story. Her companion says “me too”. The man then begins to talk about how even men are sufferers and need help, completely ignoring the predicament of the women. He wants to center the conversation around him. The women, bemused, say one after the other, “I don’t know where to begin,” “Me too”.

The international discourse after the #MeToo campaign was fascinating. Not because of the sheer volume of women who came forward, but the way men attempted to tilt the conversation by saying, yet again, #NotAllMen. That didn't last long, though. For now, women who have ever felt threatened, are finding increasing support, particularly online – an arena that leaves so many people extremely vulnerable. The anonymity is of course, a boon for serial offenders. They use techniques such as doxxing to threaten women, which was seen on a largescale during the #GamerGate controversy of 2014, when women in the video gaming industry were targeted for talking about the sexism and progressivism in the industry. Women journalists in India are consistently trolled too – and the recent case of journalist Dhanya Rajendran proves that things will take a while to change. Rajendran had tweeted her displeasure over Tamil actor Vijay's movie, *Mersal*, which resulted in the journalist receiving sexist and misogynist hate from the fans of Vijay. The popular actor asked his fans to stop trolling and bullying Rajendran only after activist Twitter asked him to take some ownership.

At such a time, when an audience – whether online or offline – asks men to take responsibility, the standard response is #NotAllMen. Men don't want to be painted by the same brush, but all women are one common canvas for men to paint on. The defensive stance that such men take was effectively portrayed by artist Maryne Lahaye in one of her works. We see a young woman and man in the panel. The man begins by saying, “Not all...”, just to be shushed by the woman. She keeps shushing him for a while, ending with her almost choking him with her arms and whispering, “We know it's not **all** men, straight people, white people, etc. But it's **too many**. It's **enough**. And you being more offended by the implication that some of your peers can be bad than by the harm they actually cause... makes you part of the problem.” (emphasis Lahaye's.) The caption that accompanies this graphic is, “think before you speak/type or the chokehold fairy will get you”. Posted on Lahaye's tumblr account, this post had over 20,000 notes. Lahaye's art includes homosexual characters in passionate embraces and displays of unabashed affection. Her art can also be viewed on her Instagram account, @maryneart. The response to her art is mostly positive, for it resonates with anyone who has ever had to face or has seen online violence and hate.

To highlight this hate, Indian website Feminism In India ran a digital campaign called 'Digital Hifazat'. Hifazat, an Urdu word, means security or safety. The campaign included a bunch of graphic art pieces that depicted how women are at the receiving end of online abuse. For instance, the difference in the response that women and men face when they type the exact thing. If a man types, “Women face a lot of abuse online”, he receives compliments such as, “Woke bro!” On the other hand, a woman receives vitriol in the form of “Feminazi cunt.” One needs to understand here that women are not jumping to conclusions or generalizing – they are simply stating how they've been at the receiving end for centuries, and how they ought to give it back. The act of giving back is fiercely captured in a poem, “Give It Back”, by Suheir Hammad. The most telling lines are reproduced here,

“Give it here yes
you are sorry no
you can't get it back
later

There are serious consequences remember?

Now get out my face with your
war whoring and don't come
calling when those bombs
and those guns are aimed at you"

There are no commas or periods in Hammad's poem. Commas represent a pause; periods signify the end. Hammad is ready for neither.

Sarah Naqvi, a textile art student from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad will not be stopped by commas or periods either. Her Instagram page, @naqvi_sarah, carries her hard-hitting art, where she creates embroidered work on gender, violence, feminism – words that our society is attempting to come to terms with. Her Instagram page shows the artist's extensive work on human sexuality, where we see her embroider nude breasts, with the caption, "Freedom | Free them" and the hashtag "free the nipple". #FreeTheNipple is a campaign aimed towards gender equality, and also the name of a 2014 documentary. Another embroidered art has three male hands reach for a female breast. The woman doesn't seem to have any agency over her body. The accompanying text reads, "How does one censor what's not theirs? And what does this ownership of our bodies imply? You simply cannot make rules for something you don't possess." Her post questions prevalent norms. Why can't women own their own bodies? Why do they need to seek permission from an assumed higher authority? It's telling men that they can't make rules for women. They don't possess anyone's body but their own. And when men don't allow their bodies to be owned or possessed by anyone, what right do they have to order around women's bodies?

Each work of Naqvi is defiant. Each work has agency. Each work speaks out to an unfair and unjust world. Each work is online, and questions the unending violence of our cluttered world.

What's not cluttered is not complex. Alisia Chase, in her essay "You Must Look at the Personal Clutter: Diaristic Indulgence, Female Adolescence, and Feminist Autobiography," writes about how she encountered "personal clutter, persistence of feelings, and diaristic indulgence" in the graphic work of female cartoonists. Her essay mentions an image by Megan Kelso, an American comic book artist and writer, in which the central character tears her broken, bloody heart out of her chest cavity, only to retrieve it because she knows that she cannot live without the ability to love. There's also a panel titled "Tit Chat," where a woman recognizes that her breasts are significant not for their size but because they encircle the heart. (Urban Dictionary defines tit chat as a group of two or more women engaging in dialogue that men will find uninteresting.)

Chase argues that such work as that of Kelso centered on the female protagonist's feelings, and that it was these artists' ability to lay themselves emotionally bare that seemed to her, as a female viewer, the most compelling aspect of their work. It is indeed difficult to lay bare what's inside. But when you've been at the receiving end of comments and criticisms for centuries, when you're made to feel you cannot do something because you're the "other"

– woman, transperson, homosexual, a minority – there needs to be an outlet to confront the society that made you feel like you’re not worth it. There needs to be art.

“Feminist art is unique in the way it’s integrally entwined with the social structures from which it emerges,” writes art critic and activist Lucy R. Lippard, in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*. Though the essays in Lippard’s book have a Western context, the underlying thought, of feminism and the struggle of women in the field of art, resonates across many cultures and contexts. Of particular importance is the chapter titled “The Women Artists’ Movement – What Next?,” which explores the increasing involvement and much deserved recognition of women artists in a field that was largely restricted to them. Lippard goes on to explore how political climate has the power to influence artists and can impact their work. “It is no coincidence that the women artists’ movement emerged in a time of political travail and political consciousness, nor that the art-world tendency toward behaviorism and content and autobiography coincided with the women’s movement and its emphasis on self-searching and on the social structures that have oppressed women.”

It these social structures that the website Gaysi Family wishes to counter. It’s one of the rare online portals in India that offers a platform for people of the LGBT community to voice their concerns, via regular features, opinion pieces, poems, personal stories. Most of what one reads on the website is poignant, and makes one wonder if India will ever see the abolishment of the regressively oppressive Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Gaysi also comes out with a magazine version, called *The Gaysi Zine*, and has published five issues so far. Issue Six – to be published in January 2018 – runs the theme of Lesbianism. The theme of the previous issue was “desire”, and like the previous zines, it had stories, comics, poetry – each that focused on desire from a queer perspective, in that the pieces opened up different kinds of desire that exist in our society, and among the different kinds of people who exhibit that desire. Creators of such work belong to all genders, every community.

Apart from platforms that exist and are beginning to exist for such creators, Take Back The Tech is a great initiative that has been running an annual campaign since 2006 that observes “16 days of activism against gender-based violence”. These 16 days run from 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) to 10 December (Human Rights Day). Initiated by the Association for Progressive Communications’ Women’s Rights Programme, TBTT’s main areas of focus include Blackmail, Cyberstalking and Hate Speech. Through the website, users have the opportunity to learn their rights and strategies that can be employed in unfriendly, dangerous online encounters.

Conclusion

Will the work of female graphic artists help make gender, and the ensuing violence something more people talk about more openly? It certainly helps that the social media crowd shares and comments about thought pieces and graphic art on sexism. Mainstream newspapers give due coverage to such work, thus normalizing the conversation. Female artists, who used to be taken perhaps less seriously before, seem less diminished now. This has perhaps been largely due to different women who’ve come out after December 2012. With the help of social media platforms, artists are using their power and fan base as a way to influence the system, without really caring if they’ll succeed or not. This mere action of channelizing support didn’t exist

even five years ago. The good news is, they are creating conversations. In time, these conversations will become revolutions.

As Rebecca Solnit writes in her 2004 book *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, “May, two hundred years later hence, someone hold a document from 2019 in their hand, in wonder, because it was written when the revolution had taken hold and all the old inevitabilities had been swept aside, when we seized hold of possibility and made it ours. “Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings,” said LeGuin. It’s the hardest and the best work we could ever do. Now, everything depends on it.” 2019 is not far away. And the revolution has only just begun.

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