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## Diachronic to Synchronic Narratives: Gender, Mythology, and Augmented Reality in *Priya's Shakti*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the evolution of storytelling through the lens of *Priya's Shakti*. This ground-breaking graphic novel combines traditional Indian mythology with augmented reality technology to address gender-based violence. Through a detailed analysis of the intersection between antiquated narrative traditions and cutting-edge digital innovation, this study explores how modern storytelling adapts to address pressing social challenges while preserving cultural heritage. The research traces the transition from oral traditions to virtual transmedia, focusing on how *Priya's Shakti* redefines narrative practices through its inventive fusion of mythological elements and digital technology. By examining the graphic novel's unique approach in addressing gender-based violence, this paper shows how contemporary storytelling approaches can effectively bridge traditional cultural narratives with modern social activism to inspire meaningful change.

**Keywords:** Visual, **Deśi** and the **Mārga**, Evolution, Digital storytelling, Victim-blaming, Empowerment.

Storytelling lies at the heart of human civilization, woven inextricably into the fabric of our social, emotional, and cognitive existence. Story, a kaleidoscopic force of human consciousness and enigmatic tapestry of human experience serves as our primary lens for understanding the world, sharing lived experiences, and crafting meaning from the chaos of existence. In the grand tapestry of human evolution, storytelling emerges as a defining characteristic of *Homo sapiens*, enabling us to forge connections, envision possibilities, and drive innovation in ways that set us apart from all other species. As literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall astutely observes, "As a species, we are addicted to stories. The mind continues to tell itself stories throughout the night even after the body has fallen asleep." (Gottschall 45). This profound insight illuminates how deeply storytelling is embedded in our consciousness, shaping our thoughts and dreams even in our most vulnerable states.

The evolution of storytelling mirrors our journey as a species—from the ochre-painted tales that dance across ancient cave walls to the immersive narratives of modern augmented reality. Throughout cultural and technological advancements, storytelling has remained humanity's most powerful means for preserving and transmitting culture, fostering communication, and driving societal transformation. It stands as a testament to our enduring need to make sense of the world through narratives, connecting the past to the present, individuals to communities, imagination to reality and humans to the environment, the divine,

and to other creatures. Priya's Shakti, a unique visual narrative, symbolizes a transformative shift by merging traditional storytelling with contemporary digital tools. The novel challenges repressive patriarchal norms and societal indifference toward victims, drawing inspiration from the harrowing Nirbhaya case—a horrific assault on public transport in New Delhi in December 2012 that left an indelible mark on India's collective consciousness. It sparked nationwide outrage and led to significant legal reforms. The protagonist, Priya, who is assaulted by rapists, discarded by her family and community, and supported by goddess Parvati, emerges as an emblem of resilience and a beacon of hope for women's empowerment. By placing a survivor-turned-hero at its center, *Priya's Shakti* reconstructs the narrative around sexual violence, shifting from shame and silence to courage and action. Ram Devineni deliberately crafted *Priya's Shakti*, a victim-turned-heroine who enthralled young readers and struck a chord with audiences worldwide. Devineni stated, "I wanted to turn victims into survivors and then make them heroes" ("SHU Hears"). Through its compelling story, the graphic novel confronts male chauvinism, misogyny, and gender-based violence, empowering both Priya and its readers. The novel exemplifies the transformative power of storytelling by seamlessly integrating ancient mythological elements and village traditions with cutting-edge digital technology. This fusion transcends traditional narrative forms, tackling pressing contemporary issues like gender inequality, women's rights, victim shaming, victim-blaming, and the lack of support for survivors. By combining time-honoured storytelling techniques with modern innovation, *Priya's Shakti* creates an impactful platform that not only raises awareness about violence against women but also inspires tangible social change. This forward-thinking approach highlights how storytelling can evolve to address current challenges while preserving its intrinsic power to shape cultural discourse and drive meaningful action.

The nature of storytelling extends far beyond simple fiction or fabrication. It embodies a profound aesthetic, allegorical, and metaphorical truth that reflects society, preserves collective memory, and conveys historical, ethical, political, economic, and cultural realities. The concept of story or narrative itself encompasses both fictional and non-fictional realms. According to *The Routledge Dictionary of English Language Studies*, narrative represents:

...the representation in words and/or images of a real or fictional sequence of events. Non-fiction narratives occur in newspaper reports, anecdotes, biography, history and so on. Fictional narratives can be found in novels, short stories, comics, plays, films and so on. A distinction is usually made between the 'abstract' storyline or plot (the sequence of real or imagined events that takes place) and the 'concrete' representation of these events in the narrative, which might use various techniques to disrupt chronological order and manipulate point of view (Pearce 12)

The significance of stories lies in their weaving of lived experiences with interpretive insights, bridging the concrete and abstract, the individual and collective, the divine and human, tradition and modernity, and tangible and intangible. As tools for cultural preservation and transmission and social cohesion, they transmit societal values, profound insights, and teachings through various mechanisms: A. Direct Teaching: Imparting explicit moral lessons and cultural values through stories of legendary figures like Rana Pratap, whose unwavering dedication to his principles despite extreme hardship teaches courage and integrity; Bhagat Singh, whose sacrifice exemplifies patriotism and selfless service; and Shivaji Maharaj, whose leadership and strategic wisdom demonstrate governance and justice. B. Symbolic Learning: The Panchatantra masterfully employs animal characters and situations to convey complex life lessons, such as the crow and pitcher story teaching resourcefulness or the rabbit and lion tale

illustrating how wisdom can overcome physical might. These stories use symbolism to make abstract concepts accessible and memorable. C. Emotional Connection: The Ramayana creates deep emotional resonance through its exploration of relationships - Rama's devotion to dharma, Sita's strength, Hanuman's loyalty, and Bharata's sacrifice - allowing readers to connect with fundamental human experiences of love, duty, and moral choice. D. Social Bonding: Building community through shared narratives, historical tales, and traditional and cultural stories strengthens communal bonds through shared heritage. The narratives of India's independence struggle - from the Dandi March to the Indian National Army - unite people through shared memories of sacrifice and triumph, exemplified in Bose's immortal words "Give me blood, and I shall give you freedom." Similarly, festival narratives and folk traditions, from the tales of Holika-Prahlad to Krishna's victories, weave communities together through shared celebrations and cultural remembrance, creating an enduring tapestry of collective identity and shared values.

In contemporary times, storytelling has evolved far beyond its traditional roles of education and entertainment. This ancient art form now serves as a powerful tool across diverse domains, shaping how we communicate, comprehend, learn, heal, and connect in modern society. Stories permeate our everyday life through multiple channels - from traditional novels and magazines to contemporary digital platforms like social media, TikTok, Instagram reels, as well as news media and factual reporting. Stories have become an integral part of diverse spheres of human activities, with their applications expanding profoundly. In spiritual and motivational discourse, they transform abstract concepts into concrete narratives, making complex information more accessible and memorable. The business world harnesses storytelling's power through marketing and branding, crafting narratives that forge emotional bonds between consumers and products. For instance, Maggi noodles' advertisements transcend mere product promotion to sell emotional experiences and connections.

The therapeutic potential of storytelling has gained significant recognition in Psychology, where narrative therapy helps individuals rewrite their personal histories and overcome trauma. Literary works that give voice to marginalized experiences - from Dalit narratives in India to Black stories in Afro-American context like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, from Kamala Das's *My Story* to Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* - provide therapeutic value not only to their writers but also to readers who find their own experiences reflected and validated. Meanwhile, technological advances have revolutionized storytelling experiences. Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality create immersive narrative environments where audiences become active participants rather than passive listeners. Digital platforms have democratized storytelling, providing unprecedented opportunities for diverse voices to reach global audiences. Social media movements exemplify this transformation – hashtags like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have amplified individual narratives into powerful catalysts for social change, demonstrating how personal stories can ignite collective action and foster worldwide solidarity.

This remarkable evolution of storytelling underscores its ability to adapt to contemporary needs while retaining its essence as a conduit for human experience, wisdom, and aspirations. As society continues to progress, storytelling remains a timeless bridge, seamlessly connecting traditional insights with present challenges and future possibilities. In the context of contemporary India, where the safety and vulnerable status of women persist as urgent concerns, *Priya's Shakti* stands out as a compelling narrative. It masterfully intertwines traditional mythology with modern storytelling techniques, highlighting the transformative role of technology in contemporary narratives. Far beyond serving as a tool for fiction, technology embodies aesthetic and symbolic truths while enhancing visual appeal. This is vividly

exemplified in the graphic narrative, a work that fictionalizes the grave issue of rape—an abhorrent violation of a woman’s dignity—and society’s often callous and neglectful response. The narrative transforms the victim's journey into one of divine empowerment and heroic salvation, offering a poignant and inspiring commentary on resilience and justice.

The narrative draws deep parallels with ancient Indian mythology, particularly the *Devi Mahatmya*, which celebrates the power, strength, and energy of Goddess Adi Shakti. In moments of crisis, feminine divine power manifests to restore balance and save the world. Just as the Devas sought the intervention of Goddess Parvati, who assumed powerful forms such as Kali, Durga, Mahishasurmardini, and Baglamukhi to vanquish formidable demons like Chanda, Munda, Shumbha, Nishumbha, and Raktabija, *Priya’s Shakti* reimagines this mythological paradigm in a modern context. Goddess Parvati/Durga, as the embodiment of divine Shakti, has traditionally symbolized the awakening of dormant divine power within humanity. This timeless symbol of resilience and justice finds renewed relevance in *Priya’s Shakti*, offering a powerful commentary on the enduring strength and transformative potential of the feminine divine.

Priya's story mirrors this mythological framework while addressing modern social issues. Following her rape, Priya is initially shunned by her community and blamed for her assault – her clothing and independence are cited as provocations – she faces the harsh reality of victim-blaming that many survivors endure. In an interview, Priya's Shakti creator Ram Devineni revealed that he had learned about the nation's rape culture, which usually places the blame for the crime on the victims. He went on to say, ‘Gender violence in India was a cultural issue rather than a legal one’ (“SHU Hears”). Unable to bear her family and community's blame, Priya departs from the village, marking a crucial turning point in her journey. Goddess Parvati, witnessing her condition, plight, and suffering, seeks Lord Shiva's intervention. Finding conventional help ineffective, the Goddess's anger at the world's injustice leads to direct divine intervention, bestowing sacred energy upon Priya. Priya’s return, empowered by divine strength, transforms her into a warrior against injustice. The narrative ingeniously employs the age-old trope of divine grace empowering mortals to combat evil, adapting it to address contemporary atrocities against women. This traditional storytelling framework becomes a powerful vehicle for confronting and challenging present-day social issues, particularly the persistence of gender-based violence and societal indifference.

Priya’s Shakti exemplifies how traditional mythological narratives can be reimagined to address pressing social concerns. The story serves as both a reflection on contemporary society and a source of inspiration, illustrating that, like Priya, every woman has inherent strength waiting to be recognized and unleashed. By reframing the discourse on sexual violence, the work shifts the focus from victimhood to empowerment and justice. This innovative approach demonstrates how ancient mythological frameworks can be effectively deployed to address modern social challenges, crafting narratives that are culturally relevant and socially transformative. The story becomes a powerful catalyst for change, urging women to explore and recognise their inner strength while challenging prevailing societal attitudes toward sexual violence.

Indian storytelling has historically evolved through two primary streams: the Deśi (vernacular tradition) and the Mārga (classical tradition). The Deśi tradition encompasses folk tales, regional legends, and local narratives that reflect diverse cultures, dialects, and community-centric experiences. These stories celebrate regional identities, cultural diversity,

and localized wisdom, often rooted in oral traditions and colloquial expressions. (“Analysis of Technical Terms”) The Mārga tradition, rooted in classical literature and Sanskrit texts, represents a structured and methodical approach to storytelling. Drawing from religious and philosophical writings such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, it conveys moral teachings, metaphysical concepts, and universal truths. An erudite audience is captivated by its intricate symbolism and aesthetic richness, which emphasise spiritual elevation and universality. These narratives, composed in Sanskrit or Prakrit, employ literary techniques such as epic poetry, allegory, and shastra-based storytelling. Together, the Deśi and Mārga traditions have profoundly influenced Indian narrative practices, forming a dualistic foundation that blends practical knowledge, a pragmatic approach, and lived experiences with philosophical and ethical ideals. Over time, these traditions have evolved to align with shifting cultural and technological contexts, reflecting the enduring flexibility and dynamism of Indian storytelling.

In contemporary times, digital media has emerged as a transformative third layer, reshaping traditional storytelling paradigms. By blending elements of Mārga and Deśi traditions, digital storytelling transcends their dichotomy, introducing innovative possibilities for narrative expression. This new dimension leverages technology to integrate regional authenticity with universal appeal, fostering engagement across diverse audiences.

Priya's *Shakti* exemplifies this evolution by seamlessly synthesises India's distinct storytelling traditions—Deśi (regional, folk) and Mārga (classical, Sanskrit)—while incorporating modern digital innovation. This unique combination creates a narrative tapestry that bridges ancient wisdom with contemporary social commentary. The Deśi elements manifest through Priya's characterization as an ordinary middle-class village girl, whose story reflects the harsh realities faced by countless women in rural India. Her experience of victim-blaming by her family and community, and her subsequent ostracization, draws from the raw, unvarnished storytelling tradition that has long given voice to local experiences and social critiques. In contrast, the Mārga tradition emerges through the mythological elements woven throughout the narrative and the divine intervention of Goddess Parvati. The grace and intervention of divine power and the gift of Sahas, the mystical tiger companion, echo the classical Sanskrit literary tradition where celestial beings intervene in human affairs. This incorporation of sacred mythology elevates Priya's personal struggle to a universal tale of divine justice and transformation.

What distinguishes *Priya's Shakti* is its innovative integration of digital technology with these traditional narrative forms. The fusion of mythological symbolism with contemporary social issues, presented through digital media, creates a compelling narrative that resonates deeply with readers. (Goldman, Srivastava, and Devineni) The work's vibrant, colourful illustrations and richly detailed imagery serve to amplify its emotional and cultural impact. This digital dimension not only modernises the story; it creates new pathways for engagement with ancient storytelling traditions. The synthesis of Deśi and Mārga elements, enhanced by digital storytelling techniques, creates a multi-layered narrative that speaks to both tradition and innovation. This combination allows the work to address contemporary social issues while remaining rooted in India's rich cultural heritage, making it particularly effective in reaching and resonating with modern audiences.

Digital storytelling has emerged as a transformative force in contemporary narrative practices, fundamentally reshaping how stories are created, shared, received and experienced. This technological evolution has revolutionized traditional storytelling methods while creating unprecedented possibilities for engagement and impact (Jenkins). The significance of digital storytelling lies in its multifaceted capabilities—through multimedia integration and interactive

features, it enables overwhelming levels of audience engagement. Modern digital platforms create engaging environments using AR and VR technologies, allowing audiences to become active storytellers rather than just viewers.

Digital technology has democratized storytelling while preserving cultural heritage, enabling the safeguarding of traditional narratives while facilitating their evolution through modern reinterpretation (Thompson). Platforms supporting multiple languages and dialects promote inclusive storytelling, while AI-driven translation tools expand accessibility across cultural boundaries. This technological transformation extends beyond mere entertainment, serving as a powerful tool for social change and cultural preservation. The integration of traditional narrative techniques with digital innovation creates a dynamic platform for addressing contemporary challenges while maintaining cultural authenticity. The educational impact of digital storytelling is particularly noteworthy, with research indicating enhanced student engagement and critical thinking skills through digital narrative techniques. Projects like *Priya's Shakti* exemplify this potential, demonstrating how digital storytelling can address social issues while preserving cultural elements.

The evolution of character delineation, like narrative framework and techniques in Indian storytelling reflects a dynamic shift from archetypal mythological figures to innovative digital personas. Classical narratives introduced timeless characters like Nachiketa, symbolising spiritual inquiry and courage; Dhruva, epitomising determination and devotion; and Prahlada, representing unwavering faith. Mediaeval tales brought forth figures like Tenali Rama and Birbal, celebrated for their wit and wisdom, alongside regional legends such as Gopal Bhar and Vikramaditya, who conveyed moral teachings.

Modern literature transitioned to realistic portrayals, with characters like R.K. Narayan's Swami capturing the nuances of childhood experiences and Mowgli bridging Indian and Western storytelling traditions. In the digital era, characters like Chhota Bheem and Baal Veer adapt traditional heroic values to resonate with modern audiences, while digital assistants like Alexa and Siri exemplify the fusion of technology with narrative forms. Innovations such as Usha Uthup's *Karadi Rhymes* preserve traditional stories in creative ways, blending cultural heritage with contemporary formats. Cinema, too, has embraced this evolution, as seen in films where robots become central characters, exploring themes of emotion and humanity. In *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* and the *Robot* series featuring Rajinikanth, robotic characters evolve to experience human-like emotions, even falling in love, blending advanced technology with the timeless appeal of storytelling. This progression underscores the adaptability of Indian narratives, bridging the past and present while embracing future possibilities.

The progression from classical to contemporary characters illustrates a shift towards more relatable, lifelike and diverse representations, reflecting societal changes and the integration of technology in narrative art. *Priya's Shakti* represents a significant milestone in this evolution of character delineation, introducing a revolutionary kind of superhero that distinctly departs from Western archetypes. Unlike the predominantly white male superheroes of Western comics—Superman, Batman, or Thor—who rely on extraordinary physical powers or technological prowess to combat apocalyptic threats, Priya emerges as a transformative figure in the superhero genre. As a young brown teenage girl from rural India, her character breaks new ground in representation while remaining deeply rooted in the nuanced tapestry and ethos of Indian traditions.

Priya's heroism is not defined by superhuman strength or dramatic battles but by resilience, empathy, and her unyielding commitment to combat wrongdoings. Empowered by the divine grace of Goddess Parvati and accompanied by her tiger companion Sahas, Priya embodies India's rich heritage of feminine divine power. Her missions, however, address

pressing contemporary social issues, blending mythological roots with modern challenges. The *Priya* series—including works like *Priya's Shakti*, *Priya's Mask*, *Priya and the Lost Girls*, and *Priya's Mirror*—tackles real-world crises such as gender-based violence, acid attacks, sex trafficking, and the global pandemic, making Priya a powerful symbol of resilience, empowerment, and transformative change.

This innovative characterisation marks a paradigm shift in superhero narratives. Rather than relying on physical combat or technological prowess, Priya's strength lies in her ability to challenge repressive norms and inspire change through understanding and compassion. Her character seamlessly bridges the ancient and the modern, the imaginative and the real, mythological power and ordinary humanity, crafting a new kind of hero who resonates profoundly with contemporary audiences while honouring the essence of traditional storytelling.

The significance of Priya as a young brown girl from rural India—juxtaposed with the predominantly white male European archetypes of Western superheroes—extends far beyond representation. Her character embodies the synthesis of divine feminine strength and grassroots activism, offering a transformative template for heroism that draws from cultural heritage while addressing contemporary social justice. Riding her tiger companion—a gift from Goddess Parvati—Priya symbolically unites divine authority with earthly advocacy, creating a distinctly Indian interpretation of the superhero. This vision not only celebrates India's mythological and cultural richness but also sets Priya apart as a groundbreaking figure in the global superhero canon.

The art of storytelling has evolved in profound ways throughout human history, adapting to societal changes while maintaining its essential role as a vessel for human experience and cultural transmission. This evolution can be traced through three distinct yet interconnected phases: oral, written, and digital.

The oral tradition represents storytelling's foundation, where tales like the *Odyssey* and the *Mahabharata* served as collective repositories of knowledge, morals, and cultural identity. These narratives, passed down through generations, created bonds of shared history and communal understanding, while evolving to reflect the values of each new audience. The emergence of written narratives marked a transformative shift, introducing permanence and deeper interpretation to storytelling. Works like *The Aeneid* and *The Ramayana* exemplified this transition, enabling more nuanced exploration of ideologies and historical perspectives. This written tradition established the groundwork for diverse literary forms and systematic analysis of narrative structures.

The digital age has ushered in the most dramatic transformation yet, introducing unprecedented ways of crafting and experiencing stories. As Henry Jenkins notes, transmedia storytelling creates "a richer and more immersive story experience," with narratives flowing across multiple platforms (92). Social media platforms have democratized storytelling, turning individuals into global narrators through micro-stories on Instagram and TikTok, while podcasts and YouTube channels have expanded the possibilities for narrative expression.

Augmented Reality (AR) represents the cutting edge of this digital evolution, fundamentally redefining the storytelling experience. By overlaying digital elements onto physical reality, AR creates multi-sensory narratives that transcend traditional media boundaries ("Augmented Reality"). This technology doesn't merely change how stories are told—it transforms how they are experienced and understood, creating immersive environments where virtual and physical worlds converge. This progression from oral to digital storytelling represents more than a technological shift; it reflects humanity's expanding capacity for narrative expression while preserving storytelling's timeless ability to connect,

inspire, and transmit values across generations. Even as the medium evolves, storytelling's fundamental power to shape human experience and understanding remains constant, adapting to new forms while retaining its essential role in human culture. The integration of Augmented Reality (AR) in Priya's *Shakti* represents a trailblazing fusion of traditional Indian storytelling with advanced digital technology. This innovative approach elevates the graphic novel from a static narrative into an interactive, multi-dimensional experience, deepening reader engagement while amplifying its social impact. Particularly resonant with Generation Z's multi-modal learning preferences, this fusion reimagines the traditional comic format into an immersive, multi-sensory journey, incorporating visual, auditory, and interactive elements to create a deeper connection with the audience.

AR technology addresses the contemporary challenge of diminishing attention spans by creating multiple engagement points within the narrative. For young readers, accustomed to dynamic, multi-medium storytelling, Priya's *Shakti* offers a layered experience where static comic panels come alive via smartphones and tablets. The digital enhancement enables seamless transitions between text, animation, and interactive features, sustaining engagement while enriching understanding. Through AR features, readers become active participants in the storytelling process. By scanning pages with their devices, they unlock animated sequences, hear character voices, and access additional content that deepens the narrative. For instance, scanning certain panels reveals real-world testimonials from sexual violence survivors, forging a powerful connection between the fictional narrative and actual lived experiences. This interactive dimension not only captivates readers but also reinforces the graphic novel's core themes, blending entertainment with advocacy.

The AR elements also breathe life into mythological scenes. Iconic moments such as Priya riding her tiger Sahas or the manifestation of Goddess Parvati's divine power transcend the printed page, creating vivid and memorable experiences. This digital augmentation bridges cultural heritage and contemporary innovation, resonating with modern sensibilities while preserving the narrative's mythological roots. Beyond its technological novelty, the AR integration amplifies the story's social message. It connects with ongoing social movements by exploring women's experiences and advocacy for equality through both imagined and real-world examples. The inclusion of location-based AR features further enhances its utility, directing readers to local resources and support services for women's safety and empowerment.

The innovative integration of AR in *Priya's Shakti* demonstrates how digital technology can preserve cultural heritage while driving social change. The narrative powerfully celebrates the inherent Shakti (strength) of women, as Priya discovers her divine power and dedicates herself to empowering others. Through AR technology, this journey of awakening becomes an interactive, dynamic engagement that resonates deeply with readers. By merging mythological storytelling with modern tools, the graphic novel establishes itself as a compelling narrative and an educational platform. Engaging young readers through an immersive medium, it effectively addresses complex social issues, inspiring reflection and action while setting a benchmark for integrating traditional narratives with contemporary technology.

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