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Research Article

# Decoding Patriarchal Ideological Biases at Work in the Popular Vernacular Comics of Nonte Fonte and Handa Bhonda: A Study of the Codification of Femininity through the Image–Text Combine

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Any image accompanies with it two concepts viz. communication and representation. Both these concepts are potent tools to be analysed from the perspective of study of signs or semiotics. But the monolithic study of signs or codes embedded in representation or communication curbs the scholarly or multidimensional spaces in which a representation/image representation can be analysed, examined, or investigated. If we consider a pictorial representation only as an image chosen/preferred randomly, we will miss the ideological bias in which it is produced. Therefore, the image representation of women/female in any text provides the ground for analyzing the term 'politics of representation,' since no production is devoid of a power structure that always invariably empowers a dominant one, dictating/controlling the production, reception, and dissemination of 'texts' (the term text to be comprehended in a post-modern sense), thus creating possibilities of stereotyping, distortion, hegemonisation, homogenization, et al. of women characters. Even under the tactful gloss of figuring ideal female characters of mythology or sculptures in temples, etc., in different ancient Indian art forms, the patriarchal ideology of depicting women with perfect female bodies according to Indian aesthetics operates. The paper focuses on the production, reception, non-reception as a result of dominant market forces of comics on women or female representation in the comics genre. It adopts the research methodology of content (image–text representation of women) analysis as a case study; paradigmatic analysis with panels from *Nonte Fonte* and *Handa Bhonda*, two popular vernacular Bengali comics, to investigate how a change in an image can affect

the reception; as well as excerpts from interviews with target readers/viewers of comics/audio-visual projections of comics to examine the decodification of female presence by a child as a receiver of such texts; and inputs from interviews with the writer–illustrators of Nonte Fonte and Handa Bhonda, have been included to examine the codification and decodification process of the image-text combination of comics.

# 1. Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the representation of women through pictorial and linguistic codes employed in comic strips/comics. It is pertinent here to mention that art forms may differ in their technique and style, but the intended meaning/representation is conveyed through communication from sender to receiver. Observing the mode of communication in any class of art form, it can be envisaged that the reciprocity of art is operational through the following mediums of communication:

1. Communication creates a sense of reality. It is thus an attempt to approximate reality, where the possibility of finding familiarity with the represented object and the resultant identification is higher.

2. Communication facilitates conveyance of the message from sender to receiver in any form, but the possibility of finding similarity in respect of representation of physical features may be less.

The paper thus initiates a reading into the proposition that in imaging females through representation, both the traditional art forms that attempt to approximate reality and one-dimensional figures/one-line drawings in vernacular comics such as *Nonte Fonte* and *Handa Bhonda* communicate the dominant power structure in general and patriarchal ideology in particular. To trace the ideological bias in vernacular strips, the processes of stereotyping, homogenizing, and hegemonizing of female characters in more recent genres of comics on 'desi superheroines' have also been investigated. Examination in detail reveals the extent and the schemes operational in this apparently innocent genre. An image/picture has always possessed a higher potentiality for facilitating perspicacity and comprehensibility than linguistic texts, and it probably existed before the origin of language, as can be seen in ancient cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The patachitra paintings of Bengal and Orissa have the same form of telling stories through pictures as that of comics. The categorization of comics as low/pop/children's literature does not negate its seriousness and potentiality to be called a product and producer of culture and cultural artefacts. The mass appeal

that it enjoys provides ample scope to make it an object of study from a cultural studies perspective and to examine the hegemonisation process that such texts under their apparent innocent mould perpetuate. A 'text' is a practiced and accumulated by-product of a culture. The creator (the writer and illustrator in the case of a comic strip) in this case is instrumental in the approbation and promulgation of the precepts of that social group and culture from which he or she creates. Therefore, the conscious or unconscious act of shaping and constructing a text in a culture-specific style is in fact propelled/induced by the concept of receptivity of a text and penetrability into the reader's consciousness. This aspect of production and circulation of a 'text' obviously involves the idea of the resultant dispersion of ideological stances of a culture that perpetuates/preserves the cultural identification and assimilation. This paper here shares the proposition of the present researcher's thesis that posits the comic strip/comics as a cultural product and contends "it effectively disseminates predominant cultural connotations shaped by its specific cultural context all the more since it is a very popular medium of entertainment for children and adults alike" (Gupta, 2012). The implicit hierarchy that such a text tends to generate, sustain, and perpetuate makes the marginalized representatives of a different culture (including women characters within) victims of cultural, racial, sexist, and professional bias. This research paper is an attempt to highlight how comics with two different sign systems – image and text – perpetuate the politics of marginalization and domination. A dominant power structure is not only indicative of the mainstream culture which uses cultural tools or artifacts as means of domination through dissemination; it also includes the dominant male proprietorship of culture or patriarchal ideology where the identities of women are subjugated, even silenced.

## 2. Image-Text Combination as Code: Theoretical Framework/Formulation

This paper adopts the concepts of 'relay text' and 'anchorage text' propounded by Roland Barthes. Barthes (1993) lays out two functions from the linguistic message of an image. The anchorage text is meant to "direct the reader through the signified of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance" (Barthes, 1993). It becomes a means to exhibit its disguised ideology in consonance with the dominant power structure. The relay text is found in cartoons and comic strips. The text is not more than 'a scratch of dialogue', and it is complimentary to the image, "the words, in the same way as the

images, are fragments of a more general syntagm, and the unity of the message is realised at a higher level than that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis" (Barthes, 1993). It includes comic strip iconography and dialogues and advances the action by adding those meanings that are not displayed in the image itself. The paper explores the concept of anchorage text and proposes that Barthes' definition can be expanded, dilated, and adjusted to include the illustration of comics within the category of anchorage text in order to ground the semiotic coding/decoding process of the writer/illustrator and the readers of the comics. This can be endorsed by the fact that "in the case of the comic strip as a genre, the illustration performs the same function of 'anchoring,' i.e., directing the reader towards a meaning chosen in advance, as does the caption in the photograph, which anchors the meaning of the image, reinforcing the addresser's intended meaning" (Gupta, 2012). Hence, all further analysis of comics included in the paper entails consideration of the illustration in the comic strip panels as 'anchorage text.' The image, with its definitive shapes, sizes, and colours, and its representation of culture-specific details, acts as a visual code and leaves almost no scope for the reader/viewer to move away from the intended meanings. This pictorial code is decoded by the reader often in a predetermined/definitive manner and works as the potent medium to disseminate a particular ideology through the image.

## 3. Decoding 'Binary of Powerful Male and Tender Female': A Praxis on a Panel of Nonte Fonte

The action of comics progresses through continuity of images arranged in panels. This technicality is similar to the film medium on the ground of providing the awareness of 'being there' in contrast to the 'having been there' feeling of still photographs. As an example, one could cite three pages from *Nonte Fonte Collection Vol.* 7, 8, 9. An image of the same woman figure (figure 1) is drawn in five panels as per the continuity of images in the story. Both the relay text and the anchorage text here reinforce the binary of powerful male and tender female. The relay text attributed to the image of the woman "is there anybody to help me" (Debnath, 1998; trans mine) immediately alludes to a threat to her womanhood. The text – image combine of the panel is the apparatus to perpetuate the patriarchal bias that endorses/commends the idea of woman as tender, lacking intelligence, and therefore vulnerable. This is, however, only one side of the politics of representation. This paper, in later segments, will also deal with how even in representing women with physical strength, the male gaze operates and the physical femininity is commoditized. This anchorage text depicts a male holding the hand of the

woman and, with a sarcastic smile, says "O woman, who will save you in this uninhabited place" (Debnath, 1998; trans mine). The relay text contains the word "lalane," which is actually a kind of derisive word for "lalana" in Bengali, meaning "woman." Nonte and Fonte come to rescue her as her cry for assistance has evoked male valour.



**Figure 1.** A panel from Nonte Fonte Collection 7, 8, 9.

## 4. Power-Structure, Male Gaze/Patriarchal Ideology and Hegemony: Commodification of Femininity Through Image Representation in Comics

The representation of female or 'figuring' women through art by the dominant power structure (read patriarchy) has always rendered it as an object intended for the male gaze. The more recent comics in India glorifying female protagonists with heightened visibility of female figures can be regarded as a departure from the familiar and accustomed tone of comics on Indian mythology as was introduced, professed, and avowed by the *Amar Chitra Katha.* But even the illustrated classics on mythology in *Amar Chitra Katha 'Malavika'* (figure 2), based on Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitram* and *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, et al., can't avoid the criticism of depicting an impeccable female figure and object of desire in content/linguistic message and as manifested in art, thereby dictating a standard form of female beauty as seen through the male gaze. A minute observation of the cover page's

illustration of *Malavika* not only displays Malavika as a perfect embodiment of physical femininity according to the Indian aesthetic of female beauty but also adduces the way female beauty is gazed at as an object of desire through the gestures and mannerism of her male counterpart.
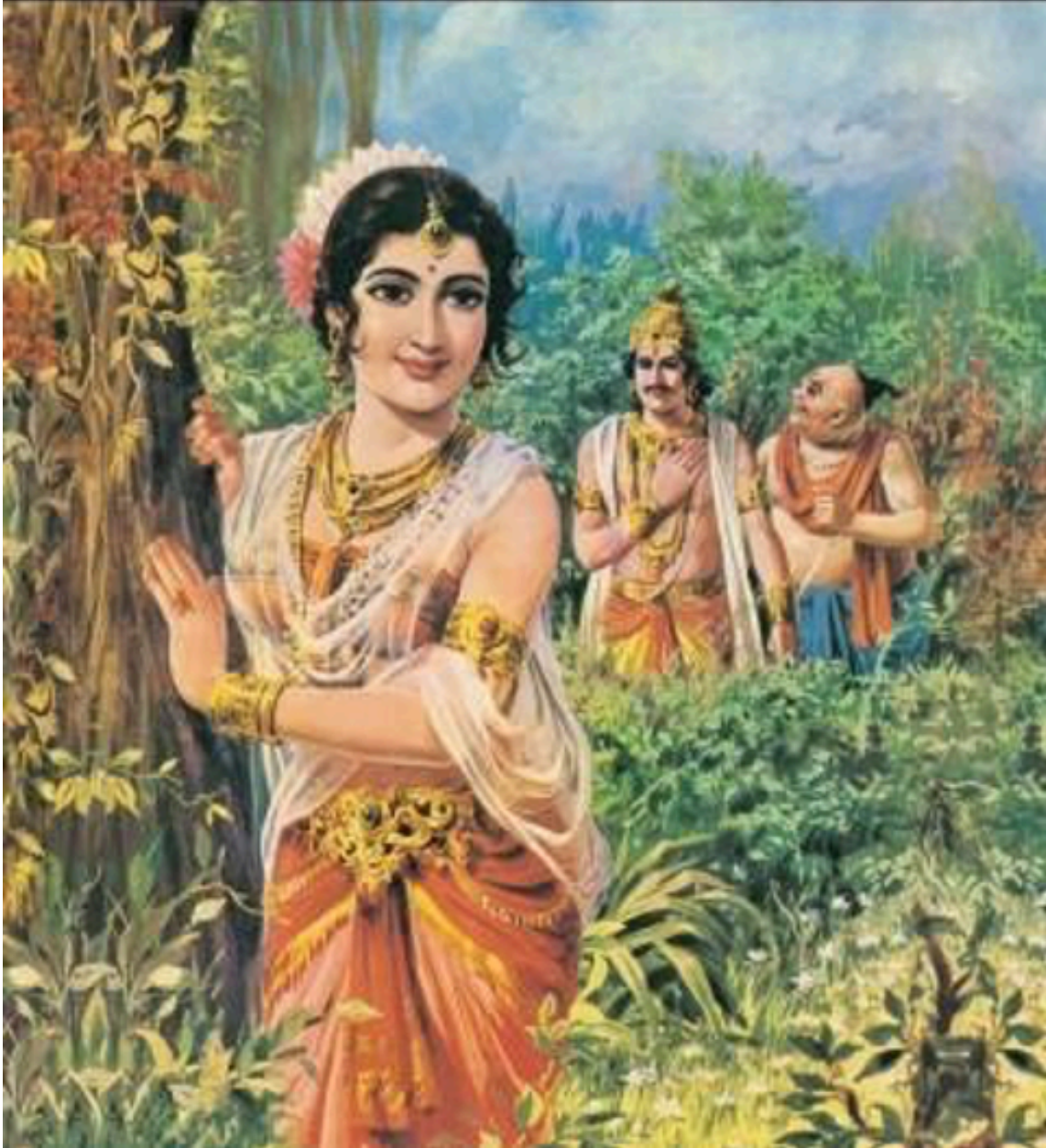
**Figure 2.** The cover page of 'Malavika' in the *Amar Chitra Katha* series.

The discussion on the depiction of the 'perfect' female body through pictorial representation in the comics genre is relevant since the reproduction and propagation of cultural values through a narrative medium that engages Indian mythology has now taken an alternative mechanism. But it has kept intact the preconceived and premeditated poetics and politics of representation, which is perhaps purposive so as to comply with the demand of the market forces. There has been a constant endeavor at the amalgamation of Indian mythology and Western culture. It has generated a more recent genre of comics based on 'superheroines,' engrossing the reader and viewer and engulfing the market. These comics are characterized by a developed pattern of illustration and are stylized in an almost cinematic/filmic pattern. The Western mode in visuals has gradually paved the way for another kind of hegemonisation – hegemonisation conforming to globalization. The mode of illustration distinctly glamorizes the 'superheroines.' The illustrations/images, having realistic attributes and a much refined graphic quality, enrapture the audience. The physical femininity and the presentation thus become the prime factors in the circulation of these comics rather than the 'valour' as simulated. (Figures 3 and Figure 4)

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**Figure 3.** Devi. A Panel from *Devi*, page 9.
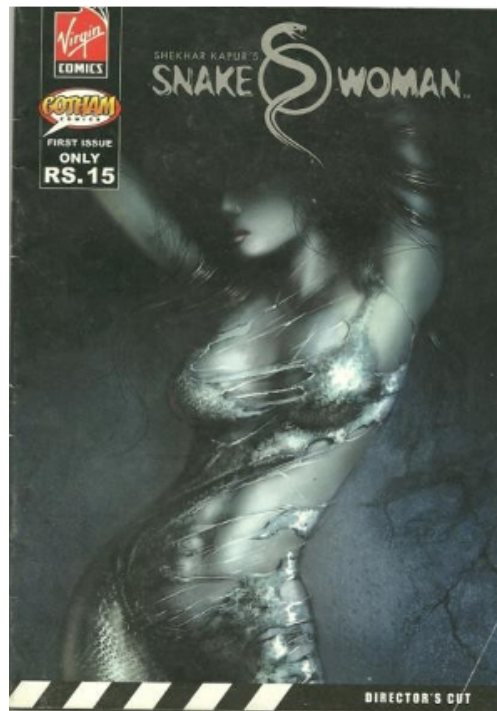


**Figure 4.** Snakewoman. Courtsey: Cover

page of *Snakewoman.*

In these comics, there is no trace of 'comic' association. *Devi* and *Snakewoman* present female protagonists who are a hybrid form of human and divine, and the way they are exhibited visually can be considered erotic and sensual. Such projection can be viewed as a strategical scheme produced by the demands of the market. They are portrayed as the reincarnations of century-old divine goddesses. The deportment embodies the commoditization of femininity and thus renders as a disfigurement of the belief system typified in mythology. This paper here reasserts the inference stated in the researcher's thesis:

Hegemonic construction operates here at two different levels - firstly, through the subsequent assimilation of such distorted dissemination of culture and heritage by Indians as consumers (readers) of these strips. Secondly, the hegemonisation process, working through commodification of women as constructed by the male gaze (here the author-illustrator's), pretends to give them a

'central' position and at the same time acts as a shaping factor that moulds the gaze of the reader. (Gupta, 2012)

It further connects it with the theory of gaze in Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which establishes the fact that forms of looking that are depicted in a text cannot be separated from forms of looking at that text conducted by the reader or spectator:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure of looking has been split between active/male and passive female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy into the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey, 1975).

Under the spurious guise of defying the concept of 'strong male and tender female,' this new genre of comics in fact perpetuates the existing marginalization strategy. The female protagonists are in the centre, but the illustration, the 'anchorage text' of the female figure, expedites the exploitation by the male gaze. It disproves their strength, valour, and superpowers. The fact that women are subordinate and are liked to be represented as beautiful, tender, and help-seeking, and not possessing valour, a quality attributed to males only, is reaffirmed by displaying a seductive mode that at once relocates them as objects of male desire. Comic strips follow the same lineage of 'representation' as linguistic text. Here it is the image representation. Gender is a social and cultural construct. The cultural construct disseminates male proprietorship by endowing gender-stereotyped roles to females. Discussing the representation of women in calendars or 'bazaar art,' Patricia Uberoi points out the two processes, namely 'commoditization of women' and 'tropising of the feminine,' that account for the heightened visibility of women in popular media - advertisements, billboards, hoardings, films, and packages - a problematic issue (Uberoi, 1990). Therefore, it becomes crucial to locate the stereotype in the cultural context that Uberoi refers to as strategies both of 'homogenizing and hegemonizing'. To simply state that a stereotype is a false image would be to discredit its potential for harm and good and evade the complexity of the relationship between signifier and signified, representation and reality through a simplistic and reductionist assimilation.

The genre of 'superheroine,' with a female protagonist at the centre, can be compared to *Shutki Mutki* (literally translated to 'The Skinny and the Fatty'), a purely vernacular Bengali strip. It was first published in 1964 in the magazine *Shuktara* after the huge success of *Handa Bhonda*. Drawing a comparison is reasonable on the grounds of analyzing demands of the market and the reader's space,

which are both producer and product of cultural 'texts.'*Shutki Mutki* (Figure 5) failed to appeal to the Bengali reader with their naughtiness because the latter was accustomed to their gender stereotyping as pretty and not mischievous (more apt for boys like Handa and Bhonda and Nonte and Fonte). When asked about the possible reason for the objection raised by women readers during the publication of *Shutki Mutki*, the writer-illustrator Narayan Debnath replied, "I have not been able to assess it rightly even today. I felt perhaps they did not like it. They did not inform me directly. They informed the publisher's office through mail or something else. According to me, probably in that era, they were not prepared to see girls doing naughty tricks and pranks and could not think of people enjoying it either. They could not accept it" (trans mine). (N. Debnath, Personal Communication, January 1, 2011).

This falls in place from the perspective of feminism where, ironically, women themselves were not ready to accept the non-conformist roles shown to be played by women in the comics. They rather preferred the gender-stereotyped traditional roles. The inference validates the asseveration stated in this research article.



**Figure 5.***Shutki Mutki*: Image taken from *Comix and Graphix*, Issue 2, 2016. Book Farm, Page 187.

# 5. Examining the Inclusion, Exclusion of Female Figures: Stereotyping and Hierarchy Formation

The content analysis and case study in this section have been taken from the researcher's thesis "Analysing Comic Strips as a Mode of Cultural Production and Cultural Dissemination" (Gupta, 2012), which is available in Shodhganga/Inflibnet and has been duly cited in the Reference section.

Debnath's illustrations of female figures in *Nonte Fonte* and *Handa Bhonda* can be considered as negative and reductionist portrayals of female characters that ease the negation and annihilation of female presence itself. They inhabit a marginal space in the male-dominated realm. The carelessly illustrated portrayal of every female character in the same manner, dress, and appearance exhibits a reductionist tendency, exposing the patriarchal bias that customarily authorizes male dominion, thus perpetuating the idea of women in general as persons of minimal significance and without any voice or identity of their own. It is pertinent here to analyse the portrayal of women as characters in the texts of *Handa Bhonda* and *Nonte Fonte* and theorise, from the feminist perspective of representation, the paucity, lack of imaginative vitality, and attribution of marginal status to them. Exposition of the politics of marginalization, hegemonization, and hierarchy formation as one of the aims and objectives of this research can be located in the concept of sexism, where women characters are marginalized and given a lower status in the binary of male-female. This tendency is evident when analysed through both their 'presence' and 'absence' in the text. The subordination of women and their corresponding lower status becomes clear through the presentation. Their 'presence,' which is often silenced or stifled in a gender-stereotyped mould, reflects their marginalized and dominated identity. 'Absence' reinforces the idea of the dispensability of women in a male-dominated space. In this respect, Narayan Debnath's comics offer an interesting praxis. His corpus of female characters is very few, but they are presented so carelessly that sometimes it becomes difficult to differentiate their physical appearance from that of the male, with the exception of their dress or outfit. Both *Nonte Fonte* and *Handa Bhonda* (two of Debnath's strips examined from the perspective of this research and its hypothesis) have storylines centered around male participation. Female presence is automatically done away with or minimised. But interestingly, the readership includes females who are oblivious to such intent and overlook their stereotyped and carelessly illustrated appearances.

Nonte and Fonte live in a Boy's Hostel. Boy's Hostel as a space totally excludes female presence. Handa and Bhonda read in a Boy's School. In both, female absence is naturalized and almost legitimised,

except for their rare inclusion only for the occasional development of the plots. Decipherable from the illustration codes such as background and dress, viz., half shirt, half pant, and chappal with a particular hairdo, both these strips present a time-frame of the 1970s and early 1980s. Society of that time preferred residential boys' education, whereas girls were kept home and educated, and this perhaps results in the exclusion/absence of the latter from the comic strip plots that nucleate around boys' life and world. Two collections of *Handa Bhonda (Handa Bhonda-10-12 and 13-15)* have been examined from the perspective of such a marginalization process regarding women.

Of the total 46 stories in *Handa Bhondar Kandakarkhana* ('The Escapades of Handa and Bhonda', translation mine), only three instances of women's presence can be deduced, while in 13-15 it consists of six panels out of forty-four stories. On page 13 of the 10-12 collection, a woman is presented, and five panels are allotted to her.

She is the medium through whom Handa plays pranks on Bhonda. Bhonda, with an intention to help her, gives an umbrella to her. But when she is about to open it, some garbage which Handa had put into it comes out, and she misinterprets Bhonda for the misdeed. She is wearing a sari in a pattern specific to Bengali culture (dress as cultural code). Her physical details, as presented in the illustration, are simple and, on decoding, provide inferences about specific cultural connotations. She is carrying a shopping bag. From the lack of customary insignias of Hindu Bengali married women, such as conch bangles, specific red-colored bangles, and sindoor, it can be inferred that she is a middle-aged widow. Her illustration shows her to be the stereotyped agony aunt popular in Bengali cultural traces such as films, etc. The illustrator has carefully blackened a portion of her mouth to show that one of her front teeth is missing. This, with her style of knotting her hair in a small bun (known in Bengali language as 'khonpa', the shape and size of which traditionally is said to represent a quarrelsome character), corresponds to the identity of a shrewd, talkative, and fault-finding widow, an orthodox believer in the strict moral code of life led according to a pattern of rituals and untouchability, etc. The anchorage here is so emphatic that her identity is at once communicated to and correlates with her readers'/audience's knowledge and experience of connotations of such representations in print or visual media. She is a typical Bengali woman of little significance. Her sense of relief on getting protection from the rain is as prompt as her reaction at being fooled. She does not have a name. Though her identity is not clear from the story, her illustration and her reaction are the sources of fun and humour. She does not have a name and conforms to the notion of type, not a genuine individual. A Bengali reader at once identifies her because of the familiarity of the socio-cultural ethos of Bengal and its visual representation or codification. The denial of a name is a clear indication of it being typed and also of it being denied significance equal to the main characters who have names. This leads to an implication of the writer/illustrator's intention of creating hierarchy and hegemony with a patriarchal bias.

The pictorial quality and picture-as-code system of comic strips enable natural communication between the representation and its consumers. As a Bengali reader, what struck this researcher in the illustration were the spines of fish and chicken among the dirt that was put in the umbrella. Her subsequent reaction is not so much about dirt but about these things that have violated the purity of

her widow life. Bengali widows are forbidden to eat non-vegetarian fare, and even any touch of the same is considered a sin – a reminder of the social sanctions that operate in a cultural specificity, substantiating the hypothesis of this research about the cultural production and cultural dissemination aspects of comic strips. Her anger at Bhonda is the result of the fear of violation of this sanctity. The illustration here is directing "the readers through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others, by means of an often subtle dispatching" and leading towards a "meaning chosen in advance" (Barthes, 1993). However, her role in the story is as subordinate as her actual status. She is presented only for the development of the plot. Handa chose her for his purpose because he knew her nature. She is stereotyped in this comic strip and marginalised. The patriarchal ideology here operates through image–text representation.

The story entitled *Uler Gola* (Ball of Wool, trans. mine) has an illustration of a girl (Figure 7). It can be deduced that her entry is only because the knitting of wool is supposed to be a feminine act naturalized and legitimised only through corresponding gender stereotyping, just as embroidery, cooking, and quarreling with servants are feminine, as evident in Kamala Das's poem "An Introduction":

> Dress in saree, be girl
>
> Be wife, they said.
>
> Be embroiderer, be cook Be a quarreler with servants.
>
> Fit in, oh, Belong, cried the categorizers (35-38).

The ball of wool is used here as a medium to teach Handa a lesson for tormenting both Bhonda and Buchki. Buchki is the name of the girl who is shown knitting the wool when Handa interrupts her. But the noticeable thing about her presence is the incomprehensibility and ambiguity regarding her sexuality, as illustrated.

**Figure 7.** A Panel from *Handa Bhondar Kandakarkhana* (13-15), Page 19.

She is given a gender-specific role, but the carelessly illustrated physical appearance obliterates her identity as a female. She is presented in such a way that she can hardly be distinguished from male figures in the story's illustrations. She is depicted as a half-pant, half-shirt wearing girl almost the age of Handa and Bhonda. Though she is presented right from the very first panel, it is only when her name was spoken in the fourth panel by Handa that it became evident that she is a girl. The illustration fails to communicate her identity because of a certain ambiguity in the illustration. This ambiguity is the result of the paradox of inclusion (in comic strip space) and also the intention to exclude (from primary signification).

The discussion on dissemination and assimilation and corresponding stereotyping, hegemonisation in representation entails a focus on readership space, reception, non-reception, effect of market forces, etc. The following excerpts from an interview with a 6-year-old boy as a reader and viewer endorse the fact that the representation of characters, along with the image specifically of females, influences the way a reader receives, formulates, and internalizes the stereotyping as 'natural,' and how it in turn affects the production. The study includes paradigmatic analysis and commutation tests to analyse the connotation of female 'presence' and 'absence' in texts (in this case, comics) and its relation to the assimilation and dissemination of dominant ideology under the apparent non-serious children literature genre of comic strips.

The following is an excerpt from a larger interview, and only the parts pertinent to the corpus of the research article have been included. The interview was conducted in the course of a general conversation on 26 October at 6:30 p.m. The boy, Sourasnata Debnath, was 6 years old, reading in class 1 in an English medium school belonging to a middle-class Bengali family.

Q. Do you think the cartoons that you watch really exist?

A. Yes, I thought that they really exist. I did not know whether we are humans or cartoon. Then my mother said these are not real. These are cartoons.

Q. What do you feel when you read and watch *Nonte Fonte*? Are they real? A.No.

Q. How do you know? A.They are drawings.

Q. Which cartoons or movies do you watch?

*Sinchan, Doraemon, Ben10, Power Rangers, Chota Bheem, Amar Chitra Kath,.Ramayana-the Legend of Prince Ram, Krishna and Balaram, Mickey Mouse, Handy Many, Chota Bheem aur Krishna., Sinchan in Treasures of Buri Buri Kingdom, Patliputra-the City of the Dead, Chota Bheem-Journey to Petra, Doraemon-the Movie Nabita and Dinosaur and many others.*

Q. Which cartoons do you like in comparison to others? A.*Doraemon,* I like Doraemon movies and Sinchan Movies.

Q. Have you seen any cartoon with girl as main character like Nobita Nobi or Sinchan? A.No, not a single one(wonder).

Q. How is Shizuka in *Doraemon*?

A. Shizuka reads with Nobita.She loves bathing very much.Nobita and others go to watch her bath and she pours a bucket of water on them. Do you know how it could be understood. It was shown that the body of them gets wet with sudden pouring of water. (smiles)

Q. What if Shizuka was not there? I mean she is not so important in Doraemon?

A.Nobita is mad after Shizuka. If Shizuka is not there for whom Nobita will take the help of Doraemon. Nobita takes the help of Doraemon to win the favour of Shizuka

Q. And Shizuka?

A. Shizuka often goes with Suneo, the other rich boy of the same class by saying just a sorry to Nobita. (S. Debnath, Personal Communication, October, 26, 2010)

(INFERENCE: Women as object of desire. Such representation reasserts stereotyping and negative codification of female characters.)

# 6. Codification-Decodification: Paradigmatic Analysis: Investigating Production, and Assimilation of Dominant Ideology Through Comics Nonte Fonte and Handa Bhonda and Their Reception.

The case studies on Paradigmatic Analysis have been taken from the researcher's thesis "Analyzing Comic Strips as a Mode of Cultural Production and Cultural Dissemination." (Gupta, 2012), which is available in Shodhganga Inflibnet and has been duly cited in the Reference section.

Paradigmatic analysis in semiotic theory seeks to identify the various paradigms, i.e., the pre-existing set of signifiers which are embedded under the manifest substance of 'texts'. These are sets of signifiers placed at the back of the mind unconsciously. This structural analysis involves a consideration of the positive or negative connotations of each signifier, as there is a 'choice' between what is chosen and what is not. The choice is set from the same set that includes both the 'present' and the 'absent'. Whereas the first category affirms the 'positive', the second one leads to 'negative,' subdued, or inferior, as a selection is always based on preference. The use of one signifier rather than another implies a preference. Paradigmatic relations are the oppositions and contrasts between the signifiers that belong to the same form from which those used in the text were drawn.

The main issue to be considered in paradigmatic analysis for the statement of this research, which is based on the concept of patriarchal ideological association of the 'texts,' is why a particular signifier rather than a workable alternative is used in a particular/specific context. This aspect is often referred to as 'absences'. It is closely related to Saussure's concept of the value of signs. According to him, signs take their value from what they are not. Paradigmatic analysis also involves comparing and contrasting each of the signifiers present in the 'text' with absent signifiers that might have been chosen. The use of one signifier over another from the same paradigm is based on factors such as technical constraints, codes, conventions, connotations, styles, rhetorical purpose, and the limitations of the individual's own repertoire. Apart from all that, it is also based on an ideological construct. This ideological construct functions as a determiner in interpreting a 'text'. Meaning is not transmitted to us; we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware (Chandler, 2000). This convention is embedded in us because of certain ideologies, and when we choose a thing out of the same paradigm, actually we give preference to it over others. The paradigmatic analysis in semiotic study helps us not to take 'reality' presented/projected as having a purely objective existence that is independent of human interpretation. 'Reality' is a construct, and we, as members of a culture, play a role in constructing it. Semiotic study includes a commutation test in order to make out why a particular sign is preferred and how it is influenced by the construct we call 'normal,' subsequently imposing a presupposed 'naturalness' in our conscience. A commutation test is the replacement of one sign by another (Lacey, 1998). It illustrates how powerful paradigms and syntagms are in image or any kind of analysis. "By substituting objects for other signs in the same paradigm and decoding the new meaning, we can isolate what contribution the original sign is making to the meaning of the sign" (Lacey, 1998).

This research involved the analysis of some panels from *Best of Nonte Fonte* using a commutation test so as to examine the contribution of the original sign (the panel as it is) in constructing the meaning of the sign –

1. The first panel- (Debnath 47)

**Figure 8.** A Panel from *Best of Nonte Fonte*. Page 47.

Nonte and Fonte are sitting in a red jeep and talking about their upcoming jeep race competition with Keltu, the bullying senior in the hostel. For the purpose of the commutation test, two kinds of replacement have been done. The first one is from the human paradigm, and the second one is from the paradigm (set) of cars or means of communication. Taking into account the given context, the verbal (syntax) form is—

Two boys sitting in a red jeep, preparing for their jeep race competition.

The alternate possibilities are given as follows, where girls are chosen instead of two boys from the human paradigm, and jeep is replaced by other types of vehicles:

  a. Two girls sitting in a red jeep, preparing for their jeep race competition;
  b. Two girls sitting in a red cycle, preparing for a cycle race competition;
  c. Two girls sitting on a red horse for a horse race competition.

The first possibility seems awkward from the presupposed concept of normalcy regarding gender because a jeep is an object that is considered purely a masculine car compared to other cars. The second one is much more natural, but only from the perspective of the present-day situation. The same thing would have been unnatural if viewed from the time frame in which the strip was written. The third one seems unnatural because of the connotations of masculinity, activity, and dynamicity associated with a horse. Gender construction and gender stereotyping do not equate activity and

dynamicity with girls; they are considered passive and docile. The interesting fact about these two alternatives is the different contributions the colour 'red' makes in these three. The concept of the red color provides a romantic, passionate, and soft association often related to femininity, while in the first alternative, it was a symbol of male masculinity. The main focus regarding the commutation test that comes out from the analysis is the strength of a sign in constructing meaning. It does not only construct but is constructed by social norms, which are themselves a creation of a particular ideology. The 'text' plays a significant role as here the researcher's choice of alternative is also the product of her readings of cultural texts such as literary texts or movies.

Another instance analysed for the purpose of the commutation test from the same strip is as follows –

An elderly person is worried because a house is on fire and a baby is left inside. He seeks the help of Nonte and Fonte. Nonte rescues the baby. (the given one in the text).



**Figure 9.** A Panel from *Best of Nonte Fonte*. Page 35.

**Figure 10.** A Panel from *Best of Nonte Fonte.* Page 35.

The commutation test is as follows:

1. An elderly woman seeks help from Nonte and Fonte.

2. A girl rescues the baby by climbing a tree.

The first one seems more 'natural' than even the given one since women are generally projected as 'damsels in distress'. They are 'chosen' for this purpose. The second alternative seems 'unnatural' because the act of rescuing or any heroic deed involving physicality is conceived as masculine. Rescuing by climbing a tree is not natural for girls. It is the gendered construction and stereotyping that is embedded unconsciously within us, and this is the factor that makes the alternative seem unnatural. The first replacement is adjusted because the male is old and seeking help. He is not presented with his masculinity. Information or meaning is not contained in the world or in any 'text'. The projection of the male as strong and therefore superior to 'females' as a reality in *Nonte Fonte* and *Handa Bhonda* comic strips is a construct and is constructed through the 'choice'/ preference of the

male as central. This choice is made on the basis of the dominant-subordinate/strong-weak/masculine-feminine paradigm or hierarchy.

## Statements and Declarations

*Conflicts of Interests*

None.

## Acknowledgements

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## Declarations