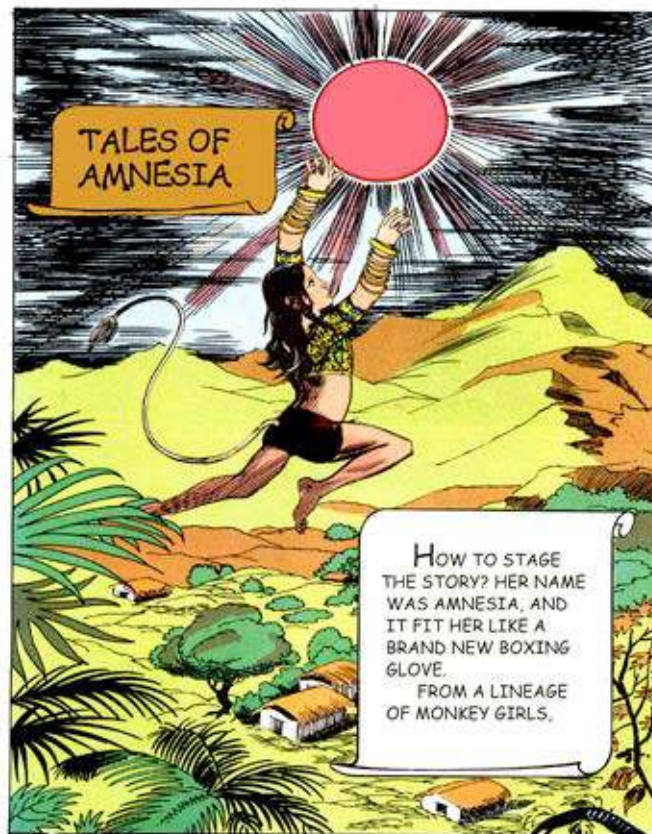# Breathing Between the Lines:

Re-Deconstruction in Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia*

Saisha Grayson

Breathing Between the Lines:
Re-Deconstruction in Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia*

Now in her mid-thirties, Indian-American artist Chitra Ganesh has reached a stage in her career marked by significant media and market attention. With her critically-lauded inclusion in the 2010 Saatchi Gallery exhibition, *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today,* alongside art stars such as Subodh Gupta and Pushpamala N., she seems to have fully arrived as a major contributor to the increasingly prominent presence of artists from India and the Indian Diaspora in the contemporary global art world.[1] Perhaps unsurprisingly, her digital collage works based on Hindu comic books have been particularly popular, as they present vibrant illustrations populated with sexy, mysterious figures, easily identifiable cultural markings of "Indianness," and poetically vague but unmistakably-biting feminist textual narration.

This combination of self-identified multiculturalism, political criticality and visually lush, aesthetically pleasing imagery is perfectly suited to the current tastes of the globalized, biennale- and fair-driven contemporary art market. The seemingly straightforward legibility of her postmodern deconstructionist project, however, has so far precluded a deeper consideration of this work. For, while the general premise of using collaged and manipulated pop-culture references as tools for cultural critique may not be new, this paper will argue that, in using the unique format and source material provided by the Hindu comic book series Amar Chitra Katha, Ganesh's first work in this style, *Tales of Amnesia* (2002)*,* produces an intertwining narrative that raises far more complex

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[1] Adrian Searle, "Review: The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today, Saatchi Gallery," *The Guardian,* February 2, 2010. http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/feb/02/the-empire-strikes-back-indian-art-today-review (accessed 3/10/2010).

issues than a cursory analysis would suggest. In particular, rather than focusing on the foregrounded feminist aim to "question" or "challenge" gender stereotypes or a rehashed pop critique of artistic authenticity, attention needs to be directed towards the structural organization of the text which works consistently to undermine the broader hegemonic forces of masculinism, Eurocentrism and Enlightenment ideology. In doing so, *Tales of Amnesia* surprisingly demands an elliptical reorganization of our understanding of this particular mode of semantic deconstruction. Instead of seeing it as simply a postmodern strategy, Ganesh uses it as a contemporary tool for affecting a cognitive return to an already existent, pre-colonial sensibility within the South Asian subcontinent. Pointing to the non-linear, multivocal approach to knowledge production and dissemination imbedded in ancient Hindu mythology and textual sources, *Tales of Amnesia* attempts to reconstructs the deconstructionist tendencies repressed during both the colonial period and the subsequent nationalism on which independent India is founded. This leads to a cross-cultural, cross-temporal critique of the stability of meaning and subjectivity, achieved primarily through the problematizing of origins, originals and originality as sources of authority or authenticity in a specifically South Asian context.

Tales of Amnesia: **The Origins of Our Inquiry**

To begin unraveling this intentionally convoluted range of references, one must in some way mirror the multi-directionality of Ganesh's project itself. Therefore, we will first consider the art object in its physical form, while considering the "original" to which it most directly refers, the comic books of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK). These English-language, Indian-produced comics, however, refer to their own originals, either sacred

Hindu texts or classic literature and epic narratives from pre-modern South Asian history. Yet, as we will explore, ACK's claim for their book's authenticity is predicated on strategically synthesizing or selecting a single source to privilege, out of a plethora of competing and previously disparate versions that all point towards, but never constituted, an original and stable text.[2] Therefore, our final stop in the investigation of sources will necessarily be a consideration of what constitutes the "origins" of Hindu mythology and Indian history referenced in both ACK's and Ganesh's comic books.

Tales of Amnesia in its original form was produced in an edition of one hundred and fifty as a self-published 'zine [3] that mimicked the unified presentation and the low-budget feel of the ACK comics, which began being published in 1969 and can still be purchased for less than three dollars an issue in New York. Including the title page, Ganesh laid out pages consisting of twenty-one interlocking frames, following comic conventions such that the size of the rectangular blocks shift, altering the composition of each page. This allows her to emphasize certain images over others, while creating a pleasing rhythmic variation that invites the reader's eye to wander in a way that is not purely literary (left to right), but also telescopic (taking in the overall composition) and impulsive (moving from one detail of interest to another), a trait that comic book creators the world over have exploited through the medium's combination of image and text. Because she not only references, but directly appropriates the imagery from back issues

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[2] Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings and Other Heroes.* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 90.

[3] Even the art object here proves illusive and unstable. According to her gallerist, Thomas Erben, in addition to its comic book form, *Tales of Amnesia* is reproduced as individual digital C-prints in editions of five. However, groupings of diptych and triptychs, sometimes mirroring the books arrangement and other times producing new configurations, have also been released in editions of five. This makes it impossible to posit a singular work as the decisive *Tales of Amnesia*, or a singular context as the sole frame for understanding a given image within the body of the whole work.

Author interview with Thomas Erben, April 1, 2010, New York, NY.

of ACK, Ganesh's work shares the bright, almost florescent color palate and agitated, black outlines and shading of the mostly-70's era ink drawings. However, a radical change in content is affected through the addition of new textual accompaniment and intricately edited, augmented and recombined imagery. Describing her process, Ganesh states:

> "I take a part of the background, play with it, make brush and ink drawings and then I scan them into a computer. I erase the white space, and I finally add colour, so there is a kind of seamlessness between the characters and the background. There is a lot of hand drawing and manipulation involved."[4]

This indistinguishability between the source material and Ganesh's alterations gives the images their powerful ability to induce productive cognitive dissonance and active, participatory deconstruction in the mind of the viewer—the reader is drawn in by what seems to be impossible incongruities, recoils from irresolvable juxtapositions and then returns to inspect the frame in detail to try and parse what the relationship between original and intervention might be.

In order to answer their curiosity about what the precise intertextual relationship is between Ganesh's work and ACK images, one must turn to specific frames from *Tales of Amnesia.* The splash page, for instance, takes its basic structure from the cover for *Hanuman* (ACK no. 19, 1971), but replaces the muscular, adult monkey-god, with a lithe, *jungalee*, adolescent girl reaching for a bright pink sun [Fig. 1]. The text also takes a distinctly non-traditional, confrontational tone, seemingly undercutting its

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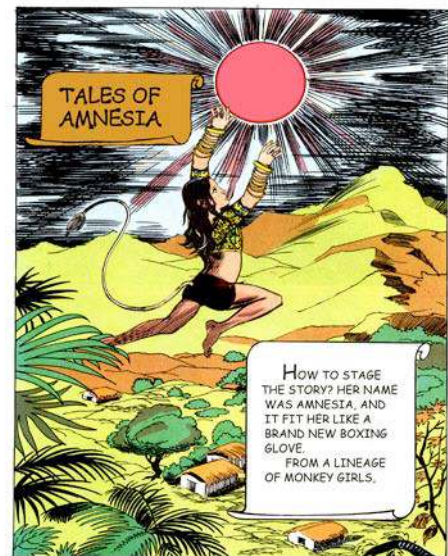
[4] "Profile: Chitra Ganesh," *The Asian Art Newspaper,* December 2, 2007, 3.

narrative authority from the start by asking of itself, "How to stage the story? Her name was Amnesia and it fit her like a brand new boxing glove. From a lineage of monkey girls"[5] The first words of the book then immediately foreground issues of staging, framing, and construction. By doing so, while using the stylistic language of comic books and the iconographic relics of ancient mythology, Ganesh ensures that the question is raised not only in the present, but posed to all stories that have come before and all stories that are/were/will ever be told. The end of the text trails off in mid-sentence, and it is unclear as to whether the thought continues in the next frame, following comic convention, or whether the narrative has skipped a beat when it says, "She was prompted by anxiety to chew off her own tail at an early age" in front of an image of the monkey-girl, tail afire in the foreground, and a blazing city, burning to the ground, in the background [Fig. 2]. For those familiar with the tale of Hanuman, this mix-and-match image would overlay the personal story of an adolescent girl compelled by anxiety to burn away/chew off her restraints and the monkey-god servant of Rama, who burned the city of Lanka to save the helpless, kidnapped Sita, traditionally held up as the model of femininity, wifely servitude and unquestioning loyalty.[6]

A more humorous but also more pointed feminist indictment of ACK's portrayals of women is produced through intertextual comparisons seen in the third and ninth panels of *Tales of Amnesia*, which are modified from images that appeared in *Shiva Parvati: A*

[5] Chitra Ganesh, *Tales of Amnesia,* 2002. New York: Self-published artwork, edition of 150. Viewed as digital prints at Thomas Erben Gallery, April 1, 2010.
[6] McLain, 60.

Story of Divine Love (ACK vol. 506, 1972). The first pairing [Figs. 3 & 5] shows almost identical young girls, dressed in fetching red, first playing catch and then turning back to speak to a friend outside the frame. These girls' remarks and object of play are quite different in each, however. In the ACK version, Parvati is trying to catch a small unidentifiable object, and after missing, states that she is done with this game and would rather go home to "play with our dolls."[7] The entire next page is dedicated to her parent's search for an appropriate husband for this well-bred, doll-loving maiden. In Ganesh's version, a dismembered forearm and hand hurtle towards the girl, with a spray of bright red blood giving the appropriate comic-book flare of movement to the object. The cartoonishly detailed cross-section of the arm's flesh, blood and bone emphasizes the kind of casual goriness found throughout ACK, despite its young audience. Above the image, the third-person commentary narrates, "She spent those years in bliss, fond of saying," a thought which is then completed by the girl's speech bubble from the right-hand section, "Godzilla, you don't stand a chance."[8] An almost perfect doppelganger to the young Parvati who wished to play with dolls, this figure is altered only by a subtle, lurid ribbon of red blood lining the interior of her lower lip and dripping seductively down from the corner of her mouth to the string of pearls around her neck.

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[7] Kamala Chandrakant, *Shiva Parvati: A Story of Divine Love*. (Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha, 1972), 3.
[8] Ganesh, 2.

In the second pairing of images from the *Shiva Parvati* comic and *Tales of Amnesia* [Figs. 4 & 6]*,* an adult woman is shown submerged in a woodland pool, hands pressed in prayer. The reader is told that the ACK figure is in an "icy pool, her lips quivering," as she silently prays, "Your image fixed in my heart shall warm me."[9] In Ganesh's alteration, she is begging, "Please God, give me an aneurysm,"[10] revealing the original's masochistic devotion for what it is, and the destructiveness of the behavior it models for children as appropriate for a woman in love.

For readers conditioned by expectations of cohesion and linearity, Ganesh's work produces a number of frictions even at this early stage. First, the connection between the monkey-girl, from frames one and two, and the girl in red in banner three is unclear: Is this Amnesia with her tail cut off? Is this another character entirely? After the first page which names the heroine Amnesia, almost all the images will frame the subject of the linguistic narration simply as "she." This creates a continuous chain of problematically indeterminate uses by the third-person narrative of the female pronoun, which is used to refers to a multiplicity of seemingly unrelated, or impossible to identify off-screen, female referents. Traditionally, the omniscient and anonymous third-person narration, which generally appears set off by a colored text-box in either the upper-right or lower-left of an image, is used in the disjunctive format of comic books to clarify and smooth over transitions between characters, times and locations. Instead, this authority voice is

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[9] Chandrakant, 19.
[10] Ganesh, 4.

used in *Tales of Amnesia* to increase the ambiguity and further widen the gaps in the text, making it impossible to confirm a specific relationship between parts, whether linguistic, visual or intertextual. As will be discussed later, this detached narration is then further disrupted by sudden eruptions of unanchored first-person narration appearing in the upper-right or lower-left boxes, as if a voice-over to the scene or internal monologue of a character. However, because the text infrequently matches neatly with the image, we are never sure from where, whom or when this personal voice interjects, and whether it is related to one or many characters within this or another comic frame, whether it speaks diaristically for the author/artist, or whether it represents a disembodied, ghostly presence that echoes through the text.

Expanding this blurring of relationships within Ganesh's text itself to a consideration of the ACK "originals," the next question that arises is what the exact relationship between the contemporary and mythic characters might be. Is Ganesh creating a revised image of Hanuman or Parvati or an entirely new heroine for consideration? And in fashioning her own "original" characters, what other texts is Ganesh bringing into play and what might their interactions be? For example, Godzilla stands out as an anachronistic reference from a vastly different tradition, yet the name reminds readers of another use of the comic form within Asian pop culture, and shifts the girl's statement from one reinforcing a gender stereotype of appropriate female play to one that challenges a fearsome monster, from outside her time and space, with sensual, blood-stained lips. The unexpected mention of Godzilla by a seemingly historic Indian character first jolts the reader to Ganesh's surprising juxtaposition; but when viewed intertexually, it works to highlight the anachronistic, odd-cultural crossing implied in the

earlier ACK version, in which the powerful, ancient goddess is preoccupied with dolls. Here the constructedness of all story telling once again comes to the fore, and viewers are encouraged to consider the national project in which the ACK comics were involved.

Amar Chitra Katha and the Hindu Past: Fixing Origins without Originals

From the start, ACK was simultaneously produced by and helping to produce an English-speaking, westernized urban middle-class that was actively seeking to enforce an ideal of Indian gender identities that were now indelibly shaped by colonial-era constructs of their own cultural history.[11] The birth of ACK was also inextricably linked to the concurrent push towards an increasingly capitalist economy that put a premium on consumption of items like clothes, comic books and childhood toys as tools for self-definition.[12] With children disconnected from the family structures and local village leaders that would have told tales of many localized versions of the Great Goddess (and other deities), ACK sought to produce a national, shared, singular version of Parvati. In the process, however, they were clearly guided by the politics of the time to incorporate modern ideologies of appropriate female behavior, which were intended to help shape a unified national identity for Indian women.[13] By reducing the complexity of India's cultural heritage to those aspects most acceptable by modern, Westernized standards, the comic retellings of stories such as *Shiva Parvati* suppressed divergent and minority

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[11] See Partha Chaterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4 (Nov, 1989): 622-633. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but it should also be noted that ACK also equally part of the push to make Hinduism and Indianism synonymous in the post-colonial reconfiguration around independence.

[12] McLain, 7-15. McLain also makes clear the extent to which these comic books did come to replace the historic texts or personal teaching of these myths, as her students regularly confronted her to correct her when class content differed from the narrative presented in the related ACK comic, which they took to be culturally and religiously authoritative.

[13] Ibid, 53-55.

positions into an unnaturally cohesive, and proscriptive version of the great myths and legends. This imposed an artificial singularity on originals that had previously been understood as permeable, open to interpretation, and able to incorporate seemingly disparate narratives as co-existent, parallel alternatives or supplements to an evolving story.[14]

For, if one pushes back further, hoping to find an original Sanskrit Parvati who predates these colonial and post-colonial reconstructions, one stumbles into the complex web of texts and "characters" that constitutes the Hindu pantheon. As part of their bid for historical authority, ACK always cites the source for their comic retellings. In *Shiva Parvati*'s case, the publishers claim it is based on Kalidasa's *Kumara Sambhava* from the fourth or fifth century CE. However, Parvati is one of many incarnations of the Great Goddess, sometimes cited as the supreme incarnation, who is elaborately praised in the *Devi Mahatmya,* a Purana devotional text from approximately the same period. This written document, though, sought to integrate a myriad of local and regional, Aryan and non-Aryan female deities of various levels, names and mythological backgrounds into the Vedic tradition. It positions these as aspects of a female spiritual force in the universe that exists alongside, and in some interpretations before, the male pantheon, which was itself composed of multiple principle incarnations of the male Godhead. As scholar Thomas Colburn notes, however:

> "[The *Devi Mahatmya's*] concern is… to glorify [the Goddess'] kaleidoscopic metaphoric potential. Like many other Puranic texts, the *Devi Mahatmya* is not interested in delineating with precision how the various divine forms are related to one another…throughout the course of

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[14] Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A translation of the Devi Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation.* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991)*,* 100-102.

the narrative, the text applies over two hundred different names to the Goddess."[15]

Discussing the relationships between the goddess-forms Parvati, Ambika, and Kali, Coburn goes on to note similar indeterminate uses of the female pronoun in the *Devi Mahatmya* as those found in Ganesh's comic, such that "Parvati came forth from 'her,' but we do not yet know who 'she' is."[16] These slippages in the linguistic forms surrounding Parvati have, in turn, been the source of centuries of scriptural debate and various interpretations as to Parvati's manifest role. This indeterminacy around the forms of the Great Goddess matches the structural obscurity surrounding Ganesh's titular heroine Amnesia, who remains a mystery throughout the text, a figure that must be constructed by individual readers through their own interpretations of shifting pronouns, images, and temporal and spatial locations. If we compare the "original" *Devi Mahatmya* instance of Parvati to the vision of Parvati offered by ACK, there is almost no relation; but even within the "original" of the ancient texts, there seems to be no original to the figure of Parvati, who appears so differently in the devotional *Devi Mahatmya* and literary *Kumara Sambhava*. The name and its relation to other names was negotiated before, in, through, around and after these primary texts, with oral traditions proceeding and supplementing their dissemination. In the case of the *Devi Mahatmya,* subsidiary appendages and commentaries have been integrated over the centuries to further complicate any notion of a singular, stationary text or deity.[17]

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[15] Thomas B. Coburn, "The Structural Interplay of Tantra, Vedanta and Bhakti," *The Roots of Tantra*, eds. Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 79.
[16] Ibid, 86.
[17] Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess,* 100-102.

Breathing Between the Lines

It is exactly this fluidity and embrace of indeterminacy, found in the pre-modern constellation of sources that form the basis for what is now called Hinduism, that I would suggest Ganesh is working to revive and reposition as central to an understanding of the subcontinent's philosophical heritage. She does this by bringing both her own project and its scriptural sources into dialogue with one of the primary theories of postmodernity, Roland Barthes' pronouncement of the death of the author. Both Ganesh's remake and her Sanskrit referent seem to follow Barthes' alternative approach to understanding writing. For Barthes, there is no singular pre-formed subject who is the author, as the subject of the author is produced through the process of writing: "All writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and…literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin."[18] The locus of meaning is thus dislocated from the individual who sets the words on the page, and is instead reconstituted as a constantly shifting field of relationships, formed by all the texts that the reader, the author, literature, even language itself, might contain. The search for *a* meaning, then, gives way to a consideration of how meaning is always in the process of being constructed by subjects who are, in turn, constructed in and through this process of meaning-making. What could be a more accurate description of the authorial position of both *Tales of Amnesia* and the *Devi Mahatmya* than a chorus of indiscernible voices with no specific origin, a chorus that reaches to the very dawn of history?

We can begin to appreciate the political efficacy of linking these texts through their foregrounding of anti-authorial origins, when Barthes states:

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[18] Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen,* no. 5 & 6, 1967, http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes (accessed 5/1/10).

"In a multiple writing…structure can be followed, "threaded" (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it... Thus literature (it would be better, henceforth, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a "secret,' that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.[19]

For Barthes, writing as a Frenchman in 1967, such writing (or an understanding of writing as such) would be revolutionary, as it refuses the basis of all Western thought, from religion to science to law. For Ganesh as an Indian-America, lesbian, female artist living in Brooklyn, to write as such, is ironically to reclaim and align herself with an ancient tradition, a tradition that was and remains violently suppressed by the Enlightenment project. Through this move, she argues against the constant positioning of Hinduism's multiplicity as a degenerate or lesser form of religion, lacking the (fictive) cohesion of the Judeo-Christian Bible and its monotheistic God. Instead, she offers it as the ultimate example of a counter-discourse, an alternative world-view that is antithetical to the Enlightenment model that has prevailed for centuries and which remains hegemonic, despite critiques from within and without, not only in the West but as the internalized ideology of Indian nationalism.[20]

This nationalistic project, in working to consciously produce a "mainstream" Hinduism, has not only sought to unify the diverse texts and deities into a limited and resolved set of Vishnu/Krisna/Rama-, and to a lesser extent Shiva-, oriented practices, but has specifically repressed Tantric aspects, which include goddess-worship, sex rites and

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Partha Chatterjee, "Five Hundred Years of Fear and Love," *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 33, no. 22 (May 30-June 5, 1998): 1334-1335.

rituals involving blood and corpses, that have long been part of the popular religious culture.[21] Ganesh takes up this occlusion in numerous places within her comic, at once challenging normative models of Hinduism but also revealing how fundamental these unacceptable practices remain even within the ACK issues that sought to avoid, rewrite or gloss over their presences. Simultaneously, she holds up a mirror to those ancient practices that are supposedly disavowed in modern India but have been allowed to appear prominently in ACK, namely *sati*, female self-immolation in service of the husband, which is treated with near reverence in several issues. By bringing the Goddess's connection to blood and martial victory into dialogue with images that connect beautiful maidens to fire, death and loss, *Tales of Amnesia* begs a consideration of why one tradition was erased from ACK's field of vision while the other was elevated, even while acknowledging its anachronistic value system.

Retracing the Lines: Devi to Parvati to Ambika to Chandika to Kali

The artist's decision to add blood to the lips of the docile Parvati from panel three [Fig. 3] takes on a new significance within this religious and political context if we again take an intertextual approach. In the *Devi Mahatmya,* Parvati is said to turn black and becomes Kali after Ambika, another manifestation of Devi (also known as Durga), comes forth or separates herself from the body of Parvati. While this section is the exact passage in which the confusion of female pronouns leads to multiple interpretations, it also decisively asserts a close ontological relationship between Kali, the most fearsome of the

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[21] For discussion of the mainstream Hinduism intentionally represented in ACK, see McLain, 50-51 & 204-206; for discussion of Tantric practices as intertwined and continuously present in Indian religiosity, see David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: Tantric Sex in Its South Asian Context.* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 1-13.

Great Goddess' incarnations, and the beautiful Parvati. By overlaying the blood associated with Kali onto the lips of ACK's Parvati, Ganesh's image reminds a Hindu audience of this deep connection between various forms of the goddess and the powers for which, and practices through which, she is worshipped. Corrupting the innocent youthful Parvati with the blood-drinking, demon- or Godzilla-slaying potential of Kali is to forge a hybrid female identity that makes all the goddess-attributes available to the heroine at any time and in any configuration.

This prominence of blood as a signifier and source of female power throughout *Tales of Amnesia* contrasts pointedly with ACK's representation of one of Kali's great mythic feats: her destruction of Raktabeeja, a demon who could replicate himself from any drop of his own blood that hit the ground. According to legend, as other incarnations of the Goddess battled Raktabeeja, Kali used her permanently-protruding red tongue to catch the demon's blood before it could hit the earth. Because of this, worship of Kali-the-Destroyer has been known to incorporate blood rituals, connecting it to other Tantric and suppressed goddess-cults. This practice however has been widely decried by Indian nationalists as non-existent or degenerate.[22] Therefore, despite the specificity of the source text, the *Durga-Saptashati,*[23] when putting together the issue *Tales of Durga,* editor-in-chief Anant Pai decided to omit any sign of blood from his retelling. When asked if this was done to protect his young audience, Pai stated, "It is not just too violent for children. It is also too violent for adults. You see, Hindus do not do blood worship,

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[22] McLain, 111.
[23] Subbo Rao, *Tales of Durga.* (Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha, 1978), frontispiece. The *Durga-Sapatshati* of the Markandeya Purana is synonymous with the *Devi Mahatmya,* both referring to the 700 verses concerning the Goddess.

sacrifice. They do not want to see blood drinking,"[24] disavowing this fearsome aspect of the Hindu goddess and her followers as not part of Hinduism at all. Guided by this post-colonial desire to delineate mainstream Hinduism for the present and future, Pai and his team had to rewrite the past, ultimately changing the next generation of Hindus' perception of what is contained in the *Durga-Saptashati*. Instead of seeing Kali "open wide [her] mouth…chew [the asuras] up and drink his blood,"[25] the ACK image in which Kali saves the Gods from Raktabeeja shows a dark-skinned but still voluptuous and attractive female goddess floating above the battle scene. The narrative text vaguely notes "Kali prevented the birth of any more asuras,"[26] without explaining how she keeps these mini-demons from springing to life. When the comic book battle is won, Chandika (another Durga incarnation) and Kali gaze calmly down on the fallen Raktabeeja, to the

relief of the male Devas, who shout "Victory to Chandika" all together [Fig. 7]. However, in the *Devi Mahatmya*, this episode concludes with the far more provocative

narrative, "The Gods entered into boundless joy…The Band of Mothers danced about intoxicated by blood,"[27] foregrounding an innumerable multitude of Mothers, and the delirious effect of blood-drinking on them, thereby suggesting an effect that might be available to their followers.

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[24] McLain, 110.
[25] Coburn, 67.
[26] Rao, 28.
[27] Coburn, 67.

Retracing the Lines: *Sati* versus Self-Sufficient *Jouissance*

Comparing Pai's reticence regarding blood-rituals to his comments on the practice of *sati*, one is struck by the distinctly different criteria used to justify the ACK portrayal of *Padmini*, a Rajput woman who leads a train of women to suicide by fire. "I am always asked, wherever I go about *sati*, about why I depicted Padmini burning herself," Pai remarked in his defense. "But it happened. I cannot change that."[28] Another editor commented on the same issues, saying, "You see our cultural values today look down upon *sati*. But cultural values change over time… *Sati* was considered for ages to be the epitome of a woman's value."[29] It is clear that Pai and his editors are willing to accept historical context and depict the "truth" of what happened when it could symbolically align with remaining ideals of subservient Indian womanhood. Yet, with widows still burning on pyres throughout the twentieth century, what "virtues" in *sati* needed to be preserved and passed on to the next generation of Indian girls, regardless of the cost? Exposing this obsession with female self-sacrifice as a gruesome, misogynistic, shared psychotic situation, Ganesh weaves death, decapitated and decaying bodies, and heads,

tails and cities on fire throughout the book. Towards the end, she sums up this critique in a banner across the second to last page [Fig. 8]. On the left, just the shoulders, arms and hands of figures gesture for a beautiful, veiled maiden to gaze down on a disembodied female pelvis while saying to her, "Or- forget

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[28] McLain, 77.
[29] Ibid.

that waterfall for a moment, come see how skin catches on fire."[30] In the panel to the right, two busty scantily clad women pick through a field of green and blue putrefying corpses, remarking to themselves, "The fire, the fire…" "Gets more gorgeous everytime." Their big open eyes fail to take in any of the horrors that surround them; they stare as if hypnotized by the beauty of an imaginary pyre. Ganesh strongly suggests that valorizations of this practice in contemporary comics, which claim to be safely set in a distant past, cast a romanticizing spell of blindness over subjects in the present, allowing them to ignore the real continuation of these traditions, whether in actual widow-suicides or other daily degradation of women within the society.

In the immediately preceding panel, Ganesh counters this devaluation of women by challenging another transparent attempt to mitigate the power of the Goddess in ACK's *Tales of Durga*. This time, however, Ganesh uses sexuality, rather than blood or death, as her disruptive tool. In addition to editing out Kali's blood drinking, the ACK *Tales of Durga* significantly removed the framing story of the *Devi Mahatmya*, a preamble that positions the Goddess as principally responsible for allowing the universe to come into being. Instead, Durga first appears in her own issue only at the behest of the

male gods, and then only to battle a demon that can be killed by female hands alone [Fig. 9]. This staging demotes Durga, making her fundamentally a product of the male pantheon, created to answer a limited

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30 Ganesh, 9.

need. Ganesh counters this subservient retelling with her own image of a self-generated, self-sufficient, and self-pleasuring vision of the Goddess [Fig. 10]. By erasing the male figures on the left, white beams of energy simply surround and feed into, rather than create, the multi-armed headless body before them. The Goddess's skirt has slid down, and is seductively tangled around her left leg, allowing one of her unnaturally elongated arms free access to penetrate the lips of her vagina with two fingers. The other hands are left where they were in the ACK image, but with bangles removed. The Goddess' head has also been removed at the neck, leaving a similar slice of bone and blood as was seen in the detached arm hurtling towards Parvati in frame three. Perhaps it is that very arm, then, which has suddenly appeared, pointing up from the ground in the lower left of this image, as if showing where veneration is due. Along the top, set off in a blue box, the text reads, "The mystery kept howling at me. I hadn't yet considered the possibility of my body splitting in two."
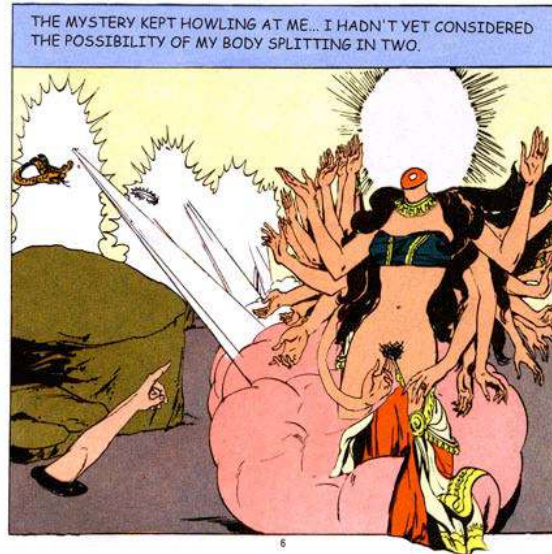
This image, however, is not simply a repudiation of the ACK Durga, nor solely an assertion of lesbian erotics. At a deeper level, it seems to recommend a deconstructionist approach to feminist debates over how the Great Goddess might figure in forging less restrictive identities for Indian woman, and beyond. In the exhibition catalogue *Devi: The Great Goddess,* art historian Vidya Dehejia writes:

> "While the myths surrounding the Great Goddess have not thus far been interpreted to serve as women's empowerment, today's new generation of

> women may indeed reinterpret the message of the myths to provide them with a degree of freedom and power… Certainly women may appropriate goddess imagery in ways different from the past when men alone controlled interpretation. As we stand on the brink of the twenty first century, it would indeed be gratifying to see women on the Indian subcontinent draw from the tradition of the great goddess to redefine their status within society and to consider the many options inherent within those myths that might be used to revalidate and revalue their position. As women increasingly adopt leadership roles, it may even become possible to challenge the long-established view of female gender as an ambiguous, limiting and circumscribed category.[31]

While Ganesh's images may not have been what Dehejia had in mind, they certainly qualify as reevaluating the many ways the myths of the Great Goddess can challenge limiting and circumscribed views of women. Importantly, however, they do this by actually underscoring and heightening the ambiguous, which is no longer positioned as a negative term. Rather, ambiguity is positioned as the ultimate gift that feminism, Hindu mythology and deconstructionist theory can all offer to the Western, masculinist, Enlightenment model of identity, in which each individual subject is constantly struggling with itself to be what it is not and can never be—complete, singular, fixed, bounded.[32] As the mystery howls, the narrator claims this mystery as the site of empowerment, "I hadn't yet considered the possibility of splitting in two." Importantly, the shift here to a first person narrative, which specifies splitting in two rather than splitting into a seemingly infinite plethora of arms, creates an intentionally ambiguous relationship between image and text. Is this the voice of the body we see, humorously understating her multiplicity? Is this a contemporary voice being placed, by the author, over a mythological image to point out resonance between our modern experiences of

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[31] Vidya Dehejia, *Devi: The Great Goddess, Female Divinity in South Asian Art*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution,1999), 34.

[32] Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine," http://webs.wofford.edu/hitchmoughsa/Writing.html (accessed May 3, 2010).

splitting and ancient wisdom that suggests singularity itself is the myth? Or is this a correlation built by the speaking-subject, who perhaps finds comfort in metaphorically linking her multiple bodies and selves with those of the Great Goddess? All possibilities are left gloriously available for the author, the text, the characters and the reader; choices, interpretations and meanings can change at each reading, and yet exist comfortably alongside other readings that do not necessarily contradict each other. For deconstructionist feminists, then, the symbolic suggestiveness of the Great Goddess does not primarily lie in her martial achievements, but in her heroic embodiment of multiplicity and instability as divine attributes of the highest order.

It is significant that this image of kaleidoscopic variety is also one of female autoeroticism, while this eruption of the first-person narrator coincides with the speaker musing on the possibility of splitting in two. This overlap between female sexuality and multiplicity points towards two other major, interrelated aspects of feminist theory that are subtly incorporated throughout Ganesh' text. These are *jouissance,* an untranslatable French word used by Jacques Lacan for the orgasmic bliss that is beyond the pleasure principle, and *écriture féminine*, characterized by an elliptical style of writing that refuses linearity and singular positionality. For a school of French feminists that employed Lacanian psychoanalytic and linguistic models, the unique quality and bodily experiences of feminine *jouissance* became a potent source for developing a new feminine language. Beginning with "The Laugh of the Medusa" published in 1976, Hélène Cixous argued that women have been simultaneously kept from their bodies, their voices (written or spoken) and the symbolic realm by phallologocentrism, a combined masculinist privileging of writing, logic and the phallus. Cixous felt that only through writing from

their unique bodies and sexuality could women produce an alternate symbolic space that was not structured by the rigid, unidirectional rationality of male bodies, voices and symbolic structures. However, it might be her colleague Luce Iragary who most clearly articulated the connection between the dispersed erotics of the female body and an alternate approach to writing and narrative:

> *Woman has sex organs just about everywhere.* She finds pleasure almost everywhere.... The geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined-in an imaginary rather too focused on sameness.
> 'She' is infinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious-not to mention her language in which 'she' goes off in all directions and in which 'he' is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. 'Hers' are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance. In her statements-at least when she dares to speak out-woman retouches herself constantly.[33]

Using this model, *Tales of Amnesia's* incomprehensibility, its constant "othering" of the central heroine, the multiplication of her forms and the multidirectionality of the narrative, are all intimately connected to the dispersed erogenous zones of the female body and this "retouching" of herself. It should be no surprise then that we see literal depictions of this diversity of possible pleasures throughout the text, including images of masturbation, oral sex, caressed breasts and penetrated buttocks. The striking inclusion
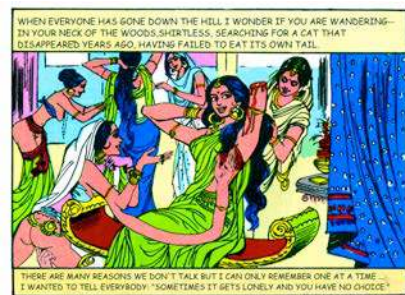
of a vagina-like opening in the underarm of a primping princess, which is prodded by the extended arm of one her ladies in waiting [Fig. 11], gives visible support to Irigaray's

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[33] Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 28.

assertion of "sex organs everywhere." However, if these characteristics of *écriture féminine* rooted in *jouissance* structure Ganesh's work, they are equally to be found in the mythological sources regarding the Great Goddess, such as the *Devi Mahatmya*, which most profoundly elaborates a "She who is infinitely other in herself." In this way, Ganesh's use of a structure that at first seems to illustrate twentieth-century feminist literary theory opens onto an acknowledgement that this fourth-century document emerges from a similar epistemological basis. By deconstructing ACK's Parvati, Durga, and Kali, Ganesh reconstructs the irrational within their shared, but contested, Hindu textual heritage. By using sexuality to do so, she arguably links up *écriture féminine* and *jouissance* with Tantra, yet another repressed aspect of the South Asian tradition.

This Body of Bliss and the Historical Subject

In the final panel of *Tales of Amnesia,* the interplay between cultural references across a spectrum of political and social positions and the narratives from anonymous to mythic to first-person perspectives, are concluded with an image that, more than any other, seems to speak from a diaristic, personal, contemporary moment [Fig. 12]. Two nearly naked, nubile beauties framed against a black background, appear to be running away from something behind them, but smiling, optimistic about the future. The figure closest to us places her fingers in the pubic hair of her companion, while her internal monologue is framed in a white thought-balloon to the left

reading: "I don't understand all that is going on. But her words make me feel---Just tell her never in my life will I forget *ROXANNE*" Returning to the personal, in the exuberant language of the memoir, Ganesh cycles back at the end to her own positionality within this complex web of texts, which after all are the constitutive elements of her unique set of experiences as an author, an artist and a post-colonial, diasporic, queer feminist; that is, a historical subject-in-formation. And this ultimately is the bliss to be found in her text, as it integrates its myriad sources, to relish both the harmony and dissonance, which we do not need to understand, but simply "feel." In *The Pleasures of the Text,* Barthes writes:

> Whenever I attempt to 'analyze' a text which has given me pleasure, it is not my 'subjectivity' I encounter but my 'individuality," the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates its suffering or its pleasure: it is my body of bliss (*jouissance)* that I encounter. And this body of bliss is also *my historical subject,* for it is at the conclusion of a very complex process of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements (education, social, class, childhood configuration, etc.) that I control the contradictory interplay of (cultural) pleasure and (non-cultural) bliss, and that I write myself as a subject out of place, arriving too soon or too late.[34]

At the conclusion of the complex process of elements that produce the subjectivity of the author and reader of *Tales of Amnesia*, it is the contradictory interplay between criticism and bliss, between culture and non-culture, between ancient, recent and immediate past and present, between masculinism and feminism, West and East that keeps the text from ever solidifying, keeps it always out of place, and therefore productive as a site for renegotiating and reconstituting our understandings of what we think we know about both sides of these binaries.

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[34] Roland Barthes, *Pleasures of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 63.

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