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Unruly Bodies and Untamed Voices.
Re-writing the Immortal through *Tales of Amnesia*

Abstract: Chitra Ganesh's *Tales of Amnesia* references *Amar Chitra Katha*, one of India's most widely read comic books. Ganesh's work interrogates the patriarchal logos perpetuated in the series by creating a separate enclave in which she disrupts the phallocentric signifiers and normative structures of the referent, giving way instead to a rigorous engagement with the uncontainable multiplicity of the female narrative. This essay examines how through a combination of words and images, the artwork takes on a subversive texture by apparently mimicking convention only to invert the locus of the original discourse into a meditation upon the power dynamics that surround the representation of gender. Through the unrestrained performativity of a 'messy' and unrestrained body, Ganesh posits her work in dialogue with Judith Butler's seminal question about what it means being female. The arguments put forth suggest that through her rendition of a childhood comic, mired in the indigenous familiarity of collective memory, Ganesh recalls cultural nostalgia only to reposition it entirely – telling people to remember and, like the eponymous protagonist Amnesia, forget the constrained male-hegemonic power dynamics perpetuated by the purportedly *immortal* picture stories.

Keywords: *gender*, *hegemony*, *hybridity*, *junglee*, *nostalgia*, *performativity*

A Tale of Two *Kathas*: *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Tales of Amnesia*

The comic books *Amar Chitra Katha*[1] *(ACK)*, which translates into 'immortal picture stories', were founded by educationalist Anant Pai in 1967 in order "to teach Indian children about Hindu myths and the history of India"[2] and are still in production today with over four hundred and forty titles and a print run of more than one hundred million issues. The fundamental impact and position of *Amar Chitra Katha* within the Indian[3] cultural context cannot be stressed enough and they have come to be regarded as "foundational texts for the religious and national education"[4] helping "to define, for several generations of readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian".[5] Interestingly, despite its highly nationalistic flavour in dealing with a subject matter that is profoundly steeped in traditional Indian culture,[6] soon after its inception, this post-independence comic book adopted English,[7] and was only later translated into Hindi and other Indian languages. The socio-historical background that influenced the linguistic choice of the *ACK* is significant and according to Saisha Grayson was, from the start: "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".[8] Using English as the language of the series helped to expand and

[1] *Katha* is the Hindi word for "story or tale".

[2] Kurt Shaw, "Chitra Ganesh uses comics to convey weighty issues", available on http://www.indianartnews.com/2011/08/artist-chitra-ganesh-uses-comics-to.html, accessed November 19, 2016.

[3] According to Saisha Grayson, *ACK* was "also equally part of the push to make Hinduism and Indianism synonymous in the post-colonial reconfiguration around independence". S. Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines: Re-Deconstruction in Chitra Ganesh's Tales of Amnesia", http://www.academia.edu/2650672/Breathing_Between_the_Lines_Re-Deconstruction_in_Chitra_Ganeshs_Tales_of_Amnesia, accessed November 19, 2016.

[4] http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0002.xml, accessed November 19, 2016.

[5] http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0002.xml, accessed November 19, 2016.

[6] According to Karline McLain, professor of Religious Studies at Bucknell University: "Its first heroes were Hindu gods and goddesses including Krishna, Rama, and Durga, whose stories were drawn from classical Hindu mythology. In the 1970s, historical Indian figures were added into the mix, including medieval warrior kings such as Shivaji and Akbar and modern freedom fighters such as Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi". http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0002.xml, accessed November 19, 2016.

[7] "The English *ACK* titles begin from number eleven because the first ten were in Kannada", says G.K. Ananthram, the book salesman responsible for leading the production of the first *ACK* books in 1965 in Bangalore, India. It was Ananthram "who originally persuaded the owner of India Book House (which previously specialised in importing English-language novels) to publish a comic-book series for young readers, printed in *Kannada,* one of the official 'scheduled' languages of India. Buoyed by the comics' initial success, Ananthram submitted a further proposal to India Book House, suggesting the series be expanded and revamped as an English-language title featuring mythological Indian stories; the company took up his suggestion, but turned instead to Anant Pai to develop the project further". Https://phantomcomicsurvey.wordpress.com/tag/amar-chitra-katha/, accessed November 19, 2016.

[8] Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines".

[9] http://www.chitraganesh.com/dc.html, accessed November 19, 2016.

[10] Natasha Bissonauth, "Storytelling: Natasha Bissonauth in Conversation with Chitra Ganesh", *Art & Deal Magazine*, 5.4, Issue 26, 100.

[11] Taken from artist's website available at http://www.chitraganesh.com/dc.html, accessed November 19, 2016.

[12] http://www.chitraganesh.com/dc.html, accessed November 19, 2016.

[13] Her multi-layered rendition is clearly informed by her upbringing as a diasporic subject coupled with a rigorous academic background that include BA degrees in both Comparative Literature and Art-Semiotics from Brown University and a Master in Fine Arts degree (MFA) from Columbia University in 2002.

[14] *Tales of Amnesia* was also shown at the Saatchi Gallery exhibition, *The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today*, 2010.
For the image in Fig. 1, please refer to http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/chitra-ganesh-tales-of-amnesia-5693730-details.aspx.

[15] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

increase its distribution and readership not just in the Indian subcontinent but also in "the diaspora (Canada, England, US, Australia, and Caribbean), with the explicit intent of educateing [sic] children about the cultural history of South Asia".[9]

During her growing up years, Chitra Ganesh, an Indian-American artist based in Brooklyn, was an avid reader of *X-Men, Doonesbury, Archie* as well as the *Amar Chitra Katha*[10] and a lot of Ganesh's digital collages integrate "fragments of the original comics with pen and ink drawings and *rewriting the text* [emphasis added]".[11] While the ostensive goals are educationally-directed writings that detail folklore and custom, the "Amar Chitra Katha comics provide prescriptive models of citizenship, nationalism, religious expression, public behavior, and sexuality"[12] under a narrow paradigm of confining societal norms and expectations. Ganesh's twenty-one part tableaux entitled *Tales of Amnesia*[13] is a digital c-print collage, which was originally created in 2002 as a comic book and then subsequently followed by a number of large single panel prints (see figure 1 below).[14]

Fig.1

Ganesh's work is in many ways a response to the "prescriptive models" of the *ACK* and betrays a particular unease with the narration of the female voice and preoccupation with the representation of the female body; underscoring Butler's assertion that feminism must work toward the "recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization".[15]

According to Ganesh:

> The imagery [of *Amar Chitra Katha*] was so interesting because it's so much about the women being pure or noble or maternal or supportive of their husbands, or quiet or passive. All of these conventional models of femininity but then, at the same time, they dress like *I Dream of Jennie*, very Barbie and with tits and ass. I wanted to use some of the existing imagery to insert a different perspective into how these myths are told.[16]

Ganesh's work explores the tensions that lie in the contradiction between the at once subservient and highly sexualized women of the *ACK* tradition who are trapped within the confined rubric of masculine structures of interpretation, from which the performativity[17] of their female body emerges. As Butler argues: "Performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition".[18] Through the act of continuous repetition, the *ACK* imposes a certain set of specific feminine behaviours and mannerisms – 'performances' – from which no deviation is expected, cast within a mould of a desirable but undesiring female form. The downcast eyes of the demure female characters[19] portrayed in the *Amar Chitra Katha* stand in sharp contrast to the wide-eyed alluring stare of the come-hither nymphets in *Tales of Amnesia*, who are unashamed in their voice, strength and sexuality. By creating an artwork that marks such a direct parallel to the original referent forces a critical investigation of the problematics that Ganesh seeks to call attention to as she examines the disjuncture in what she calls the "'don't ask, don't tell' quality of Indian culture".[20]

The "repeated stylization" of the coy female body remains static in its representation in the *ACK* with a voice that is subdued under an immovable veil of passivity, underlining Hélène Cixous' argument that "either a woman is passive or she does not exist"[21] and it is only through the suppression of her own desire that in turn releases her desirability. If one is to consider for instance the depiction of the female body in *Shakuntala* (*ACK* no. 12, 1970) the title character is, both on the cover page and through the comic, as though immobilized, through the control of her gestures and framed, through a voyeuristic[22] consumption of her voluptuous, semi-naked body.[23] Shakuntala performs her smothered desire within the confines of her fixedness, existing only at the pleasure of the male gaze, in which her passivity casts her as an object of erotic desire. *Tales of Amnesia* engages with the very constructs of "why the traditional male gazes upon a naked female body and automatically invests it with pornographic content, and how to subvert that".[24]

Ganesh challenges the active/male - passive/female dichotomy espoused by the *ACK* and completely recasts the female body by breaking the mould (set by the referent) in order "to confuse, or perhaps to refuse, traditional gender distinctions, to problematize phallocentric seeings and readings of women's bodies".[25] The unconcealed nakedness and sexual appeal of Ganesh's characters hint at the pornographic and border on the titillating, and expresses the once stifled libidinal

[16] Artist's Statement available at http://velvetparkmedia.com/blogs/vp-issue-5-tales-amnesia-chitra-ganesh-2003, accessed August 12, 2012. *I Dream of Jennie* is an American sitcom from the 1970's starring the curvaceous, blond Barbara Eden as the central character clad in a midriff bearing bustier and harem pants.

[17] Judith Butler argues that gender is performative, not an intrinsic stable category and it is through a series of repeated actions that produce "a series of effects" from which a representation of what it means to be a man or a woman emerges.

[18] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.

[19] For image please refer to http://media.148apps.com/screenshots/341557336/us-iphone-5-krishna-and-mirabai-digest-amar-chitra-katha-comics.jpeg.

[20] Artist's Statement.

[21] Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties. Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 64.

[22] The voyeurism takes place both through Sage Kanva and a girlfriend who look on, and we as spectators who witness the passivity that underline her movements and controlled gestures.

[23] For image please refer to http://ipad.qualityindex.com/apps/139205/shakuntala-the-classic-love-story-amar-chitra-katha-comics.

[24] http://www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/interviews/Toro%20Mag%20Louise%20Bak.pdf, accessed September 14, 2016.

[25] Honi Fern Haber, "Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman", in Susan J. Hekman, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State U. P., 1996), 139.

female urge that has finally rebelled from the stringent passivity that was enforced upon her. *Tales of Amnesia* vociferously challenges the condition of stasis of the female body through a parallel narrative that troubles the phallocentric narration of the *ACK* discourse by introducing the *junglee*,[26] whose shape changing multiplicity reinterprets and resignifies the performativity of the traditional female depiction, giving voice to desire that for so long had "no room for her if she's not a he".[27]

Restaging Tradition: The Narrative of the *Jungalee* body

In *Tales of Amnesia* Ganesh apparently evokes the visual tradition of *ACK* only to subvert it completely, even framing the title of the series using the "Tales of..." appellation, which is commonly invoked by the series. In *The Front Cover* (which was also used as the front and back covers of her comic book in 2002), Ganesh shows an image of a monkey-girl, flying over a village landscape with arms outstretched reaching toward a fuchsia coloured sun. The unfurled scroll in the bottom right hand corner that reads: "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"[28] reinforces a pedigree that links the hybrid body of the protagonist to a pointedly matriarchal ancestry (Figure 2).

Fig. 2

The frame is a direct allusion to the Hindu myth of the famed monkey-god Hanuman taken from the classic Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*.[29] More specifically, the artwork mimics the layout of the *ACK* issue *Hanuman* (*ACK* no. 19, 1971)[30] by using the familiar style of the "original" comic but in a way that the frames sit in an *unheimlich* juxtaposition; simultaneously attracting and repelling one another in their startling similarity and utter difference. Ganesh distorts her rendition to such an extent that the conceptual gap between the referent and the thing itself creates a kind of intentional uncanniness as a way to excavate the "different perspective"[31]

[26] Ganesh says that the term is "compelling intersection of gender-based norms, as well as the legacy of colonialism".

[27] Cixous, 889.

[28] The format of the scroll at the bottom right corner is seen even in the Hanuman issue, with the text: "Hanuman was the child of Pavana, the wind god. One day he saw the raising sun and thinking it to be an apple he leapt towards it". Thereby aligning Hanuman with a decidedly patriarchal origin.

[29] When Hanuman was a baby he saw the sun in the sky, and thinking it was a fruit decided to fly toward it in an attempt to catch, and eat it.

[30] The *Hanuman* issue of the *ACK* depicts the young monkey-god in the foreground, suspended high in mid-air, and with his arms stretched out, reaching out toward the bright red sun. For image please refer to http://media.148apps.com/screenshots/317960435/us-ipad-2-hanuman-the-monkey-god-amar-chitra-katha-comics.jpeg.

[31] Artist's Statement.

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that the artist wants to draw attention to. According to Karline McLain, by adapting "the splash page from the Hanuman (no. 19, 1971) *Amar Chitra Katha* issue, [she transformed] the mythical monkey-god into a half-monkey, half human *jungalee* (wild or barbaric) girl who defies social norms".[32]

The splash page is designed to grab the readers attention, with a strong visual appeal that is most often used as a way of introducing the hero, or in this case, the heroine, of the story. In the act of making an intervention in the ancient myth by visually staging Amnesia as the focal and only character of the splash page, Ganesh sets out in creating a different lexicon for the original story by suggesting that it is the female *junglee*, Amnesia that is the lead of her narrative and not the famed male deity Hanuman. Will Eisner explains the importance of a splash page:

> The first page of the story functions as an introduction. What, or how much, it contains depends on the number of pages that follow. It is a launching pad for the narrative, and for most stories it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader's attention and prepares his attitude for the events to follow. It sets a 'climate'.[33]

In *The Front Cover*, Amnesia's refusal to be drawn into the confines of the male dominated pantheon of the *ACK* is marked by her very presence, which is also significantly and intentionally at the cost of Hanuman's. This act of "defiance" sets the tone of the narrative in which the complete erasure of all male gods is a gesture that entirely occludes the male voice, thus utterly destabilising the Hindu mythological traditions evoked by the *Amar Chitra Katha*.

Much of Ganesh's visual vocabulary engages with "the term 'jungalee' (literally 'of the jungle', connoting wildness and impropriety), an old colonial Indian idiom (still) used to describe women perceived as defiant or transgressing convention".[34] *The role of the junglee* runs like a leitmotif through the comic standing as a symbol of rebellious and alternative (to the perceived mainstream) feminine power. Through her *Tales of Amnesia* Ganesh propagates a strongly *junglee* narrative, which reflects a concept that has had a significant impact on her work. According to Ganesh:

> *Junglee* narratives that have influenced my work come from all walks of myth and storytelling. They tend to involve female protagonists whose bodies refuse to remain contained within the space in which they are expected to stay. So these span the gamut, from *Alice in Wonderland* to Josephine Baker, from the Rani of Jhansi to Surpanakha.[35]

In *Tales of Amnesia* this idea of lack of *containment* is expressed through both illustration and text by the titular character who stands as a proud embodiment of the *junglee*, liberated and untethered to the established social order. Amnesia is fundamentally an elusive presence and her primate form, as seen on the cover page, is not always literally a consistent figure, and her body morphs alongside the

[32] Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2009), 210.

[33] Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 62.

[34] Artist's statement available at http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/chitra_ganesh.php accessed 15 September 15, 2012.

[35] Louise Bak interviewing Chitra Ganesh, available at http://toromagazine.com/legacy/6dd2f3d0-dbc4-ea84-35fc-9ce2bcf84d22/index.html, accessed September 15, 2012.

non-linear storyline, through the work. As Grayson notes, Amnesia "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".[36] Grayson's analysis highlights the fluidity of the protagonist as she moves without restraint within the space of her performativity in which her voice, like her body, expresses the multiplicity of the female.

In her seminal work *The Laugh of the Medusa*,[37] Cixous reimagines the Greek myth of Medusa[38] and uses the "feared" gorgon as a symbol of female empowerment. Through her recontextualization, Cixous offers an alternative way to conceive of the female body and encourages women to question the world they live in, working past the masculinised discourses they have been subjected to. Specifically, Cixous questions the male interpretation of the "lack" and replaces it with a theory of *multiplicity*, symbolically represented in the countless serpent-laden tendrils crowning Medusa's head. The multiplicity that Cixous stresses and calls the "wonder of being several",[39] is seen in the myriad roles and forms that the characters (all women) assume in Ganesh's work. Cixous elevates Medusa, charging her with female energy and freedom in all its forms: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing".[40] Ganesh's approach to the *junglee* embraces the contradiction of being at once enticing and at the same time very unsettling:

> The *junglee*'s defiance of patriarchal authority makes her a savage. I think the idea of an "untame woman" functions as both a seductive and repellent category. I'm interested in fleshing out this word, as it invites an exploration of how our notions of beauty and the grotesque are inextricably linked, and can only coexist side by side.[41]

Ganesh's *junglee*, resonant of Cixous' Medusa, stands as a reimagined symbol of uncontained female power that breaks through established logocentric hierarchies by challenging and indeed redefining the female in terms of agency and sexuality in order "to confuse, or perhaps to refuse, traditional gender distinctions".[42]

Agency in "Irregularity": Exploring the *Junglee* Body

On her interaction with the female body Ganesh says:

> I suggest alternative narratives of sexuality and power in a world where untold stories keep rising to the surface. In this process the body becomes a site of transgression, both social and psychic, doubled, dismembered, and continually exceeding its limits.[43]

In *Tales of Amnesia* the unrestrained female force is expressed "within a deliberately camp, and kitsch aesthetic that draws on 19th century portraiture as

[36] Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines".

[37] Cixous' feminist text was, in many ways, written in response to both Freud and Lacan; particularly on the former's discourse on the *lack*. For Freud, the phallic looking serpents writhing on Medusa's head represented castration anxiety resulting due to a subconscious fear of female genitalia as *lacking* a phallus (a state caused due to perceived castration).

[38] In Greek mythology Medusa had poisonous serpents instead of hair and had the ability to turn anyone who looked at her into stone.

[39] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", in Barry Brummett, ed., *Reading Rhetorical Theory* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 890.

[40] Ibid., 883.

[41] Bak interviewing Ganesh.

[42] Haber, "Foucault Pumped".

[43] Artist's Statement available at http://www.chitraganesh.com/statement.html, accessed September 24, 2016.

much as lesbian pulp novels"[44] and is apparent in frames such as *Ghost, Telescope*, which explicitly shows oral sex taking place between women. In fact, *all* amorous interaction in the comic takes place only amongst female characters. In every erotic gesture the *junglee* joyfully explores every crevice of her body[45] (Figure 3), on her own or in company[46] heralding Luce Irigaray's cry: "*Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost everywhere... [T]he geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined*".[47]

The power of the *junglee* is boundless and she is not limited by sex or circumstance to define the boundaries of her performativity. For instance, much of the visual imagery in *Tales of Amnesia* features mutilated body parts, especially floating arms and decapitated bodies; remarkably however, there is no lack of agency due to the seeming *impediment* and the female body becomes a site of power rather than one of subjugation.

Fig. 3

The frame *Godzilla* (Figure 4) depicts two young women playing with a freshly severed arm, tossing it around, back and forth as though a ball. For its part, the bloody appendage gambols playfully, soaring in the sky, as if it has a life of its own. Interestingly, the arm, like those of the women who play with it, is adorned with bangles, customarily associated in Indian culture as being an ornament worn by married women.[48] In other frames as well, there are instances of dismembered body parts that are constantly either in a state of action and movement, participating in conventionally perceived acts of female transgression like indulging in same-sex masturbation or otherwise "masculine activities" like fighting. It is almost as though the nonchalant attitude with which the activities are engaged in marks a kind of disregard toward traditions and patriarchal dominance. In frames such *Real Life Crowds* or in *Dear X & My Heart*[49] Ganesh portrays bodies that despite being decapitated are not deprived of the power of speech thereby giving the "mute female" a voice that had, since many comic books past, like Spivak's subaltern woman, been stifled under masculine command.

There is a particularly glorious celebration of both the female body and voice in the frame *The mystery kept howling at me*[50] where the speaking subject is a decapitated figure with multiple arms. The image enters once again into dialogue with Hindu mythology and references Lord Shiva's consort Durga, the fierce multi-armed[51] warrior goddess; even more specifically, Ganesh draws a parallel to a frame in the *ACK Tales of Durga* (no.514, 1978).[52] As Grayson notes:

> 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]. This

[44] Ibid.

[45] An explicit example of this would be the frame in which the vagina-like opening, located in the underarm area of a noblewoman, is touched by one of her attendees.

[46] For image please refer to https://www.thomaserben.com/artists/Ganesh/CG_collage9.php.

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

[48] For further information on the significance of bangles in the Indian culture please refer to: http://www.bollywoodshaadis.com/articles/the-true-significance-of-bangles-in-indian-culture-1665.

[49] The headless body says: "my heart sat up, exited its cavity and began to wander across the page". Chitra Ganesh, *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002-2007 (text from detail). For image please refer to http://www.artnet.com/artists/chitra-ganesh/dear-x-my-heart-tales-of-amnesia-uv-l3AfXJsj5M_fau96zmA2.

[50] For image please refer to http://velvetparkmedia.com/blogs/vp-issue-5-tales-amnesia-chitra-ganesh-2003.

[51] Traditionally Durga has up to eight arms representing the eight quadrants in Hinduism. There are, however known depictions of her having up to eighteen arms.

[52] Jessica Shaffer's analysis that draws a parallel to western "feminist imagery as Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, or even *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969, by Valie Export, both picturing stereotyped minority women with rifles". Jessica Shaffer, "Chitra Ganesh: Tales of Amnesia", available at http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/pub/departments/bcurj/1573.htm accessed September 29, 2012.

staging demotes Durga, making her fundamentally a product of the male pantheon, created to answer a limited need.[53]

The *ACK* rendition of the myth shows the creation process with white energy beams coming from the eyes of the *Trimurti* (Sanskrit: "three forms") comprising of the main triumvirate of Hindu gods – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva[54] – that together create the Goddess Durga who appears in the midst of a puff of pink smoke.[55] The scene that Ganesh illustrates recalls the comic representation in a stylistic sense, however there is a complete obliteration of the figures of the male gods and rays of light emanate out of space to create "her own image of a self-generated, self-sufficient, and self-pleasuring vision of the Goddess".[56] Ganesh's rendition of the myth surrounding Durga's creation depicts arms that are unbangled and free-moving with the Goddess unshackled and proud as she unabashedly pleasures herself; the severed forearm on the ground points up to her as though directing the reader's attention and reinforcing the *junglee* presence as the true protagonist of the tale (Figure 5).

The power of the frame is rooted in its obvious hybridity and the unbridled agency that the body exhibits in spite of being deprived of a head whose absence seems almost inconsequential. Ganesh's *junglee* speaks a language that voices the performativity of her body and is reflected in the accompanying caption that reads: "The mystery kept howling at me. I hadn't yet considered the possibility of my body splitting in two".[57] There is no obvious connection between the speech bubble and the image or even what exactly the "mystery" being referred to is, yet there is a sort of haunting quality that leaves the reader in the very unclear ambiguous space that Ganesh seeks to emphasise.

Fig. 4   Fig. 5

Breaking and Creating: The Narrative of the *Junglee* voice

The shifting multiplicity of the *junglee* is reflected in the mutability of her body and voice. However it is upon what Cixous calls the "limitless country" of the "unconscious"[58] that Ganesh ultimately chooses to set the stage. The artist's technique calls upon a multilayered process that encompasses both a visual account and an *Other* sort of subliminal narrative that runs parallel to the *ACK* in order to reconstruct her own existential tale. The retelling forces a complete disjuncture

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[53] Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines".

[54] The *Trimurti* comprises of: Brahma is the creator; Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer and represent the three main functions of God–creation, sustenance and destruction.

[55] For image please refer to https://i2.wp.com/www.allabouthinduism.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Durga-Appears.jpg.

[56] Grayson, "Breathing Between the Lines".

[57] Chitra Ganesh, *Tales of Amnesia*, 2002-2007, text from detail.

[58] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 882.

with the referent in a manner that further highlights the conscious rejection of the possibility of a steady, "conventional" narrative scheme with a linear coherence. The dreamy manner of the artist's writing has an almost stream of consciousness texture and draws upon a style that is cryptic and seductive, standing in sharp contrast to the regimented staccato of the *ACK*. Ganesh's narrative structure is utterly fractured and her decentered textual vocabulary is neatly contained within separate frames with individually contained accounts that are infused with an intense level of self-reflexivity (Figure 6).[59] The apparently disjointed narratives are woven into a *junglee* tale that like the body of its protagonist is fluid and elusive; Ganesh blatantly rejects all traditional arrangements of formalized writing, which Cixous sees as representative of oppressive masculine domination: "libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy".[60]

[59] For image please refer to http://outofprintmagazine.co.in/archive/march-2015-issue/chitra-ganesh_tales-of-amnesia.html.
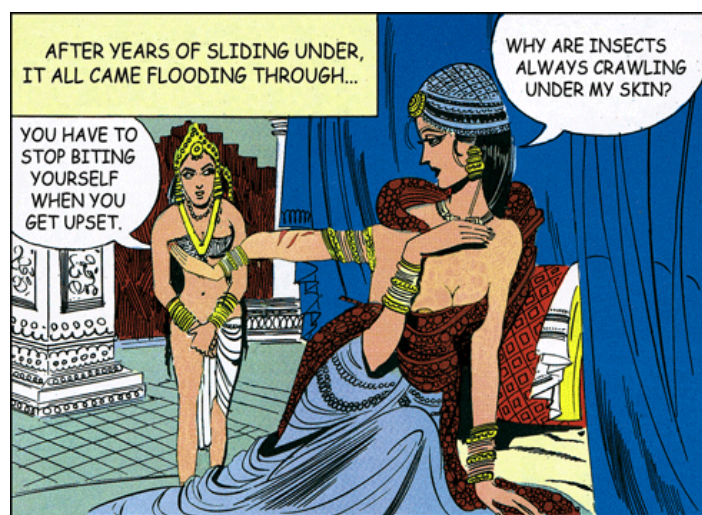
[60] Ibid., 883.

Fig. 6

There is an unsettling dissonance between text and image and "one is confronted with mysterious sentences reminiscent of *écriture automatique,* the writing technique of the surrealists aimed at bringing subconscious images and thoughts to the surface".[61] According to *L'écriture Feminine* "women's writing is a codification of female sexuality"[62] where the woman's body is written into the text "from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies".[63] An argument could align Ganesh's rendition of the *ACK* as a form of mimicry as she seemingly participates "in precisely that which is mimed",[64] however the artist successfully battles the "language of phallogocentrism"[65] and "phallocentric signification"[66] through the *junglee*, consequently radically undermining all configurations of male logocentrism. It is as though yet again Amnesia slips through the cracks and refuses, even with her voice, to be classified – as either entirely essentialist or purely performative, rather embracing both/and as opposed to either/or. Ultimately,

[61] Achim Drucks, "Chitra Ganesh: Subversive Myths", available at http://db-artmag.com/en/61/feature/chitra-ganesh-subversive-myths/, accessed November 19, 2016.

[62] Http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=english_diss.

[63] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 347.

[64] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 47.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

Amnesia, the *junglee*, is a *body that matters.*

Writing is intertwined into the liberation of the female voice, which will "shatter the framework" and create a separate space, distinct and free from the phallocentric system of language in which, "what is left of her is unthinkable, unthought".[67] The universal appeal of Ganesh's art lies in her expression of the "unthinkable" thoughts and even though her work seeks referent in the South Asian comic book she is ultimately and fundamentally, a "woman writing woman" – all women. According to Ganesh: "I am definitely making a critique on gendered representations and gendered power but just because the imagery has South Asian connotations, that doesn't automatically mean that I am referring to a South Asian community".[68] In *Tales of Amnesia*, Ganesh unleashes the driving force of Amnesia's *junglee* body and she derives "pleasure from this gift of alterability"[69] writing "her body in order to discover herself. She must explore her *jouissance*, her sexual pleasure, so as to bring down phallogocentric discourse and, ultimately, change the world".[70]

Tales of Amnesia employs strategies that illustrate female figures who "function predominantly as a metaphor and repository for cultural, social and personal conflict ... in larger arenas of sexual codes and storytelling"[71] and speak a language which dialogues with gender theory in a way that fleshes out the corpus of Ganesh's investigations. The 'messiness' of the *junglee* body stages itself somewhere between diverse cultural narratives that are at once deeply grounded in Indian cultural idioms, especially in terms of the mythology and traditions, as well as Western performative media and theory that articulates the female voice through *écriture féminine* and the performativity of the female body. Deploying Western theory to illustrate an ethic that is so grounded in Indian culture is also to acknowledge the transnational fluidity of the diasporic identity, which Ganesh herself is intrinsically a part.

Rewriting Unalienable "Truths": Forgetting and Remembering in *Tales of Amnesia*

Through her manner of storytelling, both what is presented in the images and implied in the text, is as though Ganesh is rewriting what Michel Foucault called the "regime of truths",[72] which are a set of norms particular to each society. According to Foucault:

> Truth isn't outside of power or lacking in power ... as a thing of this world, truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints and induces regular effect of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth. That is the type of discourse it accepts and makes function as true.[73]

What Foucault is postulating is that power is exerted in a society through

[67] Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out", 64.

[68] Artist's Statement available at http://db-artmag.com/en/61/feature/chitra-ganesh-subversive-myths/, accessed August 12, 2015.

[69] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 890.

[70] Clara Junker, "Writing (With) Cixous", *College English*, 50.4 (April 1988), 426.

[71] http://www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/inter-views/Toro%20Mag%20Louise%20Bak.pdf, accessed September 14, 2016.

[72] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Colin Gordon (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990), 131.

[73] Ibid.

certain unalienable "truths" and it is through the discourse of these "truths" that oppression, subjugation and domination are perpetuated. The *Amar Chitra Katha* stories function within the patriarchal power structure of these "truths" and through the performative actions of their characters, continue a subsequent reinforcement of them. Ganesh calls upon the *jungalee* as a medium to rewrite these ostensible "certainties" as a way to inverse the rubric and provide a space and platform for female expression that is in no way linked to, or limited by, the stringent hegemonies of traditional socio-cultural dictates propagated by the *ACK* series. Ganesh's work subverts male logocentrism and proposes instead a kind of "feminist fantasy ... in which the female heroine begins in the realm of traditional culture" of the *Amar Chitra Katha* "and moves away from its rules and restrictions"[74] into the enigmatic space of the *Tales of Amnesia*.

Ganesh's work premises a kind of nostalgic familiarity with the *Amar Chitra Katha* series counting on a parallel being made to the original: "Everyone our age grew up reading the comics. I use a medium that is used to educate to bring people in, to bring the viewer in. You get in there and then it becomes all wonky and surreal".[75]

In her art, Ganesh recalls the past through nostalgia but in a way that challenges "the layers of repression of subaltern histories, memories, desires, and subjectivities on which both state and diasporic nationalist ideologies depend"[76] by messing up defined boundaries and provoking established structures. Ganesh understands *Amar Chitra Katha* as a series that represents a kind of "collective memory [used] to document the traditions, rituals, and history";[77] and as Sveltana Boym argues, "stories are the best narratives of nostalgia – not only because they suffer through nostalgia, but also because they challenge it".[78] What Boym points out is exactly the manner of interaction Ganesh has with the comic; by interrogating culturally perpetuated nostalgia, Ganesh manages to combat the desire to return to the time-honoured myths, and consequently the norms, that are perpetuated by the *Amar Chitra Katha. Tales of Amnesia* uses the idea of a comic steeped in the familiarity of childhood nostalgia to create an adult deconstruction of the same by offering an education through a perpetuation of a very different kind of 'immortal picture stories'.

[74] Nancy A. Walker, *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (Jackson and London: U. P. of Mississippi, 1990), 150.

[75] Artist's Statement in Mary Thomas, "Comic-book style brings home Word of God (ess)' exhibition to the Warhol", available at http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/ae/art-architecture/comic-book-style-brings-home-word-of-godess-exhibition-to-the-warhol-310634/?print=1, accessed September 29, 2012.

[76] Gayatri Gopinath, "Chitra Ganesh's Queer Revisions", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, XV (2009), 469.

[77] Agnew, 204.

[78] Sveltana Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents", available at http://www.iasc-culture.org/eNews/2007_10/9.2CBoym.pdf, accessed November 19, 2016.