

Framing the Gutter: Mapping the Fandom, Materiality and Production in 'Grassroot Comics'

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One of the most pertinent question in fan studies is probably: who reads? Genres which emerged particularly as sub-cultures such as Punk or Rock, and movements which were underground such as Comix, definitely thrive on a distinct fandom: a niche readership, a select audience and and a curious interchangeability of the producer-consumer. That is why some works would reach a cult status and perhaps will have many aesthetic afterlives, creating ripples of self-reflexive meta narratives. Fan Studies, as a critical discourse also looks into the class-gender power distribution within the fandom. This proposal, however, is about about a comics-fandom where most people have been systematically denied of any formal education. In recent years, the Indian academic space has witnessed the rise of the caste question within its discourse; it also a question which escapes the periphery of most "Western" literary theory. Caste as a category is also forcing us to critically reflect on our own methodology. Addressing all of these, this paper wishes to take the case of World Comics India as its archive. World Comics India is a comics organisation, operating in South Asia, and partially Europe, with the aim of introducing their concept of the "Grassroot comics".

This presentation will focus on the pamphlets, comic notice boards and sines that this organisation has introduced in the order areas, in homeless shelters and among gypsy communities; it will also reflect on the series of conversations and interviews conducted by the author with Sharad Sharma, the founder of the organisation. Grassroot comics are made by people who are fruit venders, rickshaw pullers, slum dwellers, homeless and marginalised and discriminated against. The facilitators do not dictate the subject/style to the comics creators. Through the discussion mode, these artists/writers come up with their own materials, often reflecting on their stark reality. They distribute their comics through photocopies, and exhibit the panels on road sided make-shift stalls. The materiality thus becomes a revolutionary tool in the process. This presentation also investigates into the production of fandom. Does the nature of fandom change with the materiality of comics? Where do we situate the comics that are photocopied, hand distributed and not available for sale; their facilitators and comics creators are the homeless, the migrant, the people from caste/class/sexual minorities, but they form their own fandom? Their fan base is their fellow homeless people, fellow domestic helps or daily labourers- most of these artist-writers cannot read or write themselves: that is where the organisation steps in. This presentation aims to question what illiteracy, marginality and discrimination does to fandom; at the interface of marginality, what form does fandom take?

Biography:

Shromona Das is a comics-creator currently pursuing her Mphil dissertation on feminist and queer graphic narratives from School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, India, under the supervision of Suryanandini Narain. She is an avid reader, a collector and also dabbles with the form. She was a presenter at the 2017 'Doing Graphic Stories' conference at Jadavpur University, the first such conference dedicated entirely to graphic narratives. She was also a presenter at the 2018 'Graphic Storytelling in India' international symposium jointly organised by Ambedkar university, Delhi and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. She participated in the Non-Fiction Comics Master practice Studio funded by the Kochi Biennale under the supervision of Orijit Sen. Her first comics is about to be published.