

Amar Chitra Katha Comics in Feminist Perspective - A Study

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Amar Chitra Katha

Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) Comics series was started in 1967 by Anant Pai. He initiated a comic revolution in India and could rightly be called the 'Father of Indian Comics'. He showed millions of Indians 'route to their roots' by visualising stories and characters from Indian mythology, religion, history, and politics. He was given the Lifetime Achievement Award at India's first ever Comic Convention held in New Delhi in 2011. Google published a comic book style doodle featuring Anant Pai on his 82nd birth anniversary. (*IBNlive.com*)

Amar Chitra Katha has published more than 400 titles out of which only about 40 books contain women as protagonists. ACK women protagonists mostly are the ancient mythological and medieval historical heroines. ACK series is popular among Indians around the world and has welcomed both positive and negative criticisms. Criticisms on ACK comics focus mainly on two issues: portrayal of women and portrayal of minorities.

Stuller's Feminist Analysis

According to Stuller (2012), there is no single all-encompassing feminism and therefore no single proper feminist analysis. She reiterates that the ultimate goal could be to determine from the artifact how women are represented in the popular culture, and what does that say about a culture's ideas about gender, femininity, and sex roles at a given point in time? It would also be useful to investigate whether or not the artifact is representative of entertainment media of its day, or if it has elements that somehow make it progressive, subversive, or even more conservative than its contemporaries (239). This paper will consider all these issues and analyse ACK women in feminist perspective.

Artifacts Selected for Analysis

ACK Comics on Rukmini, Kannagi, Noor Jahan, and Rani of Jhansi are the artifacts selected for analysis. These artifacts represent different spheres of life during different periods in India: Rukmini, a popular character from Indian mythology, is the wife of Lord Krishna. Kannagi, a character from Elangovadigal's *Silappathikaaram*, represents the love of a traditional wife in ancient Tamilnadu. Noor Jahan, Emperor Jahangir's wife, represents the condition of women during the Mughal rule in India. Rani of Jhansi reveals the status of women during Indian freedom struggle.

Method Used for the Analysis

The method used for critiquing the representation of women in ACK comics involves the following issues:

- How are women looked at? Are they seen as sexual objects for pleasure of others, or as individuals with agency?
- How are women portrayed in relation to men and other women?
- How are women dressed, and how are their bodies positioned? Are they viewed as fractured body parts (e.g., breasts, buttocks, legs) or as whole figures?
- What does women's representation say about a culture's ideas about gender, femininity, and sex roles at a given point in time? (Stuller, 237)

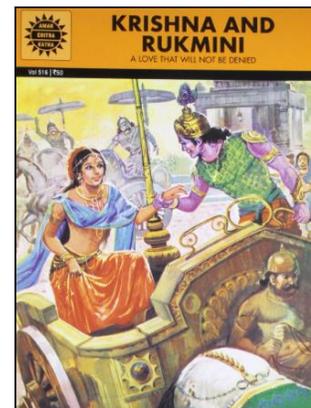
ACK Comics in Feminist Perspective - A Study

How are women depicted in ACK Comics?

The researchers try to analyse the selected artifacts and answer the following questions: How are women looked at? Are they shown as sexual objects for the pleasure of others, or as individuals with agency?

Rukmini

In ACK's *Krishna and Rukmini*, Rukmini has a 'voice' as a girl / woman. When a messenger comes and tells that Krishna has slain Kamsa, Rukmini (as a girl) feels attracted towards brave Krishna. She expresses her awe and argues with her brother Rukmi who is against Krishna. Rukmi ignores her and continues to speak to their father Bheeshmaka. (*Krishna and Rukmini*, 3) ACK shows that the young girl gets 'space to talk amidst the men' in her family. At the same time, it shows that the brother tries to dominate the younger sister.



Rukmini starts dreaming about brave Krishna whom she wants to marry. She tries to overhear what her father and brother speak about her marriage. She feels sad when her brother tries to convince their father to give her in marriage to Shishupala. She sends secret message to Krishna giving the justification that 'after all her parents are for it'. (8 - 9) Can a woman propose love or reveal her sexual interest to a man? ACK gives the freedom for a traditional woman to propose to a brave man. However, when she doesn't get a reply for a long time, she wonders whether her message has disgusted him. (14)

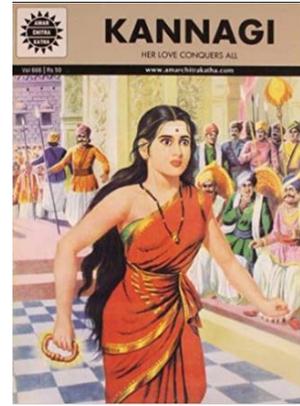
Rukmini elopes with Krishna out of her own interest. Representing a man from patriarchal society, Rukmi (Rukmini's brother) doesn't want the blame or shame to fall on the woman of his family. He condemns Krishna by saying, "Stop! Stop! Wait, You - Disgrace to the race of Yadu! How dare you kidnap my sister, even as a crow steals a sacred offering?" (25)

At the end of the fight, Rukmini falls at Krishna's feet to save her brother's life. Krishna does not kill Rukmi for Rukmini's sake. But she feels sad when Krishna shaves half his hair to insult him. Balarama rushes to stop Krishna from doing such an unkind act. ACK shows a woman falling at the feet of a man for 'sympathy'. Rukmini does not have 'voice' to stop Krishna from cutting his brother's hair. But Balarama is shown to have courtesy at least to ask

excuse to Rukmini: “Please do not take offence, dear sister. Your brother unfortunately has reaped the fruit of his own actions.” (30)

Kannagi

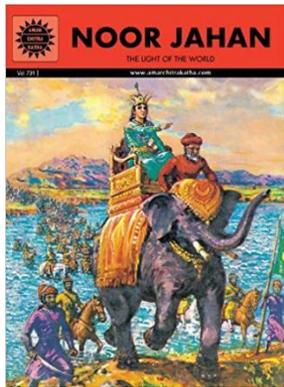
In ACK’s *Kannagi*, Kannagi is shown as a submissive wife. Kovalan falls in love with Madhavi and takes away Kannagi’s jewels to give as gifts to Madhavi. Kannagi feels dejected and cries, but does not protest against her husband. When Kovalan comes back after a dispute with Madhavi, she readily accepts him without blaming or questioning him for his misconduct. Calm and composed, Kannagi does not need a separate ‘voice’. She wants to identify herself only with her husband.



When she hears the news of Kovalan’s death, she becomes terribly angry. She walks boldly to the king’s court asking for justice. She proves her dead husband to be innocent of guilt. The king dies out of shock followed by his queen. Kannagi burns the whole city of Madurai saying, “If I am the chaste wife of an innocent man, let this cursed city burn to ashes in the flames of wrath.” (*Kannagi*, 27) After getting blessings from Goddess of Madurai, she goes to the eternal city along with Kovalan. People build temples to honour the divinity of Kannagi.

Kannagi is always quoted in Tamilnadu to teach submissiveness, chastity, and devotion to ‘corrupt’ husbands. ACK’s Kannagi also does not have ‘individual identity’. She does not question her husband’s misconduct. Instead she rejoices for his return. From the beginning to the end, she wants to be a part of Kovalan whom she relates her whole life and identity with.

Noor Jahan



ACK’s Noor Jahan is naughty, affectionate, respectful, truthful, intelligent, and courageous. As a young girl, Mehrunnisa (later called Noor Jahan) is very active watching her mother doing embroidering work. She accompanies her to king’s palace. She displays courage when she asks Akbar, “I am Meher... Now tell me who you are.” (7)

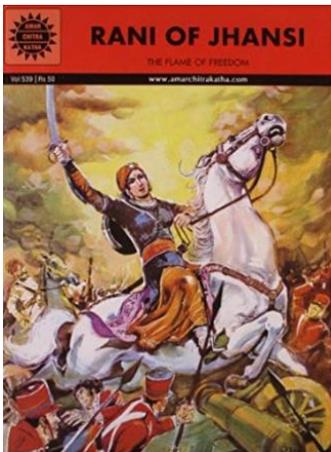
She is bold enough to tease Salim, Akbar’s son. Salim falls in love with her. She also loves him. But she does not want to hurt Akbar. So, she marries Sher Afghan and goes out of the city. After Sher Afghan’s death, she stays with Salima Begum, the Queen Mother.

Salim (now Jahangir) meets Meher after a long time and pleads her to marry him. She hesitates as she has promised to Akbar not to come between Salim and the empire. Akbar is dead now, and Ghiyas Beg (Meher’s father) requests her to marry the emperor (Salim) as he is unable to focus on administration thinking of Meher all the time. Meher thinks: “Yes... The good of the empire was nearest to the heart of Abbajan (Akbar).” (25) She marries Jahangir, and he gives her the name “Noor Jahan - The light of the whole world” (25)

As she becomes the queen, she takes keen interest in the administration of the state. She introduces schemes to help orphans and keeps an eye on political enemies. When Mahabat Khan's army surrounds Jahangir, she motivates the army to attack the enemies in a clever way. When Jahangir dies after a few years, she is unable to retain her position as a queen. She goes back to work as perfume-maker.

Noor Jahan remains an 'object of attraction' for Salim / Jahangir. She does not want to fulfill her love desire due to her respect for Akbar. But she breaks her promise and marries Jahangir only to 'save the country'. She becomes 'authoritative' when she becomes a queen. She takes part in political administration very actively. She counsels Jahangir and guides the army to attack Mahabat Khan's army. ACK's Noor Jahan is not shown as an 'object of sex' but a 'willful woman' with love, respect, truthfulness, intelligence, and courage.

Rani of Jhansi



In ACK's *Rani of Jhansi*, young Manu plays with boys. She studies in a school along with boys. She is given in marriage to Maharaja of Jhansi. After about nine years, she gives birth to a child which dies within a few months. The old king adopts a son, but he dies soon leaving Jhansi in the hands of Rani Lakshmi Bai.

Rani of Jhansi rules the state effectively. The British reject her appeal to recognise her adopted son. She gets angry and refuses to support the British who want shelter while the nationalist forces attack them.

Rani of Jhansi is a great patron of arts. She is an ardent lover of books which she reads in the state library. She encounters a lot of enemies: Sadashiv Rao (distant nephew of the late Maharaja), princes of Datia and Orchia (two neighbourhood states). ACK's Rani of Jhansi is 'not a sexual object' but an 'individual with agency'. She displays courage and self-less love for her country.

How are ACK Women Presented in Relation to Men?

According to Stuller (2012), "Female characters merely serve as motivation for the hero's journey, rather than as characters of substance in and of themselves". The researchers need to analyse the following aspects: "In the narrative, is a woman the protagonist, if not, how is she positioned in relation to the main character? Are the women included in the story the nemesis or temptation, the love interest or the damsel, the daughter or mother, the sidekick or spin-off?" (238)

Rukmini

Rukmini in *Krishna and Rukmini* is not shown merely as the love interest or damsel of Krishna. She is shown as a girl / woman with passionate love for a brave man. As a young girl, she is bold enough to talk against her brother. As a young woman, she is confident enough to propose love to Krishna and bold enough to elope with Krishna. ACK's *Krishna and Rukmini* does not portray Krishna's journey towards Rukmini, but Rukmini's love journey towards Krishna.

Kannagi

In *Kannagi*, Kovalan marries Kannagi and then falls in love with Madhavi. Kannagi does not consider it as an insult. Instead she longs for her husband to return to her. She starves and says, “For whom should I live? Kovalan never comes here.” (8) When a woman advises her to send Kovalan back if he comes from Madhavi’s house, she says: “No. Don’t say that. My husband is my God.” (8) When Kovalan returns, she does not ask anything to him. She simply feels happy that her husband has come back to her. To prove her love for him, she again gives her anklet for selling.

When Kovalan decides to go to Madurai to sell the anklet, she readily says, “As you wish, my lord. You know best.” (11) Kannagi feels very tired while walking to Madurai. Kovalan regrets and asks for excuse. Kannagi says, “Don’t say that. You have come back to me. I am happy.” (12) On the contrary, she speaks ferociously to the king and proves that her husband hasn’t stolen the queen’s anklet. She burns the whole city to prove her husband’s innocence. ACK’s *Kannagi* presents Kannagi as a ‘chaste wife’ of Kovalan who attains ‘goddess status’ as a gift for her chastity.

Noor Jahan

Akbar is affectionate towards Meher. He allows her to play with his son Salim. Meher is so naughty that she irritates Salim and only Akbar saves her from Salim’s wrath most of the time. As she grows, Salim develops love interest for her. She teaches her horse riding and archery. Salim proposes to her, and Meher is afraid that the king may not give consent for their marriage.

Akbar sends Salim to Deccan for an expedition in order to separate them both. Meher promises him that she will never come between Salim and the empire. Sher Afghan, an officer in the imperial army, falls in love with Meher by seeing her courage while riding a horse. He fights with a tiger to take back Meher’s veil. As Akbar insists, Meher marries Sher Afghan and leaves the city.

Though Meher has love for Salim, she does not reveal it as she has respect for Akbar. Though she is unable to forget Salim, she remains a truthful wife to Sher Afghan. Even after his death, she does not try to contact Salim. She marries Salim / Jahangir only for the sake of the empire. She takes control of the administration, introduces new schemes to help orphans, and saves Jahangir from his enemies. ACK’s *Noor Jahan* is not portrayed as a slave to patriarchal society but as an ‘independent woman’ who respects elders and makes decisions for the ‘welfare of the empire’.

How are Other Women in ACK Depicted?

Rukmini

In ACK’s *Krishna and Rukmini*, other than Rukmini, there is another character - Rukmini’s mother who doesn’t have a name in this story. When the messenger tells about the brave deeds of Krishna, she does not talk but think within herself: “So in spite of all Kamsa’s efforts the prophecy has come true. Is Krishna really a divinity?” (2) On another occasion, she expresses her view about Krishna to her husband Bheeshmaka: “The boy seems to be virtuous. I

cannot think of a more suitable husband for Rukmini.” (4) Though Rukmini’s mother remains a mute witness in one occasion, she has the freedom to express her thought to her husband Bheesmaka.

Kannagi

In ACK’s *Kannagi*, Kannagi is shown as a chaste wife while Madhavi is portrayed as a dancer who attracts rich men. Kovalan reaches Madhavi only after buying an emerald necklace (king’s gift to Madhavi) by paying a large sum of money. When he tells that he is unable to bear even a day’s separation from her, she says, “I am overwhelmed by all the love and wealth you shower on me.” (7) When her mother asks her to dance before the crowd, she does not talk about her love for Kovalan. Instead she says, “I am in no mood to dance”. When Kovalan misunderstands her song, she is not given a chance to explain her thoughts. Nowhere in ACK’s *Kannagi*, Madhavi has ‘space’ or ‘voice’ to express her love for Kovalan.

Noor Jahan

In ACK’s *Noor Jahan*, Noor Jahan / Meher’s mother never wants to leave her new-born baby in the desert. She says, “Oh! No. If we desert this baby, Allah will never forgive us.” (3) She is compelled by her husband Ghiyas Beg as the whole family starves without food. When the baby comes back to them through a wealthy trader Masud Khan, she feels very happy and names the child ‘Meher’. This woman has no name. She is addressed by her husband as ‘begum’. But she has the ‘authority’ to name her child. She is ‘independent’ enough to earn money (to support the family) by making and selling embroidery work to the ladies of the harem. Another woman is Salima Begum, the Queen Mother. She is kind enough to help Meher who has lost her husband Sher Afghan. She helps her in developing the embroidery business by setting up a stall in Meena bazaar.

How do ACK Women Interact with Each Other?

The Bechdel Test is used as the litmus test to analyse how relationships between women are presented. This test can be applied to any story with two or more women (with or without names) talking to each other, preferably about something other than men. (Stuller 238)

Rukmini

In ACK’s *Krishna and Rukmini*, there is no mother-daughter conversation in the story. There are a few maids with Rukmini. She does not reveal her love interest to them. She sends her proposal to Krishna only through a male messenger (Sunanda - a Brahman). This questions the woman-woman relationship in ACK’s *Krishna and Rukmini*.

Kannagi

In ACK’s *Kannagi*, the women-women relationship is clearly visible. Kovalan admires Madhavi’s dance and beauty. Kannagi’s jealousy is revealed as she thinks: “He hasn’t taken his eyes off her.” (5) Kovalan betrays Kannagi by leaving her alone. Kannagi’s neighbourhood women feel sympathetic towards Kannagi. They say: “Poor Kannagi, she is always in tears. He does not deserve such a good wife. The cad has taken away all her jewels and money.” (8)

As Kannagi starves, one of them advises her to eat. For that, Kannagi replies: “For whom should I live? Kovalan never comes here.” Another woman says, “Send him away even if he does. You are too good for him.” Kannagi expresses panic and says, “No. Don’t say that. My husband is my God.” (8) Kannagi reveals her dream to a friend, and she consoles her by saying, “Don’t panic. Trust in Goddess Parvati. She will protect you.” (10) This reveals the care and concern among women in ancient Tamilnadu.

Madhavi’s mother and old woman Kooni are money-minded. Kooni sells the emerald necklace for the highest price. Madhavi’s mother compels Madhavi to go and dance before the crowd. She says, “My daughter, aren’t you ready? The crowd out there is shouting for you... Mood or no mood, you’ll have to.” (9) Madhavi is shown as money-minded and pleasure-loving. She doesn’t have ‘space’ or ‘voice’ to express her love for Kovalan.

Kovalan and Kannagi walk towards Madurai to sell the anklet. On the way, they take bath in a temple pond and go to a temple. There is a big crowd, and a woman gets under a divine trance and tells that Kannagi is destined to be a goddess in the land of Pandyas. This tells us that in ancient Tamilnadu, women are allowed to be the oracle of the Goddess.

Kovalan is mistaken for a thief and killed by king’s men. Kannagi hears the news and loses consciousness. The woman in the host family supports her saying, “Poor Kannagi. She has fainted” (21) Many women accompany her while walking to the king’s court. Kannagi touches Kovalan’s dead body, and the severed head joins the body. One of the women in the crowd exclaims: “She has wrought a miracle.” (22)

As soon as the king dies, the queen says: “For a chaste woman, there is no life after the death of her husband. I will follow him.” (27) She dies along with her husband displaying the ‘sati’ culture prevalent in the Tamil culture. Goddess of Madurai appears before Kannagi and explains Kovalan’s sin from previous birth. She convinces her by saying that she can travel along with her husband to the celestial city.

Chaste wife, beautiful dancer, greedy mother, caring neighbourhood women, devoted queen, and graceful Goddess visualise the various roles taken by women in ancient Tamilnadu.

Noor Jahan

Queen Mother Salima Begum consoles Meher (who has lost her husband) by saying, “Fate has been very unkind to you, Meher.” (20) She advises Meher to set up a stall at the Meena bazaar. Meher calls her ‘Begum Sahiba’ with affection. Women who love Meher’s embroidery work and rose scents interact with each other. They represent the ‘beauty consciousness’ of women and their ‘desire to catch male attention’. “How beautiful! The ladies of the harem will be green with envy when they see me in this...” “Meher, will you please design a new dress for me? I want to catch the attention of the prince.” (21) After Meher / Noor Jahan becomes the queen, some women citizens appreciate her administration. “She is kind and generous. She takes good care of the orphans... She even arranges their marriages.” (27)

Meher's mother, Queen Mother, women who buy embroidery work, and the women citizens who appreciate the new queen - all of them represent the status of women during the Mughal period in India.

How is ACK Women's Body Presented?

According to Stuller (2012), "The bodies of women in mainstream comics tend to be fetishized, receive more focus than their narrative, and are shown as parts rather than an active whole... Even a cursory survey of contemporary comic book covers reveals women's faces drawn facing away from the camera, suggesting their passivity in relation to the male protagonist – whose gaze strongly faces the reader... The focus on male bodies in comics emphasizes the power of their physique, whereas the focus on female bodies in comics is meant to titillate the presumed male reader, as well as privilege his interests as consumer and audience." (237)

The researchers try to find out the following aspects in ACK Comics: Are the women characters viewed as fractured body parts (e.g., breasts, buttocks, legs) or as whole figures? How are women dressed, and how are their bodies positioned?

Rukmini

"Vedic Indians wore three garments: nivi or loin-cloth sometimes having long and unwoven fringe, a garment (vasas), and an overgarment (upavasana - adhivasa) generally consisting of a wrapper or sometimes consisting of a jacket, bodice, or cloak like pratidhi, drapi or atka. Pemas was worn by dancing girls and was the forefather of modern peshwaz. The usnisa or turban is met in later Vedic literature and was worn by the Rajas and Vratyas and also sometimes by other women." (Moti, 23)

As a young girl, Rukmini wears a three-piece attire which makes her appear attractive and confident. Rukmini, as a young woman, looks curvaceous and sexy. Back side of her body (with only a knot and a shawl) is shown when she tries to overhear her father and brother. Fractured body parts (back side of her body along with Krishna's hand) are shown with erotic overtone.

Kannagi

In ACK's *Kannagi*, all the women characters wear sarees with a piece of cloth tied at the back. The queen and Goddess of Madurai also wear sarees without blouses which is typical of Tamil women during ancient period. When ordinary women don't have jewels, the queen and the Goddess wear a lot of jewels along with a crown.

Kannagi's body is not shown in fractured parts, but back side of her body (with only a knot and a part of the saree) is visible in certain frames. She also looks attractive while talking privately with her husband Kovalan. While dancing, Madhavi appears glamorous by wearing a long loin-cloth with fringes and a piece of cloth tied at the back, without a shawl. Her dress is different from all the other women in the story.

Noor Jahan

Even as a child, Meher wears a long robe with a veil woven around the head and neck. When Meher's veil flies off due a strong gust of wind, she tries to cover her chest with both her hands. Even when she lies alone thinking of Salim / Noor Jahan, she wears a long robe. Her eyes look sensual, but her body is fully covered. All the women in the story appear with long robes and veils. No curvaceous figure or fractured body part is seen anywhere in the story.

Who Produces the Artifact?

The people ACK Comics claim to represent are from Indian mythologies, folklore, and past history. Men and women write and draw female characters differently. The script for *Krishna and Rukmini* has been written by Kamala Chandrakant. She has made the script in such a way that Rukmini has a 'distinct voice' in the story. The story is illustrated by Pratap Mullick who has drawn Rukmini in an attractive way that she looks curvaceous and sexy in many frames.

The script for *Kannagi* has been written by Lalitha Raghupati who has portrayed Kannagi as a very submissive wife. She has no distinct voice or identity until Kovalan's death. The story is illustrated by Varnam who has drawn Kannagi and all the other characters fully clad in sarees. Only Madhavi is given a different attire to distinguish herself as a dancer. Laila Mahajan has written the script for Noor Jahan. Kamala Chandrakant, author and associate editor of ACK from 1971 to 1986, had read the *Akbarnama* for about six months to get clues about Jahangir's personality and character.

Uncle Pai created or produced most of the texts. He believed that all the mythological stories had symbolic meanings which would change if the stories were changed with scientific outlook. He had created characters like Jhansi Rani, Kalpana Chawla, or M. S. Subbulakshmi who were not portrayed as erotic objects but as independent women with voice and authority.

Conclusion

According to McLain (2009), "There is no room for heroines who do not fit either of the two models: *pativrata* or *martial virangana*". (86)

Anand Pai's ideal heroine is "Shakunthala – *pativrata* par excellence – foremother of all Indians who epitomizes the female heroic virtue of voluntary long-suffering devotion to one's husband." (86) ACK female protagonists like Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Damayanti, Padmini, Joymati, Kannagi, etc. belong to this category as they displayed 'long suffering devotion' to their husbands. Mirabai, Avvaiyar, and Mother Teresa also can be added to this category as they had devoted their whole lives for God's service.

"To this normative ideal, an alternative heroine was later added: the *martial virangana* who epitomizes the male heroic virtue of voluntary self-sacrifice out of devotion to one's country." (86) Rani of Jhansi, Rani Durgavati, Sultana Razia, Rani of Kittur, Echamma the Brave, etc. belong to this category as they remained devoted to their country. Marie Curie, Kalpana Chawla, and M. S. Subbulakshmi can be placed in both the categories - *pativrata* and *martial virangana* - as they remained devoted to their husbands and their countries.

“There are as yet no women on the ‘Makers of Modern India’ list - no Sarojini Naidu, no Kasturba Gandhi, no Kamala Nehru, no Durgabai Deshmukh, no Anasuyabehn Sarabhai, no Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and no Indira Gandhi. Even outside the ‘Makers of Modern India’ category, there are no educated, urban, twentieth century women in the Amar Chitra Katha series at all.” (Pritchett 12)

McLain (2009) opines that the absence of modern Indian heroines - politicians, revolutionaries, social activists, scientists, industrialists, and religious leaders - in the ACK series is not due to the fact that such women do not exist, nor are their lives any less dramatic than their male counterparts. Instead, the absence is due to the many ways in which ideal Indian womanhood has been located within the past Hindu golden age. (86)

What is absent speaks more... In ACK Comics, there are many female protagonists from mythologies and a very few poets, politicians, scientists, and business women. Women portrayed in ACK Comics are devoted to their husbands and devoted to their country. They display coy femininity (Jhansi rani involving in poojas, Subbhu Lakshmi taking care of children, Marie Curie involved in domestic chorus). Women are victimised either by men or the society. They rarely express freedom of love or marriage. Women in ACK Comics who become the role-models for the young readers pressurise them indirectly to follow the ideal Indian womanhood of the golden era.

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