The graphic novel *Priya's Shakti* and the representation of violence against women in India

El cómic *Priya's Shakti* y la representación de la violencia contra las mujeres en India

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Abstract: In this article, we aim to provide a case study of the Priya's Shakti comic, written by Ram Devineni and Vikas K. Menon, and illustrated by Dan Goldman, and published in 2014. This article analyzes said comic from an interpretive approach, based on the indexical inferences paradigm of microhistory. We found that this comic has a structure that plays with postmodern aesthetics, by mixing elements of the real world with those of the metaphysical world, to generate through its theme, graphics and dissemination, awareness and emancipation about the violence exerted against women. women in India.

Keywords: India; violence; emancipation; postmodernity; comic.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo aportar un caso de estudio del cómic *Priya's Shakti*, escrito por Ram Devineni y Vikas K. Menon, ilustrado por Dan Goldman y publicado en 2014. Dicha obra se analiza desde un enfoque interpretativo, basado en el paradigma de inferencias indiciales de la microhistoria. Se encontró que la estructura de este cómic juega con la estética posmoderna al mezclar elementos del mundo real con los del mundo metafísico para generar, a través de su temática, gráfica y difusión, consciencia y emancipación frente a la violencia ejercida contra las mujeres en India.

Palabras clave: India; violencia; emancipación; posmodernidad; cómic.

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Introduction

Violence against women is recognized as a public health problem in the world. This conception "was strengthened globally by the resolutions of several international forums, including the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing" (Babu & Kar, 2009, p. 2). In India, the problem became apparent after the issuance of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005:

Estimates of domestic violence prevalence within India vary widely (from 18% to 70%, with differences in study methodology) [10-20], and it is noted that the problem's magnitude has not been well accounted for. From various parts of India […] Scrutiny of prevalence rates reveals that domestic violence is a national phenomenon with some variations across states as these differ from each other in overall socio-economic development and status of women8,21] (Babu & Kar, 2009, p. 2).

In the academic study conducted by Babu and Kar (2009), they concluded that, for eastern India (and perhaps also for the north), a woman's caste influences the form and degree of violence received, an aspect that is evident in the primary source analyzed in this article.

Priya's Shakti is a graphic novel in digital format that mixes interactive elements through mobile applications. Its proposal attracts all types of audiences: from children to adolescents and young people, who are interested in technology. It was launched at the Mumbai Comic and Film Convention in 2014 and funded by the Tribeca Film Institute, New Media Fund, and Ford Foundation. According to its official website, "the graphic novel and the character became an immediate success, with more than 400 news stories around the world and almost 500,000 digital downloads" (About, 2014)

This project has several partners and financing institutions, among which the World Bank, numerous foundations and civil associations, and different entities in the city of New York[1]. It is a work where various creatives and entities, such as Rattapallax (a non-profit organization focused on film production and transmedia storytelling) come together and cooperate. Thus, the work not only has its graphic version, but also an animated short, a story made with puppets, and several augmented reality murals available both in the graphic novel and on the streets of India.

The structure of *Priya's Shakti* plays with postmodern aesthetics both in its narrative and in its dissemination, to generate awareness and emancipation in the face of violence against women in India. In this way, the proposal is based on the questioning of violence as the sole basis of interaction between men and women through the following mechanisms:

1. Thematically and graphically, the graphic novel mixes elements from the Hindu religion (sacred world) with a context where rape, prostitution, and acid attacks on women (profane world) are the main problem. Both planes intermingle and link.
2. Its format is integrated with electronic applications (transmedia narrative) and activism in the streets and galleries. The work presents games that mix different spaces and times: that of the novel, the digital, and the real. These aspects are linked through the use of augmented reality, which gives it a postmodern aesthetic.
3. The graphic novel's proposal for emancipation comes hand in hand with the questioning of violence as the only foundation. To this end, this graphic and narrative product uses different media, including mass media, so the greatest number of readers possible become aware of the problem, promoting change based on interaction with a plurality of visions. In this way, *Priya's Shakti* erodes the idea of a single reality and reaches the viewer through multiple formats and actions.

Given the impact that this project has had, attention has been focused on its proposal from different perspectives:

1. General structure and history of the work. In this category, some works present the general characteristics of the graphic novel and talk about its history, its proposal, its link with social problems, its relationship with the history and religion of India, and its approach linked to social change (Pelegero, 2017; Peralta, 2016).

Women Worldwide is the non-profit participation partner. The graphic novel series and interactive works were developed at Crossover Labs" (About, 2014).

2. The use of Hinduism and its link with comic books. The studies in this section have the particularity of focusing on the use of the symbols of Hinduism within the narrative of the work. In this order of ideas, the interaction of such religious elements with the story is analyzed, as well as the impact, positive or negative, that their inclusion in the proposal for social change has (Shrivastava, 2018; Smears, 2019).

3. Graphic novels and transmedia resources as tools for emancipation. The articles included in this approach focus on the use of graphic novels as a teaching instrument, as well as on the impact of the use of transmedia resources that, in the particular case of *Priya's Shakti*, are designed to link its narrative with reality and its different social problems, to generate social change (Pande & Nadkarni, 2016; Shrivastava, 2018).

The previous review shows the interest that *Priya's Shakti* proposal has aroused as a tool that can contribute to social change. However, the aesthetic structure of the graphic novel still needs to be studied, as well as how the superposition of its various dimensions (graphic, digital, and real) is part of a postmodern structure that contributes to social transformation.

The above leads us to wonder how this transmedia proposal can contribute to social change based on a complex format that breaks the spatial limits between the graphic novel, the digital, and its contextual reality of creation. In response, the thesis stated above is proposed: *Priya's Shakti* has a structure that plays with postmodern aesthetics by mixing elements of the real world with those of the metaphysical world to generate, through its themes, graphics, and dissemination, consciousness and emancipation against violence towards women in India, prompting action and, with it, education and social change.

Materials and methods

The proposed analysis is based on the details present in the iconography and the theme of the graphic novel, returning to the paradigm of indexical inferences of Carlo Ginzburg (1999), who proposes an "Interpretive method based on the secondary, where the marginal data was considered revealing. Thus, details that are usually considered unimportant, or simply trivial, low, provide the key to accessing the highest achievements of the human spirit" (p. 143). Therefore, this work makes a detailed observation of the figures, actions, and central vignettes that constitute the graphic novel, which provides information on symbolic, ideological, and sociocultural aspects of the culture of its origins. On this basis, the theoretical interpretation is carried out.

In terms of theory, the proposal of Néstor García (2016) is taken, who states that postmodernity is hybrid: "It is not a stage or trend that would replace the modern world, but rather a way of problematizing the equivocal links that it created with the traditions that it wanted to exclude or overcome to establish itself" (p. 23). Along the same lines, we follow the proposal of Gianni Vattimo (1987), for whom modernity was characterized by the prolongation of tradition, in which the real world is subordinated to an ideal world, meaning that modernity was constituted by taking the idea of progress, subjecting the real world to scientific and technological abstraction. Later, this same author would affirm that the emancipation of modernity comes hand in hand with the emergence of mass media, which makes visible the chaotic diversity breaking with ultimate foundations (Vattimo, 1990). Finally, the approach of Damián Pachón (2013) is recognized, who expresses that "human emancipation implies the upheaval of the entire social order," (p. 171) and the liberation of humanity, an idea of social consciousness that is associated with the assumption of action and change.

On the other hand, the notion of transmedia narrative proposed by Carlos Scolari (2014) is adopted. This author refers to a story that expands across multiple platforms, usually starting in a graphic novel, continuing in a television series, and incorporating video games and other forms of marketing. A second characteristic is the active nature of the audience, including the work made by fans (fanfiction and fanart) within the stories derived from the initial narrative:

Transmedia narratives extend from one end of the media ecology to the other, spanning old and new media. They also cross genres: there are transmedia narratives in fiction, journalism, documentaries, or advertising. Political, scientific, religious, or educational discourses are not left behind and little by little begin to become transmediatized (Scolari, 2014, p. 73).

Finally, it should be noted that the primary sources for this analysis are, mainly, the first two volumes of *Priya's Shakti* in its digital version, available for free download on the project's official website[2]. To use the images from the graphic novel, the author Ram Devineni was contacted directly by email, to which he responded, authorizing the use of the images for analysis, and even providing some of better quality for use.

Results

Sacred space and profane space in *Priya's Shakti*

Interest in *Priya's Shakti* project has not only been observed in the various versions published since its creation, but also in the academic work reviewed in previous pages. In this sense, studies focused on the transmedia nature of this work stand out (Aston, 2017; Bosworth & Lakshmi, 2018; Freeman & Proctor, 2014; Pande and Nadkarni, 2016; Vemuri, 2016).

In this first section, it is proposed that, thematically and graphically, the graphic novel mixes elements from the Hindu religion (sacred world) with the representation of social problems such as rape, prostitution, and acid attacks on women (profane world). Both planes are intermixed and linked through the main character, "Priya."

The graphic novel tells the story of Priya, a young woman of humble origins who has to leave her studies to dedicate herself to helping her family with household chores and selling vegetables at the market. One day a group of men sexually abused her. Horrified, the girl goes to her family, but they blame her. Priya then asks Parvati for help. The goddess then enters the girl's body and tries to convince her family of her innocence, without success. In addition, she seeks to make one of the attackers reflect, who tries to abuse Priya for a second time.

The fury that this act awakens in Parvati reaches the god Shiva, who decides that humanity is corrupt and proposes to exterminate it by making women sterile. The other gods, including Parvarti herself, try to make Shiva understand the unfairness of this decision, but he remains impassive. In the end, Parvati takes the form of Kali and makes the god desist.

Back in her Parvati form, the goddess gives Priya a mission: "Speak without shame and stay with me, bring the change we want to see" (Devineni et al., 2014, p. 22). Later, during the rest of volume one, Priya dedicates herself to convincing people, through her words, to leave behind violence against women. Later, in volume two, the protagonist helps a group of young people, victims of acid attacks, to escape from an evil being that keeps them prisoner and convinces them, through speech, not to reintegrate socially.

The details[3] present in the graphics and story of this graphic novel inform about the space in which the story takes place. Therefore, it can be stated that in this case there are two types of places: the sacred and the profane. In this regard, the point of view of Eliade (1981) can be taken into account, who proposes that for the religious man, space is not homogeneous, there are breaks, places with greater importance within religious thought and others less important:

> There is, then, a sacred and, therefore, "strong", significant space, and there are other spaces that are not consecrated and, therefore, without structure or consistency; In a word, amorphous. Furthermore, for the religious man, this absence of spatial homogeneity translates into the experience of an opposition between the sacred space, the only one that is real, that exists, and all the rest, the formless extension that surrounds it (Eliade, 1981, p. 16).

According to Eliade (1981), space presents a rupture when hierophany is manifested in it, which implies that something sacred is shown: "the manifestation of something 'completely different,' of a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that form an integral part of our 'natural,' 'profane' world" (p. 10).

This sacred space is presented in the graphic work in various ways: from the temple where Priya goes to pray to Parvati, a link between worlds, to the representation of the top of the Kailash mountain, located in Tibet, where Parvati and Shiva dialogue in volume one (figure 1). This last scenario is sacred par excellence since "The

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[2] See: https://www.priyashakti.com/

[3] These details "serve to identify and locate objects and beings in time and space, they refer to places, objects and gestures" (Beristáin, 1984, p. 41).

cosmologies and myths of the origin of each of the four religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Bön) speak of Kailāśa as the mythical Mount Meru, center and birthplace of the entire universe." (Sarao, 2014, p. 214). This area is where the iconographic tradition represents

Shiva meditating in solitude: "In the Silpasastra tradition, the iconography of Siva contemplates him as a mahayogin. He is represented meditating in complete solitude on Mount Kailasa [sic]" (Tripathi, 2014, p. 28).

Figure 1.
Parvati and Shiva talk at Kailash
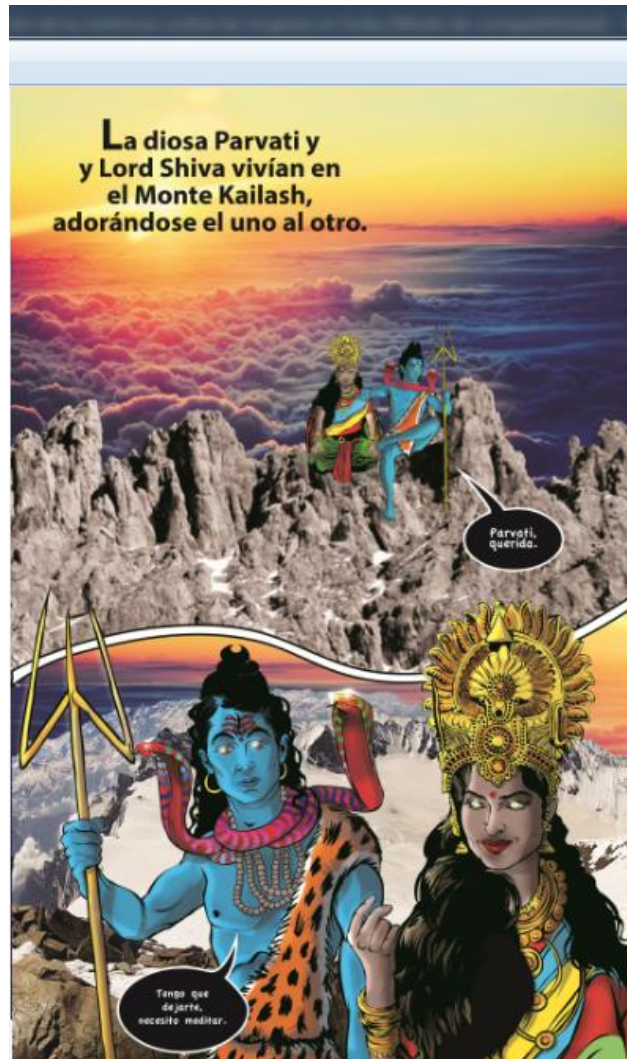
Source: taken from *Priya's Shakti* Volume 1, Devineni, Menon, Vikas, (2014).

Through the presence of the gods, spaces become sacred to the extent that they appear different from the profane (Eliade, 1981). This is observed both in the representation of traditionally sacred places and in the use of certain atmospheres and colors when divine entities are shown. Thus, whenever the gods appear, the clouds stand out.

For example, in addition to the mountain, in volume number one, the gods are represented in the middle of dense red clouds or in environments where emptiness with fluorescent red backgrounds seems to predominate. In this way, there is a representation of places where hierophany is present and "something sacred is shown to us" (Eliade 1981, p. 10).

The profane world, then, is never completely removed from the sacred in *Priya's Shakti*. This world in its entirety "is the completely desacralized cosmos, a recent discovery of the human being, since it is the total experience of the non-religious name in modern societies" (Eliade 1981, p. 11). Therefore, this graphic novel arises from that universe that can be called "profane," as the result of a series of problems related to violence against women, which generate concern and call attention to creating measures to combat them.

Due to the above, profane spaces and problems are linked to the sacred world through scenarios where Priya moves. It can be recognized that the actions of this character take place in a rural environment, in villages with houses built with wooden tiles and roofs made of what looks like straw, as seen in Figure 2, corresponding to page number five of volume one.

The extracted image is composed of four vignettes: two at the top, one in the center, and the last one, which occupies the entire lower part and where Parvati's mouth and part of her jaw are shown. In the first vignette, Priya looks at her reflection in a lake, and the text appears above the scene: "Parvati had been a girl full of curiosity about the universe."

In the second vignette, Priya is found sitting on the floor, in the middle of the darkness, and illuminated by candles while she writes with pen and ink on several notebooks. The text says: "She worked tirelessly to achieve her dream of being a teacher."

Then, the third vignette, located in the center of the page, illustrates the protagonist standing in front of her father, both outside a type of hut whose construction material appears to be wood and straw on the roof. The image is accompanied by the following clarification: "By the time she grew up, her father had other plans for her" and, likewise, a balloon with the following dialogue: "School is over. You will stay to take care of the house."

The last panel shows Parvati's mouth and teeth, with the following text: "Parvati was saddened," and the speech bubble says: "Why this injustice with my devotees?" (Devineni & Menon, 2014).

This page shows that Priya belongs to a low caste, given the marginalization in which she lives and the violence

that forces her to leave school to dedicate herself to commerce. Furthermore, the following pages illustrate wooded areas where men rape young women. Also, although the entire market is not seen, there is a moment where the protagonist is represented surrounded by the merchandise and fruit that she sells. Finally, volume one shows a niche in the middle of the forest, where Priya summons Parvarti by praying in front of a statue of the goddess.

Later, in volume two, the actions take place inside and outside what looks like a castle in the middle of the desert. The graphic novel uses a representation that resembles the castle located in the city known as "The City of Gold," in the Rajasthan State. This construction is known as the Jaisalmer Fortress.

Figure 2.
Priya's village

Source: taken from *Priya's Shakti* Volume 1, Devineni, Menon, Vikas, (2014).

Not only the adventures of volume two, but a good part of Priya's adventures seem to take place in Rajasthan, located in northern India. This is observed in the volume of Priya and the Lost Girls (Devineni, 2019) when the protagonist returns to the village of her origin, located in the middle of a sandy landscape on the top of which some sort of castle or fortress is represented. A similar illustration is found in that same volume when the young

woman arrives in Rahu, a place where a demon[4] kidnaps the girls who migrate to that city to work and prostitutes them.

The indices[5], for their part, show that Priya is a young woman from a lower class (it is not clear what caste she belongs to but since she sells products in the market, it could be that of the merchants or *vaisias* or the workers or *sudras*): She is thin, with dark skin and short hair. Devineni expresses that she wanted to create a character that reflected Indian women, especially from the villages, and to achieve this they compiled "hundreds of photos of women from all over India to make a composite image" (Vemuri, 2016, p. 90). The girl's clothing is humble at first, but when she receives Parvati's entrustment she becomes more luxurious and even wears earrings and bracelets. From volume two onwards it is more common to see her wearing *a kameez*[6] and *salwar* pants[7].

In the story, Priya is the main subject, and her objective is to raise awareness in society to stop attacks against women. The one who entrusted her with her mission and gave her powers is the goddess Parvati, and the one who benefits from it is society in general, which, in the graphic novel, begins a process of change thanks to the young woman's efforts. As her assistant, she has the goddess Parvati herself and a tiger, which she rides (and which is a representative element of Durga, another invocation of Parvati). As opponents, she has violent acts and various evil beings derived from sadness, suffering, and the bad decisions of human beings.

The sacred par excellence: Hinduism in *Priya's Shakti*

The main element that gives meaning to the story, the theme and plot core, is the reference to Hinduism, a religion called *Sanatana Dharma*, or "eternal religion"

since it is based on eternal principles, or *Vaidika Dharma* since it is founded in the doctrine of the Vedas[8].

According to Royston (2001),

> Hinduism is a very difficult religion to define. It does not have a "creed" common to all the faithful; It has no universal dogmas or single philosophical system [...] Thus, within the religious and social complex of India it is necessary to accept the orthodoxy of the Brahmanic scriptures and traditions, worship the gods and their incarnations, strictly observe the rules of one's caste about marriage, food and drink, and recognize without hesitation that Brahmins are indispensable in all these essential rites (p. 217).

In this sense, the characters act and interact in a world where the borders between the sacred and the profane are erased through hierophanies, and the gods establish contact with mortals; particularly, the goddess Shakti, "the divine mother or "Great Goddess", who represents the active power of the divine, as well as its nurturing force, and who in the Hindu school of Shaktism is worshiped as a supreme deity" (Kindersley, 2015, p. 100). Shakti is also the supreme deity, creator, and destroyer:

> Shakti or energy, represents the creative energy of the god, the producer, the mother. But all creation implies destruction and death, everything that is born has to die and the mother, by giving us life, also gives us death. That is why the Great Goddess also has terrible aspects such as Kali, Chamunda, or the different goddesses that cause fevers and epidemics (Preciado, 1992, p. 78).

Shakti can take various forms: Parvati, Durga, Kali, etc. Of them, in the graphic novel, there are two explicit ones and one reference: Parvati is the devotion to which Priya prays; She becomes Kali when she forces Shiva to stop bothering humans, and Durga only manifests herself

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[4]This demon is Rahu, an entity that, within the framework of Hinduism, causes eclipses, which is why it is not strange that he is represented as the main villain in this volume. «In Thai astrology and cosmology, which has its origin in Vedic astrology and cosmology, the stars Rahu, Mars, and Saturn are evil stars and act cruelly [...] Rahu, the invisible star, the demon that causes eclipses of sun and moon, provides all the basic qualities of a villain" (Kosuta, 2012, p. 19).

[5]Aspects in the image and narrative that "allow the reader to identify, based on their knowledge of the world, the physical or psychological characteristics of the protagonists" (Beristáin, 1984, p. 39).

[6]"The traditional top of the *kameez* is a loose-fitting knee-length tunic with long sleeves [...] The kameez is worn over the salwar and the entire outfit is commonly known as a salwar suit in India [...] The salwar kameez is usually paired with a long scarf or shawl of transparent fabric

known as a dupatta, which covers the neck or is worn over the head, which is both a mark of respect and honor" (Kumar and Walia, 2016, pp. 756-757).

[7]"Indian salwars resemble pajamas tied at the waist with a rope and are made in such a way that they taper at the ankles" (Kumar and Walia, 2016, p. 755).

[8]These books are the religious basis of Hinduism. They consist of hymns written in ancient Sanskrit and the oldest was written about a thousand years before Christ. There are five main collections (*samhitas*): the *Rig Veda* or Veda of hymns and prayers; *Yajur Veda* or Veda of sacrificial formulas, made up of two Samhitas: Black Yajur and White Yajur; *Sama Veda*, or Veda of songs and, finally, the *Atharva Veda* or Veda of priests who officiate at sacrifices (Royston, 2001, p. 460).

through the tiger, which the goddess rides in her destructive aspect (Cooper, 2004). Now, it is interesting to mention that, although the animal appears as a devastating attribute in Durga, the properties assigned to it in the graphic novel correspond rather to those of the lioness, which is also characteristic of Durga: "It represents the power of the uttered word" (Cooper, 2004, p. 104).

The above is observed in volume one, when Parvati assigns Priya her mission: from the moment the young woman sits on the tiger, it is the word that she has as the main help to achieve her goal, and the People, who did not want to listen, finally hear it and help spread the message (figure 3).

Figure 3.
Priya and the power of the word
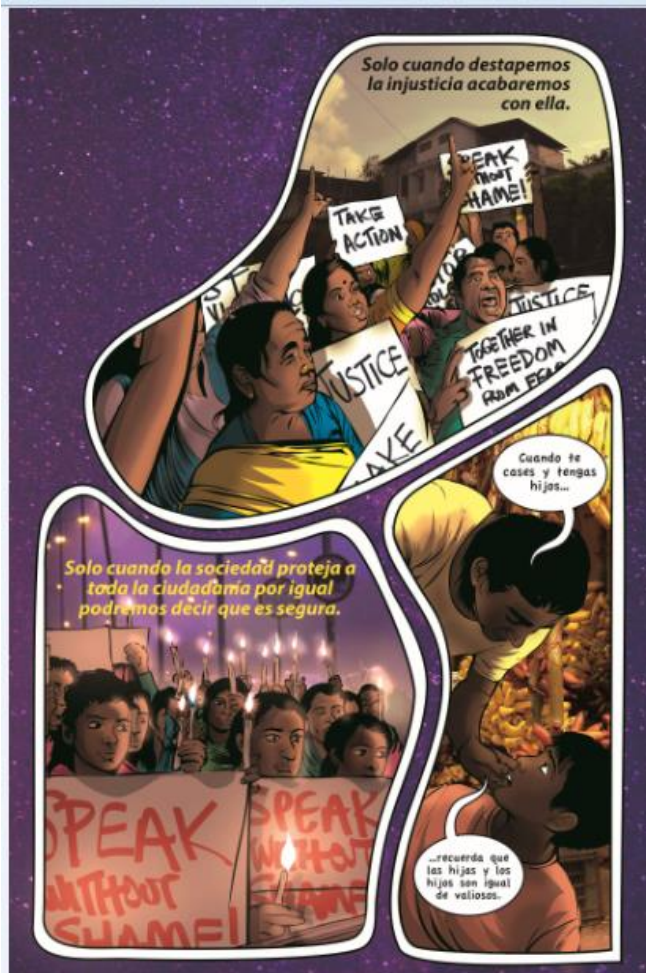
Source: taken from *Priya's Shakti* Volume 1, Devineni, Menon, Vikas, (2014).

In addition to Parvati, Shiva is of special importance within the narrative of the first volume of the graphic novel, since he desires to end humanity which triggers Parvati's decision concerning Priya. As depicted in traditional iconography, Shiva is in retreat on Mount Kailash in the graphic novel. Furthermore, he carries a trident and has two snakes coiled around his neck:

> Drunk in his ecstasy, he does not care about the snakes that wrap around his neck. He is covered in ashes and armed with a trident and a drum to accompany his dances. Although he is a renunciate yogi, we often find him represented in the company of his family: his wife Parvati and his children Ganesha, with the head of an elephant, and Skanda, the God of War with six heads and twelve arms (Preciado, 1992, p. 78).

Shiva is represented throughout the first volume as a deity with a marked dual character, observed in his sympathetic dialogues with Parvati and his subsequent anger and desire to destroy humanity. This duality is part of the traditional incarnation of the god:

> Siva is a unique deity in the Hindu pantheon. He is imbued with a variety of opposite qualities, fantastic and reassuring, repulsive and beautiful, wrathful and easy to please, celibate and epicurean. He is an ascetic and falls under the charm of Parvati Parvati, the mountain girl. He is ubiquitous and lives in cemeteries (Tripathi, 2014, p. 19).

It is precisely in the first volume of the graphic novel where there is the most varied representation of Hindu gods; specifically, during a meeting in which it is discussed whether to end human life or not, the participation of other gods such as Brahma, Rama, Agni, Hanumân, Lakshmi, and Ganesha is observed.

Discussion

Postmodernity in *Priya's Shakti*: when time and space transgress the graphic novel

In this section, the premise is developed that *Priya's Shakti* is integrated with electronic applications (transmedia narrative) and activism in the streets and galleries, against the problems of violence towards women. To this end, the work presents games that mix different spaces and times: that of the graphic novel, the digital, and the real world, linked through the application of augmented reality, which gives it a postmodern aesthetic character.

In this way, through the integration of its illustrations with digital platforms, *Priya's Shakti's* global project overlaps three different realities:

1. The fictional world of the plot materialized in the graphic novel and the videos and animations that tell the story.
2. The digital world is translated into augmented reality elements that materialize through the use of applications on murals and illustrations. Here the world of comics is linked with the real context of the work's creation.
3. The real world, which is observed in the reason for creation and India's contextual problems, which are reflected in the themes addressed in the story.

As has been seen, since its origin this graphic novel has been directly linked to the problems of gender violence. A fundamental case of this reality was the attack on the physiotherapy student in New Delhi:

On the night of December 16, 2012, six men attacked a student who was accompanied by a friend. She was raped and tortured on a moving bus. And 13 days later she died in a Singapore hospital, a case that shocked India and sparked unprecedented protests regarding women's helplessness. It also led to changes in Indian laws on sexual assault. Little happened in reality because the country continues to suffer a rape epidemic (Clarín, 2018).

The case was so violent and became so high-profile that it drew attention to the problem of violence against women in India:

Increasing cases of rape and sexual assault are certainly not an Indian or third-world problem. But they continue to rise in India (NCRB, 2015). It is a global phenomenon and continues to top the list of crimes in several countries. A recent report from the World Health Organization, for example, indicates that approximately one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2016) (Chattopadhyay, 2017, p. 3).

Furthermore, in the graphic novel, the problem experienced by the victims after the attack is made clear, since society itself blames them for provoking the perpetrator, judging their attitudes or what they were wearing (Chattopadhyay, 2017). This is reflected in the comments of one of the girl's rapists in New Delhi and volume one of *Priya's Shakti* when the protagonist, faced with the rejection of her family and her society, goes out to confront one of her attackers:

Priya: Hey, you, why did you do this to me?
Aggressor: It was your fault. You shouldn't dress like a whore. Come here.
Priya: No, stop! (Devineni, Menon & Vikas, 2014, p. 10).

Added to the act of violence experienced by the victims is the fact that "Survivors of sexual violence are considered to have compromised the honor of their families and communities, instead of being victims who deserve support and attention" (Vemuri, 2016, p.79). This last aspect, evident in the story, is one of the main problems Priya must face and solve through her speeches.

In addition to the victims of rape, in the following installments of the graphic novel, other problems experienced by women are made visible, such as acid attacks[9], migrant prostitution, and social rejection.

Rege (1996) argues that in India violence against women occurs differently in each caste. Thus, in the case of the upper castes, they are not allowed to work, while in the urban middle classes, this authorization is negotiated as long as it does not violate male domination, while various control mechanisms are exercised such as "real physical abuse; wife-beating, forced confinement, denial of basic services and necessities" (p. 10). Finally, in the lower castes, the violence seems to intensify, as portrayed in the graphic novel:

In the case of lower caste women, the fact that their work outside the family is crucial for the family's survival leads to a lack of strict controls over their work, mobility, and sexuality and this makes them "impure" or "lacking in virtue." In several cases, the rape of lower caste women may not be considered rape at all due to the habitual access that upper caste men have had to the sexuality of lower caste women (Rege, 1996, p. 10).

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[9]"India has the highest number of acid attacks in the world but the worst conviction rates […] An acid attack is the worst crime taking place not only in India but in the world. The victims are usually women between the ages of 14 and 35, and the attack often occurs as revenge for rejecting a marriage proposal or sexual advances, showing the peculiar mentality of male entitlement and power, which no woman has the right to refuse." (Verma & Srivastava, 2021, p. XXIII).

This is precisely what is observed in the plots and the profane spaces of the graphic novel: the need to work on the part of low-caste women and the notion that this makes them impure and makes them easy prey for abuse by men. In this way, problems arise after rape, such as the case that the courts operate under the same ideology that justifies the abuse and questions the "virtue" of raped women. Rape, then, becomes a cultural form of exercising power and war since:

> lower caste women suffer rape as part of ongoing caste clashes. In rural India, defiance of caste restrictions by lower castes has more often than not resulted in arson and gang rape of lower caste women (Rege, 1996, p. 11).

For many scholars, this caste system based on religious foundations is a fundamental part that supports violence against women. In this sense, Tamsin (2010) points out that "Religion is partially responsible for many activists and researchers in India for contributing to the creation of an environment in which violence against women is considered normal" (p. 361). However, the same author, in his research on the population of Rajasthan, argues the possibility that this social factor can go from being negative to positive given the number of religious spaces in which women interact and which they conceive as safe places. So that:

> Religion can be a useful resource for activists, and this article has argued that many everyday religious spaces are occupied solely by women. Religious spaces are also experienced as safe, safe moments in the lives of female adherents. Through her relationship with divine images, a woman is free to express her most intimate thoughts and feelings. In the spaces before and after worship, women gather and share the thoughts expressed during worship. If the visibility of such spaces can be clarified, activists could use them to build dialogue and creativity. Strategies in response to the violent relationships that women talk about (Tamsin, 2010, p. 373).

Precisely in this sense, *Priya's Shakti* takes up the religious foundation to empower the protagonist, seeking that this factor that contributes to violence against women also becomes part of the solution. As a cultural product, this graphic novel is immersed in its context and cites it within its pages, since Priya is a heroine who seeks to solve these problems through divine intervention, words, and emancipation.

Although the narrative of this work is quite traditional and does not present spatial or temporal ruptures within the story that each volume tells, it does highlight the mixture of traditional elements with these facts from the historical context of the creators. This, coupled with the integration of the graphic novel's history with augmented reality and the contextual reality of creation, gives it a postmodern aesthetic character.

It is worth remembering that, for Néstor García Canclini (2016), postmodernity is not a stage, but a process of problematization between tradition and modernity. That is, postmodernism is considered that point of convergence where the traditional elements, which still survive in society, mix with modernity.

Concerning this last statement, it does not mean that the problems of violence against women are specific to modernity, but rather that the specific events on which the graphic novel is based belong to its current context of creation, and these situations are illustrated in the work establishing links with the sacred aspect that empowers Priya. In this case, a game is presented where current phenomena are linked with tradition and are linked to the viewer not only in the graphic novel but through digital applications, typical of modern technology.

Due to the above, it should be noted that this product is not only aimed at an adult audience, given the complexity of the topics and the acidity of the social criticism it makes but also establishes links with children and youth audiences through the application. Blippar Electronics, which specializes in augmented reality. This app:

> expands the images of reality, from their capture by the camera of a computer or advanced mobile device that adds virtual elements for the creation of a mixed reality to which computer data has been added (Fombona et al., 2012, p. 203).

Thanks to this tool, the user can see special animations and films that come from the images of the graphic novel and from the walls of Mumbai and New Delhi, where murals have been painted to publicize the message of social awareness. These elements generate a transmedia narrative, characterized as "a type of story in which the story unfolds through multiple media and communication platforms and in which a part of the consumers assumes

an active role in this expansion process" (Scolari, cited by Albarello, 2013, p. 247).

As can be seen, Scolari (2014) proposes two main characteristics of transmedia narratives. On the one hand, they are:

> stories told through multiple media and platforms. The narrative begins in a graphic novel, continues in an animated television series, expands in the form of a feature film, and ends (it ends?) incorporating new interactive adventures in video games (p. 72).

On the other hand, the audiences that consume this type of creation assume an active role, since "a part of the recipients is not limited to consuming the cultural product, but rather embarks on the task of expanding the narrative world with new textual pieces." (Scolari, 2014, p. 72).

In the case of *Priya's Shakti*, it is observed that the story begins traditionally in the graphic novel, using illustrations, and proceeds with the Blippar application, which takes certain animated forms. In this part, the passage of the narrative to other media, in this case digital, is evident.

The second characteristic of transmedia narratives is also manifested in *Priya's Shakti* since the work is designed, from its origin, to trigger change and actions on the part of those who read it, which ends up being reflected in activism in the streets with the murals and graphic production activities aimed at adolescents to generate awareness of change. There was even an exhibition of graphic art at the Lincoln Center, as part of the NY Film Festival in 2016. In this sense, the official project page highlights:

> In India, Hinduism and its iconography are always present. The image of Goddess Durga astride a tiger can be found in homes, businesses, and places of worship across the country. Our project references and transforms this image through our iconic image of Priya sitting on a tiger: Priya conquering her fears. Priya is a rape survivor and she is the catalyst for change in our graphic novel. Our goal is to make the image of Priya on the tiger a powerful symbol to fight against gender violence (About, 2014).

In addition to the above, it is worth taking into account the creation of the Colombian graphic novel Kaia, designed within the Priya universe. This work stars Natalia, a girl who is the victim of a violent acid attack who, after dealing with the processes of pain and violence resulting from said event, ends up becoming a heroine who fights and supports the unprotected with the help of a magical snake. Kaia represents a narrative extension generated due to the productive consumption of those who read *Priya's Shakti*'s proposal and marks evidence of the fruits of this initiative in its search for gradual social change.

This transmedia characteristic generates a leap from the reality of the graphic novel to virtual reality and, then, to the real context of the creation of this cultural product. Therefore, in addition to the convergence between the traditional and the modern, the postmodern aspect of the work is given by the rupture of times and spaces: from the graphic novel to the virtual, and the real world, to generate awareness and transpose the problems of the characters to the immediate context of the reader. In this sense, it is necessary to remember that in postmodernity there is the end of the unitary story, of the ultimate foundation, of the unique and intrinsic reality; It is a postmodern fantastic narrative in which the elements of one reality and those of another become itinerant (Nieto, 2015).

Priya's Shakti and her emancipation proposal

In this last section, the premise developed is that the emancipation proposed by the graphic novel comes hand in hand with the questioning of violence as the only foundation. This graphic and narrative product uses different media, including electronic media, to generate awareness among as many readers as possible. In this way, a change is promoted through interaction with a plurality of visions that erode the single reality and reach the viewer through multiple formats, to propose actions.

Although Priya's graphic novel is located in a space and a series of problems specific to its context of creation, the character of these phenomena is not restricted to that place. The proposal aims to reach a broader audience than the Indian one. In that order of ideas, its digital version is available for download in several languages such as English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and Hindi. Likewise, although its circulation in Mexico was not massive, the project received international interest, as shown by the series of dissemination notes in Spanish and English that began to circulate after its launch (Aijaz, 2015; Cooperativa. cl, 2014).

At the Latin American level, the impact of this graphic novel can be seen in the creation of Kaia, the work described in the previous section. In it, Natalia Ponce de León, a survivor of an acid attack, becomes Kaia, "defender of the vulnerable and protector of the innocent, who have been traumatized by injustice and violence in modern Colombia" (Kaia, 2023).

In short, *Priya's Shakti*'s proposal has as one of its fundamental elements its transmedia character, which allows it to reach a large number of viewers, distribute in various spaces, and lead to the reading and understanding of the material from various perspectives and realities. In this sense, the postmodern is presented in the graphic novel from at least two basic areas:

1. A postmodern aesthetic in the structure and content is observed in the mixture of sacred and profane aspects within the story, as well as in the translation of elements of contextual reality to the world of comic books. It is about the dissolution of boundaries between the different environments mentioned. This refers to the rupture of ultimate foundations typical of postmodernity, in which the unitary concept of history dissolves. In this way, in *Priya's Shakti* it is observed that "there is no single history, there are images of the past proposed from various points of view" (Vattimo, 1990, p. 76), as well as different times and spaces linked by the conflicts that constitute plot threads.

2. The interrelation of resources from the graphic, digital, and real spheres thanks to the multiple communication formats used to transmit and disseminate history. Through this variety of media, we not only access diverse populations distributed in several generations, spaces, and realities but also manifest the complexity and diversity that became evident with the advent of the communication society or transparent society, which, in the words of Vattimo (1990), it contributed to the rupture of the unitary concept of history:

In the birth of a postmodern society, mass media plays a determining role; […] these characterize such a society, not as a more "transparent," more self-aware, more "enlightened" society, but as a more complex, even chaotic society; and […] precisely in this relative "chaos" lie our hopes for emancipation (p. 78).

This multiplicity of visions given from the different elements of the story and its dissemination processes, which use the media and applications, makes evident the complexity of the social problems portrayed in the graphic novel. At the same time, it is a work that moves change from various types of actions that, as said, are not limited to visibility and education through the work, but rather move awareness by creating augmented reality murals in Nueva Delhi, as well as exhibitions, workshops and work in schools of various levels. According to the official project page:

Comic books are an ideal and creative way to reach teens, engage them with digital media, and create characters and stories that address social issues in their community. During the practical session, participants discuss how to educate their community about the issues of gender violence and other topics. Students write their stories and create comics on paper. The comics are then printed and distributed to friends, family, and community. (About, 2014).

In this great variety of actions proposed for change from various dimensions and populations would reside the possibility of emancipation and transformation raised by *Priya's Shakti*: not only through education but through the open questioning of violence as the sole foundation of social interaction towards Indian women. In that sense, both the content and the structure of the graphic novel take up Mahatma Gandhi's notion of satyagraha (nonviolent resistance).

The above is very clear in the first two volumes of the graphic novel and, more specifically, on pages 24 and 25 of the first volume. The first panel on the first page (Figure 4) shows the detail of the back of Priya's feet, who is standing in front of a tiger. In the second vignette, the protagonist is seen crouching in front of the animal, to whom she says: "You are my Shakti." Then, in the last vignette, the young woman is sitting on the tiger and enters a humble village saying, "She speaks without shame..."

For its part, on page 25 (figure 5) the dialogue continues its development. In this case, there are four more vignettes: the first, horizontal, shows the back of Priya, who is mounted on the tiger, speaks in front of the

villagers: "...and stand by my side," while they express: "It's our end!" "Please don't punish us!" Under that vignette, there are two more, drawn in a vertical orientation. One of them represents the young woman, who remains seated on the tiger while she continues her dialogue: "Achieve the change..." The other consists of a close-up of the protagonist's face, in profile, with the text: "...that we want to see." The last vignette on that page presents the girl in a long shot, sitting on the tiger and with the complete dialogue: «Speak without shame and stand next to me. Achieve the change we want to see."

Figure 4
Priya and her return to the village

Source: taken from *Priya's Shakti* Volume 1, Devineni, Menon, Vikas, (2014).

Figure 5.
Priya preaches change through words

Source: taken from *Priya's Shakti* Volume 1, Devineni, Menon, Vikas, (2014).

The basic notion of *satyagraha* is based on the idea that human beings have inherent goodness: it is an ethical-political program of struggle, which takes into account other aspects such as *ahimsa* (not killing), *sarvodaya* (well-being of all), *swaraj* (self-determination and self-government) and *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) (López, 2012). In the graphic novel, the protagonist moves according to these principles, whose central core are truth and non-violence. She thus follows the mission given by Parvati, who opposes Shiva's violent decision to punish society through its destruction.

Therefore, throughout her various adventures, most of the time Priya confronts her enemies through dialogue, understanding, and forgiveness. In this sense, she takes up many of the characteristics of a *satyagrahi* or *satyagraha* practitioner:

1. Be honest and sincere.
2. Have no mental reservations; have an open mind.
3. Be a disciplined soldier.
4. Be completely fearless.
5. Courage leads to another virtue: sacrifice. A satyagrahi must be prepared for the greatest possible sacrifice.
6. Suffering and sacrifice must be lived in an attitude of simplicity and humanity.
7. Gandhi states that a satyagrahi is required to practice truth and non-violence not only in his actions but also in his thoughts and words.
8. A satyagrahi should be firm in his dealings and conduct (Arpana, 2013).

Priya's behavior, throughout the volumes, follows these principles: she is honest and open-minded, fearless, brave and even self-sacrificing when required; she is firm and fights all the time practicing non-violence. Likewise, she cries out for love as a possible solution to problems, as seen in volume two, in a dialogue she maintains with her defeated opponent and one of the girls she rescues, named Kusum:

> Priya: We are not at war, Prem.
> Prem: What was it like before? Weak! And that's what you've turned me into again.
> Priya: Controlling others does not mean being strong. Take this mirror and find your true value... and show everyone that there is another kind of strength. Are you coming with us sister? What's your name?
> Kusum: My name is Kusum, I think I will stay a while and teach you how to use the mirror of love (Vohra & Devineni, 2016, p. 34).

In the dialogue, the application of the central principle of nonviolence is observed, which "implies several positive values. These values include love, activity, resistance to injustice, courage in the face of violence, non-possession, truthfulness, and brahmacharya" (Arpana, 2013, p. 68); all of them practiced by Priya throughout history. Thus, this character, despite being persecuted by the violence committed against her, always makes an effort to dialogue and convince her opponents:

> Ahimsa is nothing but Love. Love is a kind of feeling of oneness [...] Therefore, Ahimsa demands a sincere effort to free the mind from feelings like anger, malice, hatred, revenge, jealousy, etc. (Arpana, 2013, p. 69).

Furthermore, *satyagraha* is completely consistent with the central idea of the work: Parvati's decision to act to improve human life by taking Priya as a tool of salvation, which implies a close bond or union of divinity with humanity, just as it happens with this principle:

> Gandhi stated that God and Truth are identical. At the same time, Gandhi accepted a pantheistic conception of God. He argued that God permeates all beings. All beings are united by God and the act of unification is made possible through love or Non-Violence. So Non-Violence is ultimately the foundational bond of the Universe that has its origin in God or Truth (Arpana, 2013, p. 69).

As can be seen, both the content of the graphic novel and the rest of the actions derived from it call for social transformation and emancipation from the questioning of violence and the exercise of the dominance of one sex over another, as expressed by Priya when she tells Prem "show everyone that there is another kind of strength" (Vohra & Devineni, 2014, p. 34). In that sense, both the content and the structure of *Priya's Shakti* proposal are in line with the emancipation model proposed by Vattimo (1990), linked to the more "transparent" society brought by the media:

> Here emancipation consists, rather, of an *estrangement*, which is, in addition and at the same time, a liberation from the differences of local elements, from everything that we could call, globally, the dialect. As soon as the idea of a central rationality of history falls, the world of generalized communication explodes into a multiplicity of "local" rationalities [...] that take the floor, not being, finally, silenced and repressed by the idea that there is only one true way to realize humanity, to the detriment of all the peculiarities of all limited, ephemeral, and contingent individualities (p. 84).

In *Priya's Shakti*, precisely, the exposure of the problems against women in India from multiple channels and spatialities, together with the various actions proposed to generate this social change, constitute this liberation and visibility of what Vattimo calls dialect: the multiple Voices, transmitted from various channels, calling for awareness and action, would constitute that utopian ideal for which we fight through comic books.

Conclusions

Throughout this article, it was argued that the graphic novel *Priya's Shakti*, written by Ram Devineni and Vikas K.

Menon, illustrated by Dan Goldman and published in 2014, has a structure that plays with postmodern aesthetics by mixing elements of the real world with those of the metaphysical world to generate, through its themes, graphics and dissemination, awareness and emancipation about violence against women in India. This proposal is based on the questioning of violence as the sole basis of interaction between men and women in India and uses various media and applications to make visible, from various angles and in various spaces, the social problems related to the said phenomenon.

It is observed that the different platforms linked to comics become tools that allow interaction with the reader, generate awareness among as many people as possible, and promote change and mobilization. In this sense, it is understood that consciousness implies that the subject recognizes his position within a society and a specific context and that, by belonging to said society, he also has its past behind him, so that his present actions will be those that will cause a transformation in the future.

In particular, we seek to ensure that young children recognize the problem of violence against women and act to resolve it, always through speech and words, and all through peaceful acts:

> Since the graphic novel's launch in 2012, the creators of *Priya's Shakti* have connected with other stakeholders to do just this —use a culture-centered approach to collaborate with local groups and try to create an environment where the issue of consciousness is not fleeting, but a constant process— so that social change can be attempted (Chattopadhyay, 2017, p. 13).

It can be said, ultimately, that this work responded to a cultural problem of widespread and intense violence in India, marked to a large extent by the caste system in force in that society. *Priya's Shakti* is a proposal that takes precisely the religious foundation that seems to be part of the problem to turn it into a possible solution.

Likewise, since its launch, apart from the interest generated at an international institutional level, in the academic field, the possible impact of this work has been studied based on interviews carried out with its users. With this, the conclusion has been reached that this is a proposal that can only work in an articulated manner with other social entities such as the school:

> The general opinion of the 24 respondents seemed to indicate that introducing graphic novels into schools and sending those books home to be read together with family members could sow the seeds of interest in the topic, sparking discussions within schools and homes, essentially creating the possibility of involved engagement from different stakeholders such as school teachers, school children and their family members (Chattopadhyay, 2017, p. 39).

This idea of social consciousness implies the recognition of a problem and the consequent action to solve it by an articulated community. At the same time, it involves emancipation or, as Pachón (2013) states, citing Marx:

> Human emancipation implies the upheaval of the entire social order and the liberation of humanity as a whole. It does not consist of making everyone equal, but of creating an environment where each one can develop according to his talents, his tastes: where, if he wants, the individual could be a pastor, a reader, or a critic (p. 171).

Now, it must be emphasized that the graphic novel does not call for revolution, but rather, from within, emphasis is placed on carrying out actions that imply peaceful resistance, aimed at carrying out gradual changes. It is about making permanent efforts, not one-time and immediate ones, to create an awareness where constant work leads to medium-term transformations.

Finally, it is possible to highlight that current social and cultural processes develop in what Vattimo calls "the most transparent society," characterized by the advent of diversity, made visible through different electronic media. To that extent, *Priya's Shakti* proposal uses precisely this multiplicity of tools not only to show a series of social problems but also to raise awareness and promote social change through educational processes and constructive actions, which involve creative aspects and aesthetics, beyond simply reading the graphic novel.

Author contributions

Sarahi Isuki Castelli Olvera: research and writing.

Declaration on conflicts of interest

This article has no conflict of interest since its execution and writing were carried out only with academic and research guidance, therefore, the document was not

created through any funding institution. In addition to the above, there is authorization to use the images.

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