

## **A Study of Folktales' Visual Representation in Literature**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Since the dawn of time, people have congregated around the fires and shared tales of voyages, mighty creatures, vengeful demons, and the heroes who overcame them, establishing themselves as figures to be admired and loved. For thousands of years, folklore and mythology have given rise to these vivid tales and assisted humanity in making sense of the universe. It is interesting to discover how society is still being shaped by these captivating stories, and these stories have found a new medium in the form of graphic narratives. With the theoretical understanding of the genre as well as through examples of certain Indian graphic narratives, the paper argues that the genre of graphic narrative is closest to the oral narrative. By looking into their similarity, the paper explores why it is used by authors of folktales and why the genre is most suitable for folklore. Furthermore, this paper discusses how oral storytelling skills are incorporated, embraced and appreciated in the genre of graphic narratives.

**Keywords:** Graphic novel, Comics, Folktales, Storytelling Traditions

### **1.1 Introduction**

Last year, when Folktales of Mao, Maram and Poumai, which is a collection of 15 folktales from three major tribes of Manipur, India was released, it stirred the debate on the reasons why it was published as a comic book. It could have been released as a book as well. It is not a single publication, but for years, the folklore has been accommodated in various graphic literature, and a prime example is Amar Chitra Katha. Moreover, many Indian traditional narrative traditions like Paad and Kaavad have been using visuals along with oral storytelling. Thereby the correlation between oral and visuals, and their representation in the graphic novels, becomes an intriguing issue. It aids to see the similarities between visual storytelling in the form of comics and graphic novels and oral storytelling.

Given that the genre of comics and graphic narrative is on the rise, even in those cultures where once it was not popular, like Emirati culture (Webster), and given that Emirati Literature has a history of kharareef or folklores (Khamiri 1); the paper through its analysis of genre's significance and ability to cater to various modes of storytelling, presents the idea that graphic novels are a perfect medium for representing the folklore stories. Especially in Emirati Literature, where folklore has not yet represented in graphic form by any major publications (Godinho). With the recent establishment of UAE's first comic studio in 2022, called Sandstorm Comics, it is evident that homegrown comic culture will grow, and varieties of indigenous storytelling themes may be reflected in future publications from the region.

## 1.2 Oral vs. Visual

It is discussed in the paper that the folktales published as comics and graphic novels are one of the literary forms that can be called most similar to the oral tradition of storytelling. It can be said that oral storytelling skills are embraced and appreciated in the comic book medium. To substantiate the argument, the paper invokes the theory by Will Eisner, as explained in his book titled *Graphic Storytelling*. According to the book, there are only two main ways to convey a narrative: words (which can be oral or written) and images (visuals). This is true independent of the different means of communicating a tale, including any modern ways of communication.

These two techniques are blended in comics (Eisner 13). He further says that a storyteller is someone who is in charge of storytelling, so in the case of graphic novels or comics, it is the author who is in charge of storytelling, whereas in oral tradition, there is a performer or storyteller who takes care of storytelling.

However, a primary distinction between the oral narrative and visual narrative (on print) is that the oral primarily communicates the visuals through sound. However, Vox claims that the way a story is told relies on the listener's needs and preferences, the storyteller's storytelling ability, and the individual's personal interpretation of the story (3). However, in both forms, the audience may read the storyteller/protagonist's gestures, facial expressions, and silences in the making of the meaning.

Due to the significance of speech in the graphic style, Eisner asserts that the reader is an actor (55). When the conversation is absent, the storyteller must rely on the reader's personal knowledge to provide the speech that accentuates the players' interactions. Thereby the graphic storyteller must be careful to use gestures and postures that are immediately recognizable with the dialogue being played out in the reader's head when illustrating a silent interaction sequence.

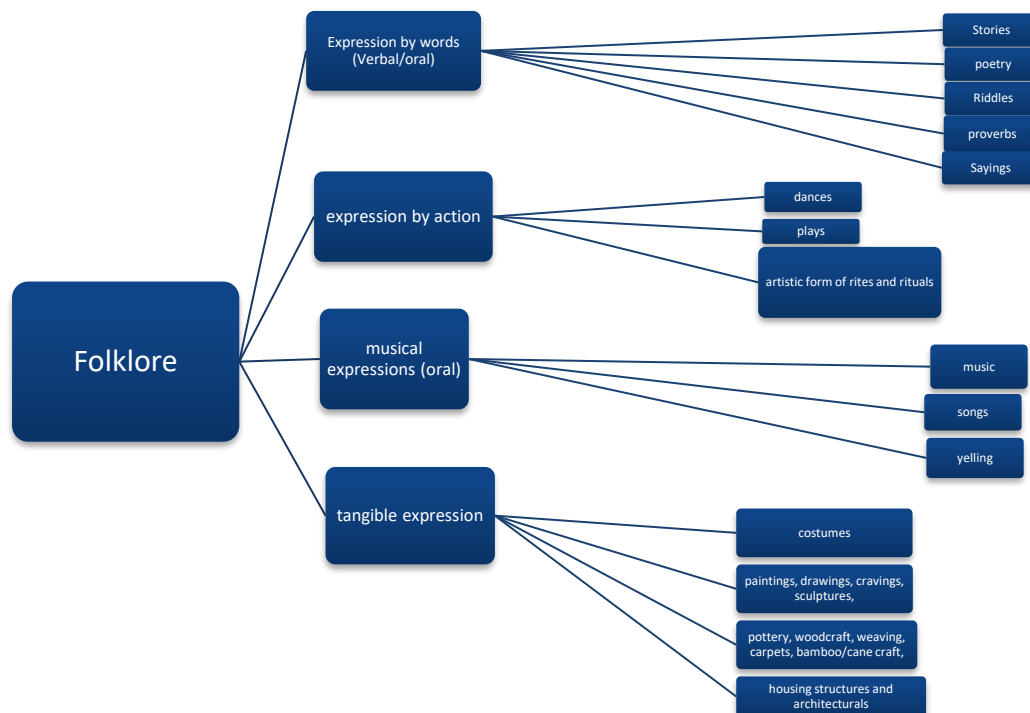
## 1.3 Folklore and Comics

The concept of folklore refers to the passing down of stories and a collection of ideas, beliefs, and cognitive processes within a society or subculture. The term folk refers to a group of people, whereas lore is a combination of knowledge-system and tradition. Folklore is described as "traditional beliefs, habits, and stories of a group, handed through the generations by word of mouth" by Oxford Dictionaries (Bascom). Folklore is constructed by cultural knowledge and memory, and it refers to any type of knowledge and experience that has been passed down orally over a lengthy period of time (Kaisi 21). According to Bronner in his iconic book *The Meaning of Folklore*, the idea of folktales has been a crucial component of oral narrative tradition.

"Folklore offers values, notions, and legacies that have significance and link with identities. Whether or not individuals are aware of it, folklore is a consequential, if not always obvious, source of connotative customary knowledge and behaviour throughout the course of human life. Its ramifications and uses for people of all ages, in all points of time and place, necessitate identification, annotation, analysis, and justification. (Bronner 180)

In this paper, the word folktale has been used in the context of stories and narratives passed on in cultural knowledge settings. However, the paper acknowledges that folklore or

folk-literature contains not just stories but refers to a more extensive cultural knowledge system, as depicted in following Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** *Idea of folklore (folk literature) as theorized by Kaisi (21)*

In 1977, Rolf Brednich observed that there are many structural relationships between oral narrative (notably the folktale) and comic genre. He analyses European folktales and finds that it includes a large number of characters, clusters of characters, storylines, and other elements that have been appropriated by authors of comic literature. He further makes a significant claim that “the audience for comic book stories and folklore stories is virtually the same. Both are light entertainment that highlight the accomplishments of heroes who defy the rules of the existing order” (48).

A fundamental similarity, as claimed by Vox based on Eisner’s theory, is that both comics and folktales employ stereotypes as a storytelling device. It is a useful tool as it serves as a concise summary of human experience and encourages listeners to use their imaginations. For example, because everyone is familiar with the appearance and behaviour of a princess, the storyteller need not pause or slow down the narration to describe the characteristics (3). It can be seen extensively in both genres, as both rely on audiences’ imaginations. Furthermore, it can be said that both rely on human experiences and memory to construct meaning.

## **1.4 Literary Representation of Folktales in India**

The oral tradition of storytelling has existed in India for years, and stories, cultures, history, knowledge-system, and beliefs-systems are carried forward through it. Amar Chitra Katha has paved the way for widespread awareness and popularity of the genre in India. It started with representing the lives of key figures from Indian history. It had its first publication in 1969 on Lord Krishna's life; subsequently, by the end of the 1970s, it started publishing folklores like Jataka and Panchtantra. It became a medium for learning about the lives of great people, legends, myths, epics and folklore. It is undeniable that Amar Chitra Katha took over the oral tradition stories and presented them to a broader audience.

A recent comic book titled *Folktales of Mao, Maram and Poumai* represents the folktales from the tribes of northeastern India. The Mao-Poumai have primarily lived in the Senapati district of Manipur, which borders Assam and Nagaland, except for a few villages in the Phek District of Nagaland; even now, many of them are dispersed throughout India's cities. The book was published by a government official named Kiran Kumar and launched by the Chief Minister of Manipur, who emphasized such initiatives' role in preserving the folktales. It contains three folktales from the Mao tribe, five stories from Maram, and rest seven are from the Poumai tribe.



**Fig 2:** Cover of the book titled *Folktales of Mao, Maram and Poumai*

The study of the text reflects how using visuals, they are able to comfortably convey the folktale in its true sense and capture a similar impact of oral storytelling. It can be seen that cultural memory and tradition are the essential subjects of the book as individual stories and characters revolve around the idea of tradition and the happenings of the community. Furthermore, it links the present to the past beautifully and depicts the negotiation of a tribe's identity, culture and history. Each folklore in the text is not just a story but contains an educational meaning, wisdom and knowledge for younger minds. The tales reflect tribal society's ways of life and their way of establishing identity through their culture.

Character's body language and gestures are one prominent element which can be observed structurally. The author uses gestures and postures which are immediately recognizable to reflect action. A tool which is also used by oral storytellers. As Eisner writes, gestures are more effective than words in an oral narrative because they cause the listener's mind to conjure clear, vivid images immediately. They must contribute to the way the tale is conveyed and offer the audience a crucial type of in-depth visual information. In graphic literature, the gestures help bring the printed page and the characters on it to life. The space between the two panels is used to represent a silent session, where readers are left to make the meaning of what might have happened between that or how the character might behave next; this again is very similar to oral storytellers where they make a pause (silent session), and leave the story in listener's head to imagine as per their cultural understanding.

## 1.5 Conclusion

The paper presents a perceptive on folktales and comics, where it argues that comics and graphics narratives are the literary forms that are probably closest to the oral storytelling tradition. By looking into their similarity, and theoretical understanding of Eisner, the paper finds that the genre is most suitable for folklore. Both the graphic narratives and the oral story rely on words, voice tone, body language, gestures, and timing to engage the listener/reader. Both of these storytelling strategies call for the audience to actively participate in understanding the narrative; they must analyze the speaker's body language, spoken words, as well as silences in order to imagine the characters, the setting, and the action that is taking place in the story in their own minds. Through the correlation of graphics and words, it can be seen that the genre of graphic narrative allows authors to create an experience of oral storytelling. Paper finds that graphic narratives become a suitable format for authors to convey the folklore, and oral storytelling skills are, incorporated, embraced and appreciated in it. Thereby Graphic narratives can become a new home for accommodating folktales from different regions and preserving the cultural heritage which they carry with them.

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