

## *Childhood Obsessions Piece*

### Amar Chitra Kathas: The Comic Books That Tell My Stories

I started reading them as an elementary schooler. First, I was given a few; and after gorging them within hours, it became evident that I needed more. The slim, glossy booklets began to pile up on every flat surface in my room—cluttering my nightstand, desk, and entirely engulfing my small bookshelf. If you picked one up, it would strike you that, as children’s comic books go, these are beautiful. Each one has a completely different cover, telling another story: raven-haired women in shimmery saris walking through luscious gardens, idyllic kings and queens seated upon golden thrones presiding over noblemen in court, and fervent, muscular warriors charge into grisly scenes of battle. Indeed, the violence was unsparingly graphic, but for some reason, that never mattered to me. The ancient times would come alive in my hands as I flipped through pages that blurred the lines of history and mythology. I never knew what was real or what wasn’t, but it didn’t matter, because truth had no bearing over the scenes that sprang into life in my head. I could hear the impassioned commands of almighty kings, the thunder of war storming around me and metal clanging upon metal as enraged warriors fought to the death. And then there were the other stories, the ones that told of pacifist sages who were sought for their eternal, enduring wisdom, and the humble, ordinary townspeople whose piety was rewarded with acts of divinity. There were stories of humans who the ocean would part for, children who could lift mountains, little girls who became fierce warriors. I read dozens of the comic books, called Amar Chitra Kathas, with an insatiable longing to become part of them.

The history we learned in school did not include me. We read about white people, Native American people, black people, but not brown people—not *my* people. I remember wondering

what my own ancestors were doing centuries ago while American revolutionaries cried for independence, when democracy was established and slavery was abolished. I turned to these comic books to give me a world I was inherently part of. Maybe my ancestors were the citizens in the pictures walking through the bustling markets, the thriving townspeople who inhabited the glorious cities; maybe they worked in the cavernous, wildly ornate courts of royalty; maybe—and this one was a stretch, but still, I hoped—they had relations to the kings themselves, or embodied some reincarnation of the divine. Maybe I somehow had a place in these stories.

So I clung to my comic books with a kind of childish stubbornness, because they allowed me to belong somewhere. Otherwise, where else would I be grounded? To the modern day India that exists half a world away? To my grandparents, individuals who I hardly know because of the distance gaping between us? I was not raised to be religious, culturally devout, or bound to any sort of community, and yet I felt with overwhelming certainty that the Amar Chitra Kathas sang of a land that was my home. I considered this rich, majestic history of kings and queens and warriors to be my own.