
Drawing the Minority: Muslim Identity and Counter-Narratives in Post-2014 Indian Graphic Fiction

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Abstract

This paper looks closely at how Muslim identity has been drawn, written, and imagined in Indian graphic fiction since 2014, a time when public life has been thick with Islamophobia and the politics of Hindutva. It focuses on a set of works including Longform (2018, 2022), First Hand Graphic Narratives (2016, 2018), Ita Mehrotra's Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection, Malik Sajad's Munnu, and several independent zines and asks: what happens when the stories of a community are told in panels, speech bubbles, and ink rather than on prime-time television?

Through a mix of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (to unpick the power and politics in representation) and Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory (to see how stories persuade through coherence and emotional truth), the paper shows how these graphic works resist the stock portrayals of Muslims found in mainstream news and cinema. They replace the familiar two-dimensional villain-or-victim script with portraits that are layered, everyday, and often defiantly political. In doing so, they don't just reflect reality, they actively reshape the way people see, speak about, and understand Muslim lives in contemporary India. This study not only theorises how these works operate as a resistant archive within contemporary India, but also offers a transferable FDA–NPT analytical framework that can be applied to other marginalised communities in graphic fiction.

keywords: Comics and Graphic Narratives, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Narrative Paradigm Theory, Muslim Representation, Islamophobia, Indian Visual Culture, Counter-Publics, Resistance Narratives, Archival Theory, Memory Studies.

Introduction

Since 2014, the public conversation in India has changed in tone and texture – and not for the better if you happen to belong to a minority community. The BJP's rise to power, underpinned by the politics of Hindutva, has coincided with a loud and often hostile turn in the way Muslims are spoken about in television studios, on social media, and in cinema halls.

Night after night, news channels frame Muslims as the “other” dangerous outsiders or potential threats to national security. Bollywood, meanwhile, has done its part: films like *Padmaavat* (2018), *Sooryavanshi* (2021), and *The Kashmir Files* (2022) serve up the same familiar tropes – the treacherous invader, the militant extremist, the exoticised stranger. These are not harmless bits of entertainment. They harden stereotypes, close down empathy, and create a sense of Muslims as a monolithic, suspect bloc. The country’s press freedom ranking speaks volumes: 161st out of 183 in 2023. Dissenting voices are pushed to the edges, Muslim perspectives often vanish from mainstream debate, and public life becomes a narrower, less hospitable place.

But even as the official and popular narratives have closed in, another kind of storytelling has been taking root in the pages of Indian graphic fiction. At first glance, the format might seem too niche or too playful to carry political weight. Yet the combination of text and image has always been capable of subtlety, depth, and resistance. Over the past decade, collections like *Longform* and *First Hand Graphic Narratives*, as well as stand-alone works like *Shaheen Bagh* and *Munnu*, have shown how the comic form can push back against dominant scripts. Beyond close reading, the article theorises these works as components of a resistant archive of Muslim life in contemporary India and advances an analytical template combining FDA and NPT usable for studying other marginalised communities’ graphic narratives.

These works depict Muslims not as caricatures but as fully rounded human beings organisers, workers, parents, friends, activists and, crucially, as people with agency. In a climate where Muslims are too often reduced to either the villain in the shadows or the victim in need of saving, such portrayals matter enormously.

This paper asks four main questions:

1. How have Indian graphic novels since 2014 built Muslim identities in conscious opposition to the political and media mainstream?
2. Given the texts hold resistant potential, how can graphic novels act as a new method of expression, organised protest and archival practice to create a discourse of identity recognition?
3. How do the counter-narratives in these graphic novels resist and challenge dominant discourse?
4. Given that the genre also depicts other minority voices, how can the proposed research methods offer a new approach to analysing graphic fiction to conceptualise it as a resistance genre for other marginalised communities?

By answering these, the study fills a surprising gap in existing research: although scholars have written about caste, class, and gender in Indian comics, there’s been very little sustained work on religious identity and even less on how Islamophobia is resisted in this medium. What emerges is not simply an account of “representation” but of active cultural work: the crafting of counter-narratives that can meet prejudice head-on, armed not with shouting matches or statistics, but with stories that are believable, compelling, and quietly subversive.

Literature Review

The representation of Muslims in popular culture has never been neutral and in India, it has often been political to the core. Scholars have long pointed out that television, cinema, and news media don't simply reflect reality; they shape it. Since 2014, with the rise of the BJP and an increasingly nationalist public mood, the gap between how Muslims live and how they are portrayed has grown wider and more troubling. Existing projects with Indigenous storytellers in Canada (Smith, 2019) and Syrian refugee youth in Germany (Hassan & Clarke, 2021) show that participatory comics can transcend cultural boundaries while preserving community-authored histories.

Muslims in Mainstream Indian Media

Research into Indian news channels and films since the mid-2010s shows a striking pattern. News debates often frame Muslims as a "problem" for the nation as potential security threats, as culturally incompatible, or as passive victims of "backward" traditions. They are not arbitrary framings but belong to a larger Hindutva discourse that defines Indian identity solely in Hindu terms.

Bollywood has also been instrumental in this narrative construction. There is a rich tradition of Muslim characters in Indian films, from the chivalrous nawab in traditional historical films to the self-discovering anti-hero, but recent trends have seen a consolidation of stereotypes. Films such as *Padmaavat* (2018), *Sooryavanshi* (2021), and *The Kashmir Files* (2022) significantly concentrate on representations of Muslims as aggressors, invaders, or internal enemies. Scholars like Kabir (2020) and Datta (2022) contend that these representations are not merely fueled by economic compulsion; rather, they closely align with a political environment that facilitates normalization of suspicion and marginalization.

Representation, Power, and Resistance

Representational accounts remind us that what we see on screens or read on pages is never "a narrative." Stuart Hall's work on cultural representation analyzes how media representation actively creates meaning and can reinforce existing power relations. In addition, the ideas developed by Michel Foucault show how such meanings are also tied to mechanisms of power: how we speak of a given group determines the way the group is known in legal terms, in policy-making, and in everyday life. But there is a rich tradition where resistance is articulated through the vehicle of narrative. There are examples recorded by scholars where minority groups build counter-narratives that contest the dominant discourse and, as such, introduce other meanings. These narratives don't just correct falsehoods; they can rehumanise a group that's been flattened into a stereotype.

Graphic Fiction as Political Storytelling

Although comics and graphic novels in India have often been dismissed as light entertainment for children, they have a rich history as tools for political commentary. From Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* in the 1990s to recent anthologies like *First Hand*, Indian comics have taken on issues from environmental justice to caste discrimination.

Globally, works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Joe Sacco's comics journalism have shown that the medium can handle deeply political subjects with nuance and emotional impact. In

the Indian context, however, academic work on graphic novels has tended to focus on themes of caste, class, and gender. Religion and especially Muslim identity remains underexplored.

Identified Gap and Contribution of This Study

Despite the growing presence of Muslims in Indian graphic fiction, there's been little sustained scholarly attention to how these portrayals work, what they resist, and how readers might respond to them. This gap matters because, in a climate where mainstream narratives are often hostile, alternative portrayals are not just art, they're acts of cultural intervention.

This study steps into that space. It brings together tools from Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Narrative Paradigm Theory to examine how Indian graphic fiction since 2014 has challenged dominant Islamophobic scripts. By analysing both the words and images, it aims to show how these works make Muslim lives visible in ways that are layered, humane, and politically significant.

Methodology

Corpus Selection

For this research, I've built a collection of works that together give a broad yet focused picture of how Muslims are represented in Indian graphic fiction since 2014. The core texts are four anthologies: Longform (2018, 2022) and First Hand Graphic Narratives (2016, 2018). These collections bring together a variety of writers and artists, so they naturally offer multiple voices, styles, and ways of seeing. Many of the pieces deal directly with communal violence, political exclusion, or the everyday experiences of Muslims in post-2014 India.

Alongside these anthologies, I've chosen two stand-alone works: Ita Mehrotra's Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection (2021) and Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir (2015). To capture the more underground side of things, I've also included a handful of independent zines that have circulated through activist networks. All completed comics will be digitised in high-resolution format, accompanied by oral history recordings where consented, and stored both in a community-accessible archive and a university-managed digital repository, ensuring long-term preservation and accessibility.

The works were selected using three clear criteria:

1. The work must have been published between 2014 and 2023.
2. It must contain sustained representation of Muslim characters or communities.
3. It must address, explicitly or implicitly, the political climate of post-2014 India.

This approach means the material covers both more widely published works and smaller, self-published projects, giving a richer sense of the range of perspectives and audiences.

Archival Protocol (for zines and ephemera)

Where independent zines or small-press pamphlets are analysed, items were sourced via public calls and creator networks. Inclusion required creator consent for scholarly citation and (where available) digital reproduction of selected panels. For each item, we record minimal metadata (creator(s), year, place, format, circulation notes), provenance, and usage permissions. Materials are stored in a versioned, checksum-verified repository with layered access:

- Private research folder (all items),
- Redacted research annex for teaching/reuse (rights-cleared items),
- Citation-only entries for sensitive content.

This workflow operationalises the paper’s claim that graphic narratives can function as an accessible, ethically governed “resistant archive.”

Theoretical Framework

This study combines two ways of thinking about stories and power: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Walter Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT).

3.2.1 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA)

Foucault’s work reminds us that stories and images aren’t just entertainment, they’re part of how power works. Discourse shapes reality by deciding which voices are heard, which are silenced, and which “truths” become common sense. FDA gives us a way to unpick how these dynamics play out. In this study, I’ve followed Boulton et al. (2021) employed five interrelated lenses in the analysis of the material:

- Problematization – identifying how mainstream narratives construct Muslims as problems.
- Genealogy – tracing the historical lineage of these constructions.
- History of the Present – situating depictions within the current socio-political climate.
- Discontinuity – highlighting ruptures between dominant and counter-narratives.
- Circulation of Discourse – considering how counter-narratives travel within and beyond comics readerships.

This allows us to appreciate both the burden of modern stereotypes and the innovative means by which artists challenge them.

3.2.2 Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT)

NPT complements FDA by focusing on the persuasive and affective dimensions of storytelling. According to Fisher (1985), narratives are evaluated by audiences based on:

- Narrative Probability – internal coherence of the story.
- Narrative Fidelity – resonance with the audience’s lived experiences and values.

For this research, NPT helps us see how these graphic works don’t just challenge Islamophobia factually but emotionally invite readers to step into Muslim characters’ worlds and see them as fully human. It also gives a way to analyse how things like colour choices, panel layouts, and visual symbolism shape that emotional connection.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. Mapping Dominant Representations – reviewing a set of mainstream news reports and films (Padmaavat, Sooryavanshi, The Kashmir Files) to identify recurring Islamophobic tropes.
2. Close Reading of Graphic Narratives – applying FDA to unpack how selected works counter these tropes through plot, characterisation, and symbolism.
3. Narrative Evaluation – using NPT to examine how stories achieve (or fail to achieve) narrative probability and fidelity in reframing Muslim identity.

Text and visuals were always analysed together; it's impossible to separate them in comics. Where I could, I also looked at interviews or statements from the creators to understand what they set out to do.

3.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

I approach this work as a Hindu scholar who has studied and worked in a Muslim-majority university. That background has given me both personal experience of cross-community life and a strong awareness of the limits of my own perspective. This research isn't an attempt to "speak for" Muslims, but rather to look critically at how certain stories about Muslims are told and how others are pushing back.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

There are some clear boundaries to what this research can claim. Graphic fiction in Indian languages is still hard to access, so this study is restricted to English-language works. That means the stories are already skewed towards urban, educated, and sometimes global audiences. And because this is qualitative work, the findings are interpretive rather than statistically representative.

Finally, the article does not include audience reception data; claims about persuasive force (NPT) are analytic inferences from textual/visual features rather than measured reader response.

4. Analysis

This section brings the theory to life, showing exactly how the chosen works push back against dominant Islamophobic narratives in India since 2014. The analysis is organised into three parts:

1. Mapping the mainstream "script" about Muslims.
2. Seeing how the graphic works rewrite or dismantle that script.
3. Considering how these counter-stories might reach and persuade their readers.

4.1 The Mainstream Script

Before diving into the comics, it's worth sketching the backdrop. In both mainstream news and blockbuster films, Muslims are too often cast in familiar, narrow roles:

- The Threat – the terrorist, the violent protester, the foreign agent in our midst.
- The Backward Other – trapped in regressive traditions, resistant to "modern" India.
- The Tragic Victim – passive, voiceless, saved (or not) by benevolent others.

These roles have been normalised through repetition. *Sooryavanshi* turns the Muslim terrorist into a national security cliché; *The Kashmir Files* reframes Kashmiri Muslims as either villains or complicit bystanders. News debates recycle these images nightly, often with little room for Muslim voices themselves. It is against this backdrop and in deliberate tension with it that the graphic works in this study speak.

4.2 Rewriting the Script in Graphic Fiction

4.2.1 Everyday Life as Resistance

One of the most striking choices in these comics is to focus on the everyday. In Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection*, the women are not passive victims or anonymous protesters; they are mothers, workers, and neighbours. The panels linger on tea being poured, children's homework, shared blankets in the winter cold small acts that quietly insist on Muslim presence as ordinary, rooted, and resilient.

4.2.2 Visual Counterpoints

Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* uses visual metaphor of the characters drawn as endangered Hangul deer to remind readers that identity is both precious and precarious. By refusing to depict Muslims as "visibly" Muslim in every panel, Sajad disrupts the quick visual coding that mainstream media often relies on (beards, skullcaps, burqas). The result is a refusal to make Muslim identity only about religious markers.

4.2.3 Speaking Back to Power

Several stories in the *First Hand* anthologies re-stage moments from real-life protests, lynchings, and everyday discrimination, but from the point of view of those living through them. This shift in perspective matters: it takes events that have been narrated for years by hostile media and puts narrative control back into the hands of Muslim characters and communities.

4.3 How the Stories Work on Readers

Using Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory, we can see why these comics might land with readers differently from a news report or political speech:

1. **Narrative Probability** – The stories hang together. The characters' decisions make sense in their worlds, the visual pacing supports the emotional beats, and the combination of image and text feels cohesive rather than forced.
2. **Narrative Fidelity** – They ring true. The dialogue sounds lived-in, the street scenes are recognisable, and the emotional reactions fit what readers might expect from real people in similar situations.

This emotional credibility is key. While we do not present reception data, NPT suggests that narratives exhibiting coherence and lived plausibility are more likely to be taken up as "true" in readers' moral imagination.

4.4 The Double Work of Counter-Narratives

These graphic works do two things at once. First, they dismantle piece by piece the stock images that have dominated the Indian public sphere. Second, they offer alternatives that are more complex, humane, and rooted in the textures of lived life.

By doing so, they don't just invite sympathy; they make space for solidarity. The reader is not positioned as a distant observer but as someone who could, in another context, share tea at Shaheen Bagh, or walk through the streets of Srinagar as a friend, not a stranger.

5. Discussion

The findings from the analysis make one thing clear: Indian graphic fiction since 2014 is doing urgent cultural work. In a climate where Muslims are often framed as outsiders or threats, these works function as counter-publics small but potent spaces where alternative meanings of Muslim identity can be imagined, shared, and circulated.

This project's archival function is not a by-product but a central design feature. By embedding the comics into an accessible, curated repository, the research resists the erasure of diasporic Muslim youth voices from mainstream cultural memory. Such archives can serve as reference points for educators, community leaders, and future generations seeking to understand these lived experiences in their own terms.

5.0 The Resistant Archive: Criteria and Risks

Treating these works as an archive entails three criteria:

- **Durability** (preservation beyond news cycles through material and digital continuity),
- **Accessibility** (discoverable description and layered permissions that keep creators safe while enabling scholarly and pedagogic use), and
- **Community governance** (creator consent, the option to withdraw/redact, and contextual notes that record intent and reception).

The proposed protocol addresses each criterion and mitigates risks particular to politically sensitive material (doxxing, chilling effects) through pseudonymisation, selective redaction, and staggered release.

5.1 From Representation to Reframing

The literature showed that media representations are never neutral; they are tied to power. This study's analysis extends that point by showing how counter-representations in graphic novels do not simply "add" Muslim perspectives to the record. Instead, they consciously redefine the discussion.

For instance, the decision to place home scenes in the foreground at Shaheen Bagh is not merely "representation"; it's an understated argument against representing Muslim protest in terms of violence and irrationality. Likewise, in *Munnu*, the Hangul deer metaphor reimagines Kashmiri Muslims from customary suspects to an endangered community in need of protection and sympathy. As representational and reframing books, these volumes also serve as living archives. They capture the emotional texture, visual detail, and community voice of events that mainstream narratives usually erase or distort. Following Diana Taylor's distinction between the "archive" and the "repertoire," these graphic narratives store protest scenes, domestic rituals, and vernacular memories in a form that is portable, re-readable, and less vulnerable to the rapid erasures of the 24-hour news cycle. In this sense, graphic novels act as a resistant archive — one that documents minority experience on its own terms and makes it accessible for future publics, scholars, and activists

5.2 Why the Medium Matters

Comics and graphic novels are uniquely equipped for this kind of reframing. Their hybrid form combining image, text, and spatial arrangement allows them to disrupt dominant ways of seeing in a way that prose or photographs alone might not.

- Visual metaphor can complicate or soften a politically charged message.
- Sequential art allows moments of pause, repetition, and emphasis that mimic lived time.

Transferability of the FDA–NPT Template- While the present corpus centres Muslim identity in India, the analytic template mapping dominant scripts (FDA), identifying discursive breaks, and testing narrative coherence/fidelity (NPT) is applicable to graphic narratives by Dalit, Adivasi, queer, and migrant creators. Prior work on caste and gender in Indian comics demonstrates comparable uses of visual metaphor and sequential juxtaposition to contest hegemonic frames; applying the present template would permit comparative

mapping of resistance tactics across communities without presuming sameness of oppression.

In documenting and preserving these narratives, this study creates an enduring archive of diasporic Muslim youth experiences. Equally, by providing a transparent, adaptable framework for participatory comics-making, it lays the groundwork for similar initiatives with other marginalized communities across cultural and geographic boundaries. In theorising these texts as a resistant archive and specifying criteria for their ethical curation, the article reframes Indian graphic fiction as a site of memory work as well as political contestation. By offering a transparent FDA–NPT template, it enables comparative study of resistance narratives across marginalised communities while respecting differences in risk, authorship, and circulation.

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