

Paulina Niechciał

# Zoro- astrianism in comics

# Introduction

Zoroastrianism – an ancient religion originating from Iran that has survived until the present day, professed by a small and shrinking community – is rarely represented in modern literature and popular culture, including comics. Some Zoroastrianism-inspired motifs are present in the world-famous series of an action-adventure video games *Prince of Persia* developed by Brøderbund Software, published for the first time in 1989, and currently produced by Ubisoft. Some literature readers might be familiar with the Parsis – a community of Zoroastrians who escaped from Iran centuries ago to avoid persecution in their Islamised homeland, and found shelter in India, mostly settling in Gujarat and over time becoming a part of Indian society. They have been portrayed in a few contemporary novels, of which probably the most famous are those by Rohinton Mistry, world-renowned Indian-born Canadian writer, the author of such books as *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002) (cf. Parui).

When it comes to the comic industry, which is the focus of my article, fans of Marvel Comics – the company founded by Martin Goodman in the USA in 1939, at that time named Timely Publications – might be vaguely familiar with Yazatas, Zoroastrian deities who are depicted marginally as immortal, extradimensional humanoid beings with a tan complexion and black eyes<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in 1981 in the Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian* series, Zoroazztor, a son of Pourusaspa, was incorporated in the story as an old sorcerer and scholar, the keeper of the Crown of Wisdom, riding a flying carpet<sup>2</sup>. Apart from this rather insignificant mention in publications focused on non-Zoroastrian characters and stories, there are comic books that aim to familiarize readers with Zoroastrianism, and I shall comment on them here. To the best of my knowledge there are two examples, both very different from each other: *Zarathushtra* (1974) and *Silent Was Zarathustra* (2013). The former is an Indian publication, while the latter is French, but both were once published in India – home to the most populous Zoroastrian community, in 2012 estimated to constitute more than a half of the Zoroastrian population that stands approximately at 112,000.

Comics tell stories. As Barker emphasised, “All different kind of stories, of course; but still, all stories” (11), in most cases fictional, and it raises the question about the “message” in a story – how we should understand it, what it offers the readers. Contributing to the relatively new field of sociology of comics (cf. Brienza; Locke, *Constructing a sociology of comics by Simon Locke*), not only will I provide an analysis of the texts and their message and answer the question regarding how Zoroastrianism is represented in the chosen comics from a comparative perspective, but also reflect on the social context of production and reception, inspired by the production of culture approach that refocuses attention “upon the various social contexts and conditions of comics production” (Brienza 115).

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1 The picture available at: <https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Yazatas> (Accessed 29 May 2019).

2 Pictures available at: [http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix7/zoroaster\\_sorcerer\\_supreme.html](http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix7/zoroaster_sorcerer_supreme.html) (Accessed 29 May 2019).



Pict. 1. Yazatas from the Marvel Comics (available at: [https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Yazatas?\\_Hercules\\_Encyclopaedia\\_Mythologica\\_Vol\\_1\\_1\\_0001.jpg](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Yazatas?_Hercules_Encyclopaedia_Mythologica_Vol_1_1_0001.jpg)=undefined. Accessed 29 May 2019.)

## Zarathushtra – A Smiling Child from the Legend

The first comic is *Zarathushtra* published in 1974 under the Amar Chitra Katha brand – one of the India’s best-selling comic book series – and reprinted later. This 32-page colour publication was written by Bachi Karkaria, an Indian journalist, and illustrated by Ram Waeerker, an artist who worked on many books in the series including the very first, *Krishna*, in 1969, and was involved in the creation of many iconic characters in Indian comics. The editor of *Zarathushtra* was Anant Pai (1929–2011), a pioneer of the Indian comic industry, the creator of Amar Chitra Katha launched in 1967, who himself became a hero of a comic story *Anant Pai: Master Storyteller* (Chandrasekaran et al.) in 2012. Popularly known as Uncle Pai, he aimed to retell Indian legends and myths to make them accessible to a wide, mainly young audience. As one of his coworkers said, “He brought into the limelight stories of our country which needed to be shared and told” (Pandey).

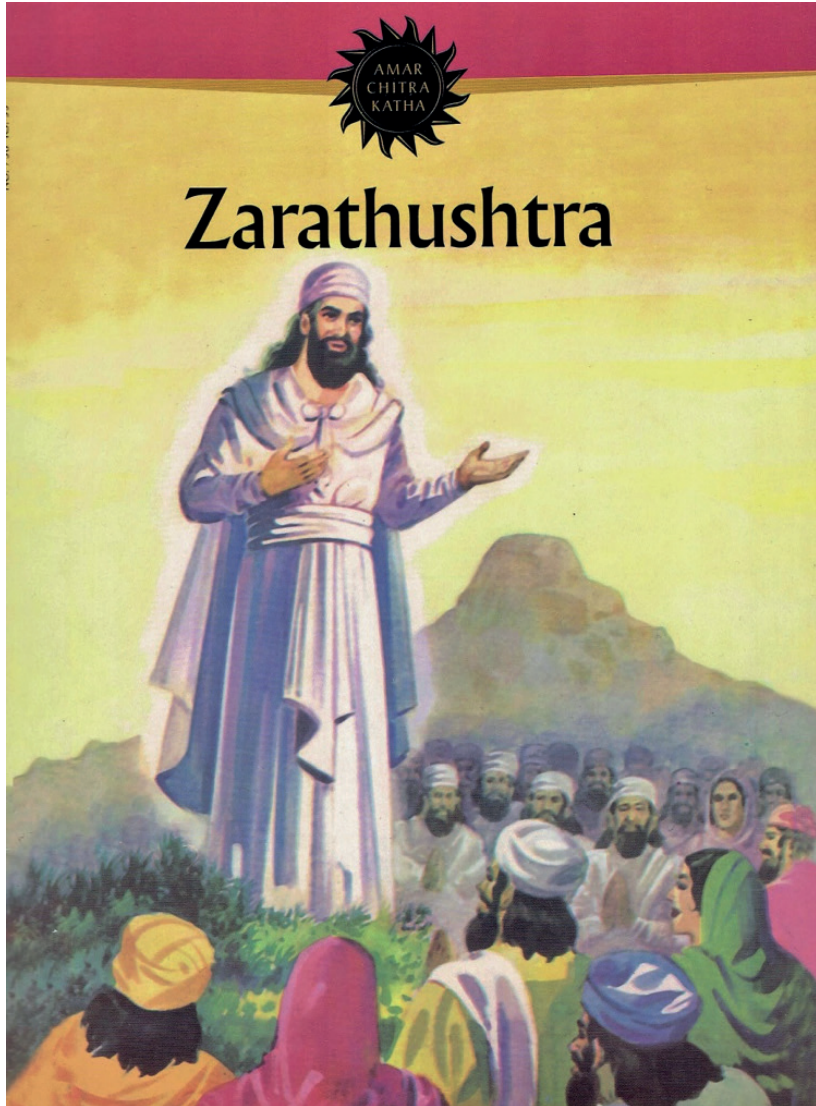
To understand the comic *Zarathushtra* we have to take a closer look at the Amar Chitra Katha comics themselves. As Pai himself said referring to his young nephews and nieces worldview: “Their libraries were filled with books that came from England. I thought I must do something about it” (Pritchett 77). In his message he addressed the parents: “You want your children to know all about the culture of India. Amar Chitra Katha takes you on a trip right down to the roots of your heritage” (Pritchett 81). Pai presented his comics for children as a “route to your roots” and emphasized that they were a product of “primary” research. The representation of the classic Indian stories in a comic format was meant to be a way to reach a wider audience and serve as a tool for children’s education. Even though critiqued for the narrow perspective and stereotypes, he achieved huge success, selling tens of millions of copies not only in English, but also in many Indian languages (Khanduri 174–75).

The comic presents the story of the title character Zarathushtra, widely known in European languages as Zoroaster, derived from the Greek. The name Zarathushtra is the Iranian version of his name, preferred by Zoroastrians themselves. Despite the poor historical sources, Zoroaster is believed to be a reformer of the ancient Iranians’ beliefs into a religion that eventually became dominant in Iran up until its Islamisation (cf. Boyce 18–19; Malandra).



**Pict. 2.** Zoroastor from Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian* series (available at: [https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Zoroaster\\_\(Earth-616\)](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Zoroaster_(Earth-616))). Accessed 29 May 2019.)

The comic book details the story of his life, actually beginning before his birthday, in ancient Iran, where people were waiting the god Ahura Mazda to send them a saviour and “let past glory return to this earth” (Pai 2). Of course, this is not a story in line with any scientific knowledge. Taking into consideration that Zoroaster lived presumably ca. 1000 BCE, we know there was no such entity as Iran at that time and Ahura Mazda was only one of the deities of ancient Iranian peoples, later proclaimed as God by Zoroaster. From the first pages of the publication we find out that it is a mythological tale of the religion's beginnings, not a historical one, and is in line with the aim of the *Amar Chitra Katha* to retell and introduce myths and legends to a wider audience, including the Parsis, within a multicultural Indian society. As in his other comics, so too here does Pai use the name of a renowned expert to ensure the accuracy of the research retold in the narratives (Khanduri 174). On the back cover of *Zarathushtra* the Parsi scholar and High Priest Dasturji Dr H. K. Mirza wrote a very brief introduction to Zoroastrianism,



Pict. 3. The front cover of reprinted *Zarathushtra* (Pai)

explaining who Zoroaster was, pointing out the key principles of his religion and mentioning the number of people who follow it.

The Prophet Zoroaster is presented here as a special child right from the beginning of his life. His birth was surrounded by miracles: the body of his mother glowed, he smiled instead of crying, and miraculously saved himself from the trap that the enemy set for him. As McLain mentions, referring to the example of comic *Rama*, published by Amar Chitra Katha in 1970 and retelling the story of the Indian hero of the ancient Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, Rama manifests the same archetypal features of superheroes that American comics established between the 1930s and 1950s: extraordinary powers, a strong moral code and specific enemies. The difference lies in the fact that Rama's story is not a randomly fictitious one, like that of Superman et al., but is a Hindu devotional story of god in a human form (1-2). The same is the case



Pict. 4. The baby Zoroaster miraculously saves himself from the attack of his enemy Durasrob (Pai 9)

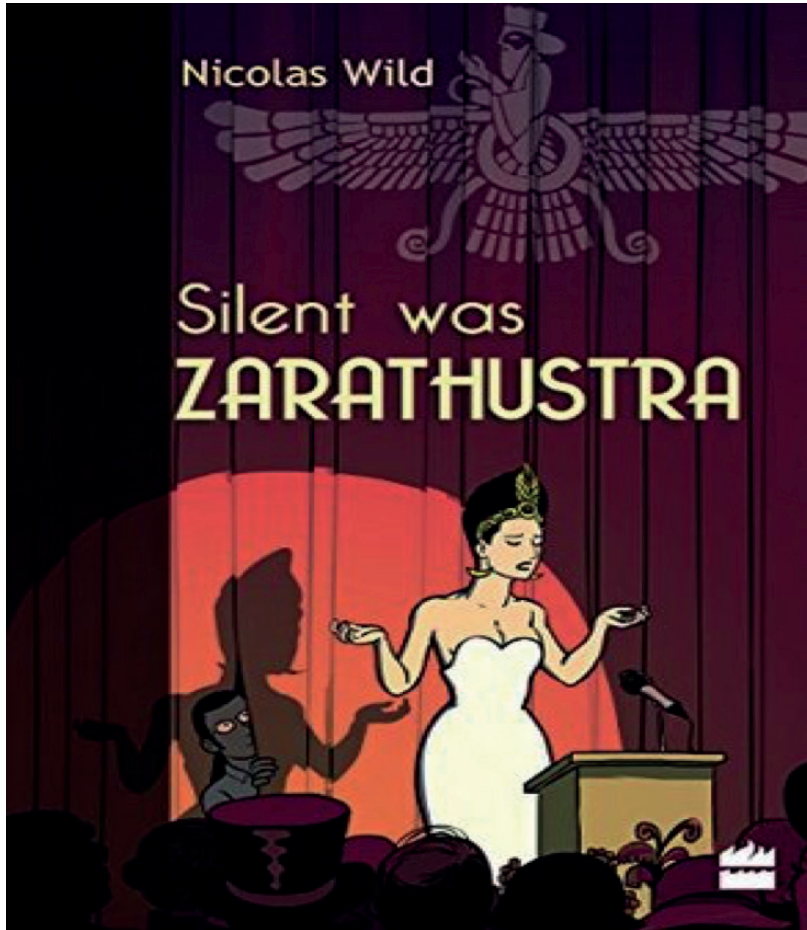
with Zoroaster, a Prophet and the key figure of the Zoroastrian symbolic universum, who manifested his superpowers even when he was an infant to fight his first enemy, Durasrob. Through the miraculous event he established a new religion and spread it with the help of God and despite adversities. Though deeply influenced by Western patterns, the comics of Amar Chitra Katha are grounded in Indian visual traditions, specially usage of the popular images and text in the 19th century struggle for independence. They tend to immortalize local heroes transforming them into indigenous superheroes, in line with the company name that means “immortal picture stories” (McLain 3).

Such a superhero's tale was, however, not invented for the purpose of the comic, but has a long history in the Zoroastrian tradition. As the main source I would mention the *Zardosht-nama* that is an account of the life of Zoroaster dated to 1277, written in Persian by a Parsi named Zartushi-Behram. The text

incorporates earlier texts, such as the Middle Persian *Denkard*, and additional legends, placing particular emphasis on the miracles Zoroaster performed starting from his childhood. Just as in the comic book *Zarathushtra*, he was born smiling: “As he left the womb he laughed; the house was enlightened by that laughter” (Zartushi-Behram 9). The glowing beams pictured over his figure in the Pai’s book symbolize the *farr* – the divine splendor and shine – inherited through his mother, Dughdov. The text of *Zardosht-nama*, as it is repeated in the comic book, indicates that the healing of the legendary King Goshtasp’s favourite black horse was the main event that persuaded king to accept the new faith (Rose; cf. Zartushi-Behram 31–36).

A reader of the *Zarathushtra* comics who is familiar with Christianity might be surprised by the emphasis on miracles and that some of Zoroaster’s features are similar to those known of Jesus, as well as the fact that the Amesha Spentas – the greatest sacred beings – are called “the angels of Ahura Mazda”. It is the echo of the disputes over the interpretations of Zoroastrian theology that began in 19th century India, resulting in the fact that Indian Zoroastrians, challenged by Protestant missionaries and Western scholars, shifted towards new interpretations of their faith. Martin Haug (1827–1876), a German orientalist and linguist, in the volume based on his research, *Essays on the sacred language, writings and religion of the Parsees*, published in Bombay in 1862, described the Amesha Spentas as “archangels” and other divine beings, Yazatas, as “angels” (184). He interpreted Zoroastrianism as the first religion to establish monotheism in ancient times and inspiration for the concepts present in the Abrahamic religions. These ideas resonate in the interpretations of Zoroastrianism until today among Western scholars as well as Zoroastrian community, who share the idea of their religion being essentially monotheistic, but contaminated by other ideas over time (Ringer 56–57; cf. Palsetia 164–67).

The time in India when this comic book appeared was before the rise of nationalism proclaiming the Hinduism to be national religion and to constitute the main cultural patterns in the country. Readers who grew up in the 1960s and the 1970s, the middle-class generation of urban children, were prepared to be a “new generation” united across linguistic or religious borders. Religious education was not of a top priority, left to the sphere of popular culture including movies, comics or social events (McLain 9). The social context may have changed, but today the reprinted comic books are still distributed, as they have become an important part of Indian popular culture, treated sentimentally by some. The cover of my reprinted copy of *Zarathushtra* contains a reminder that comics “are like family heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation”, and “timeless illustrated classics” (Pai). *Zarathushtra* itself is distributed, for example, by Parsi migrants, as it dovetails well with the trend for simplifying the message of Zoroaster for younger generations that I have observed among contemporary Zoroastrians. From this perspective it still fulfils its aim of being “a route to the roots” of Zoroastrianism. Although the story is accepted by everyone, among contemporary Zoroastrians there is a dispute over the Prophet’s person. As Rose concludes, some view him as an incarnate of Amesha Spenta possessing supernatural abilities to perform miracles (as in the *Zarathushtra*), while others believe him to be a philosopher and scholar – enlightened but mortal (Rose). I observed this difference in perception at the last World Zoroastrian Congress, usually organized every four years, that was prepared by the Australian diaspora and took place in June 2018 in Perth. Iranian *mobed* (priest) Kurosh Niknam, presently based in Paris, strongly criticised the way the program was organized for not educating



Pict. 5. Indian front cover of Nicolas Wild's *Silent was Zarathustra* (Wild, *Silent was Zarathustra*)

the participants about their own “dying” religion, but repeating superstitions, legends and myths developed over time within the Zoroastrian texts. Among the examples he mentioned the movie *Life & Time of the Zarathustra* by Meher Bhesania, shown to the congress participants. Niknam stressed that instead of presenting the historical facts about the origins of the religion, it depicts the myths surrounding Zoroaster.

## Zarathustra – an Excuse to Tell the Story

On the contrary to *Zarathushtra*, which was an indigenous Indian production, the second publication of my interest, *Silent Was Zarathustra* (*Ainsi se tut Zarathustra*), is a French black and white graphic novel of more than 200 pages. The author, Nicolas Wild (b. 1977) – both the writer and illustrator – is a French cartoonist who graduated in illustration at the École Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg. *Silent Was Zarathustra* was not his first attempt to bring closer the Eastern cultures to the French readers – Wild





Pict. 3. The front cover of reprinted *Zarathustra* (Pai)

was known as an author of the critically acclaimed *Kabul Disco: How I Wasn't Kidnapped in Afghanistan* (*Kabul Disco: Comment je ne me suis pas fait kidnapper en Afghanistan* 2007) and *Kabul Disco: How I did not become an opium addict in Afghanistan* (*Kabul Disco: Comment je ne suis pas devenu opiomane en Afghanistan* 2008). In these publications he mentioned a few years of his life as an expat in Afghanistan, where he worked for Zendagui Media, a company involved in designing social and civic communication campaigns (Ohana 290).

Over time, Wild was attracted to Iran, exploring the culture with help of his Iranian friends and his knowledge of the Persian language. In result he published *Ainsi se tut Zarathustra* in 2013, with the title being a reference to the famous Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra". Wild's book appeared in French, and was then translated into English for HarperCollins India (Wild, *Silent was Zarathustra*)<sup>3</sup>. Worth mentioning is the fact that it was not the first

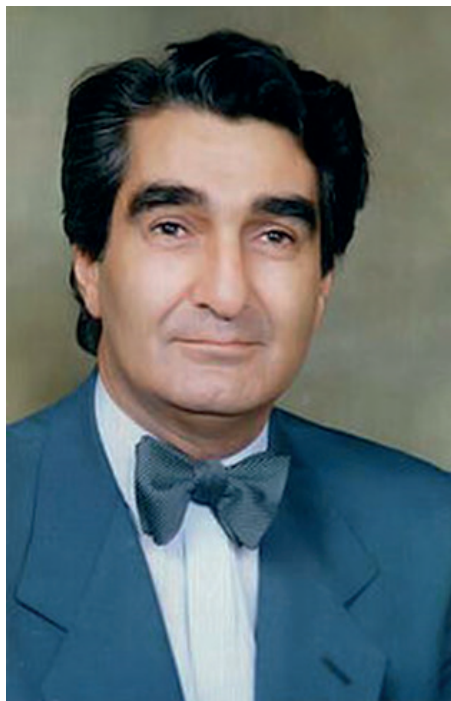
<sup>3</sup> It has been also translated to a few other languages, including Polish (Wild, *Tako milczy Zarathustra*), and Wild was an official guest of the 2016 Krakow Comic Book Festival.

French graphic novel to tell the story of contemporary Iranian society; it was already familiar to readers through the acclaimed *Persepolis* and its continuation, originally published in French in four parts in 2000–2003 and later in English in two parts. This is a graphic autobiography by an Iranian-born French author Marjane Satrapi, the winner of the *Angoulême Coup de Coeur Award* at the Angoulême International Comics Festival – the second largest comics festival in Europe.

For his graphic novel on Iran and Zoroastrianism in 2014 Wild received the France Info Prize for the News and Feature Comics for best comic report or current affairs comic – this is a comic book prize awarded annually by the public radio station France Info. The book was also among the official selection of the works that caught the attention of the public and critics of the year 2013 at the The Angoulême International Comics Festival. Critics wrote that Wild “manages to make it [the subject] not only intelligible, interesting, as well as fun and filled with suspense [...] the author teaches the reader a lot, without showing heavy didacticism” (Le Saux). Despite this acclamation, the English translation was prepared for the Indian, not British or American market. The author made a comment: “Being published in India made me very happy. I wasn’t sure whether my books would be understood in another culture. Nobody wanted to publish them in UK where they were seen as too French, too graphic, too I don’t know what. So being translated in English for India was a very grateful thing!” (Fernandes). This statement may be in line with the British tradition of perceiving comics as a non-serious literature, meant especially for children (Locke, “Considering comics as medium, art and culture – the case of From Hell”), which Wild’s work is definitely not.

The story of Iranian Zoroastrians by Wild is a first-person narrative that begins when he meets Sophia, a French-Iranian woman, daughter of Cyrus Yazdani—a Zoroastrian activist from Iran assassinated in Geneva in 2006. Together they travel to Iran where Nicolas becomes familiar with the life of Iranians and Zoroastrianism. The second part of the book is set in Geneva where he goes to hear the testimonies given at court in relation to Yazdani’s murder. The third part is the shortest one, commenting on what finally happened to the book’s characters, it also includes the photographs of ancient Zoroastrian sites in Iran and of contemporary Iranian Zoroastrians. The whole narrative is interwoven with flashbacks that reveal Cyrus Yazdani’s personality and life story.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, today Zoroastrians are a shrinking community of about 15,000 members or less. According to the constitution of Iran, like Christians and Jews, they constitute a recognized religious minority (*aqaliyat-e dini*), so they have right to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, provide religious education and to act according to their own regulations in matters of personal affairs (article 13). In practice, these rights are restricted and minorities face discrimination and marginalisation (cf. Niechciał). Thanks to the *Silent Was Zarathustra*, readers are not only acquainted with a simple story of the religion and community of its followers, but learn about the nuances of the presence of Zoroastrianism in the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example the issue of the sympathy towards the religion from some Muslims who are dissatisfied with the Iranian government. Readers also find out about the mythological biography of the Prophet, but with more focus on his message than miracles, as in the Amar Chitra Katha’s comic book. The lawsuit in Geneva is also an excuse to explain to the readers the issues connected with the Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian community, both in



Pict. 7. Professor Kasra Vafadari (1946–2005) and Nicolas Wild's Cyrus Yazdani (Wild, *Tako milczy Zarathustra*)

Iran and in India. The autobiographical journey of Wild, as well as the focus on the story of the Yazdani family and their friends make the story personal and more appealing.

Wild's spy thriller covering the story of Yazdani was inspired by the true story of Professor Kasra Vafadari (1946–2005), a Zoroastrian social leader, activist and scholar. He was a retired Professor of Nanterre University, a former chair of Iranian History and Religions before Islam, an ancient Persian history specialist, author of books on Zoroastrianism, active in Zoroastrian social life in Iran and abroad, known for openly speaking about Zoroastrian problems. At a conference in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in 1999, he was harassed by two unidentified man and did not deliver his speech on the difficult situation of the Zoroastrians in Iran. He was threatened that he would risk not only his own life but also the whole Zoroastrian community in Iran—this is a story also recalled by Wild, who carefully reconstructed the events that led to the Professor's death. However, this event did not stop Vafadari from involvement in Zoroastrian affairs ("Obituary: Professor Kasra Vafadari (1946–2005)"). Finally he was stabbed to death in Paris.

Considering the political character of the Islamic Republic of Iran, clearly Wild could not write Vafadari's story openly without exposing the heroes of his novel and himself to risk. So he transformed it into a story about Yazdani, allowing us an insight into the life and contemporary problems of the small, discriminated minority of Iranian Zoroastrians. In one review of Wild's earlier work, *Kabul Disco*, a reviewer wrote that "Wild is particularly brilliant when he's exploring the differences between the cultures of the people around him and his own" (IndieQuill). I would agree that this is also true in the case of *Silent Was Zarathustra*. Moreover, he is also funny, even describing such difficult topics as a religious minority's persecutions with a sense of humour.

I believe it is an important piece of comic art, but I have not noticed any reviews in the Zoroastrian press, and my impression was that it went rather unnoticed within the community. However, its message reached readers with no or little knowledge of Zoroastrianism and a variety of internet reviews indicate that they found it very interesting and informative. Interestingly, this was not the last time for Zoroastrianism to appear on the pages of Wild's publications. He has already announced his work on the story of the Parsi nuclear physicist Homi J. Bhabha (1909–1966), popularly known as the “father of the Indian nuclear program”, who pioneered the use of nuclear energy in India. He died in a plane crash on an Air India flight near Mont Blanc in 1966. His death triggered conspiracy theories of his possible assassination, including those about the involvement of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Wild, *What If?*).

## Conclusions

Both works – *Zarathushtra* by Pai, Karkaria and Waeerkar, and *Silent Was Zarathustra* by Wild – familiarize readers with Zoroastrian tradition, albeit in a very different way, as they are the products of their time and cultural context. The former, deeply rooted in the Amar Chitra Katha's idea of returning to culture and religion via simple, concise comic books, presents a simplified story of the Zoroaster legend and his miracles. The second one is a spy thriller referring to the best traditions of a *bande dessinée* (French comics) for adults. It is focused on the contemporary Zoroastrian community and their problems in Iran, and also presents the religion's rudiments and the story of Zoroaster. Both fill a gap in terms of the presence of Zoroastrianism in popular culture, although the former definitely deepens the stereotype of an extinct ancient religion.

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