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The Experience of Trauma in Two Indian Graphic Novels, *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories*

Debanjana Nayek
Research Scholar
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi

Abstract:

The graphic novel is a thriving genre in World Literature today and it got initiated after the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. This form of writing involves a textual narrative which is corroborated by a graphic representation of the subject. In India this form of writing has emerged at the hands of Orijit Sen in his book, *River of Stories* and later he has been followed by many graphic storytellers. In this paper I will be analysing two such Indian graphic novels, one of them is *River of Stories* itself and the other is Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*. Both these novels are noteworthy because of their documentation of the "experience of trauma", during two historic periods of time. While Sen registers the struggle of the Narmada Bacha Andolan, Ghosh recreates the agonizing period of the Emergency. However, to fully grasp the significance of such commemoration of the traumatic past I have compared the two texts with *Maus* and highlighted the aspects which set these two texts apart from the rest of the Indian graphic novels. This paper can also be perceived as a reading of two graphic texts under "trauma literature".

Keywords: *River of Stories*, *Delhi Calm*, Trauma, *Maus*, Experience.

> *In the stillness of that summer night, everything froze. In shock, not awe. Even the mosquitoes behaved themselves and restricted their nightly activities to south and west Delhi. All India Radio had finished the day's transmission, there was no point in waking up the announcer. However the announcement was ready and approved by Moon herself. Gearing up for the morning, she sat alone like in the old days and reflected. Her starlit journey. Doubts about democracy. Just like The Prophet, her secret yearning for a revolution. Moon had changed things forever. As the text faded onto the screens, the stars above smiled. A smile of reassurance.*

> *--Delhi Calm,* Vishwajyoti Ghosh.

In the popular culture of the Indian literary sphere the graphic novel is a fairly recent incorporation. *River of Stories*, the first graphic novel to be published in the country, had introduced this form of art in India which was later followed by many graphic artists who created their own storybooks through illustrative narration. Amongst a myriad of graphic novels which appeared in the Indian market in the last few years, Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* are distinctive in nature. They can be set apart from the works of other popular Indian graphic novelists, like that of Sarnath Banerjee, Amruta patil, Parismita Singh and Appupen, on account of their subject matter. Both Sen and Ghosh's novels deal with a historic time and register the struggles of common people against the government. The two books look back at a time when the citizens were oppressed by the country's government itself and they had to undergo an "experience of trauma".

The magnum opus of Vishwajyoti Ghosh documents a crucial period in the political history of India. The book is a graphic novel and is named, *Delhi Calm* but with a sheer dose of irony Ghosh depicts in the narrative a very "un-calm" and chaotic time. In his graphic novel the author-artist talks about the twenty one months of Emergency in India which was declared in the country from 1975 to 1977.By the assisstance of his dexterous graphic artistry in the book he has harked back to the tumultuous socio-political milieu of the Emergency period where he has captured the experience of everyday life of the common people. This "experience" includes the sudden seizure of every civil rights of the people, the loss of jobs and material security, the forced silencing of voices and protests and a constant prevalence of fear, uncertainty, intimidation, foreboding and anxiety amongst the citizens of the country. The State had achieved supreme power over its people and their lives where political leaders were taking drastic steps in the name of "urbanization" and "development". Ghosh satirically represents the political leaders of that age, such as, Indira Gandhi, who is known as Mother. Moon in the book, Sanjay Gandhi as The Prince and JP Narayan as The Prophet. He also satirically presents the ruthless decisions of Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi and how their call for an Emergency had doomed the nation to one of its darkest times after Independence. The graphic novelist has manifested the helpless situation of the poor when their slums were demolished by the government, without providing them any other abode. He has graphically captured this traumatic experience of the slum dwellers as the bulldozer was demolishing their only place to reside. The book is scattered with figures of people who are broken down with despair as well as the faces of "smiling survivors". These "smiling survivors" are the people who were appointed by the government to do undercover surveillance on the citizens, to be observant about any kind of protest and revolt and also to annihilate such voices of dissent. They are also the ones to execute different projects of the government, for instance, the slum demolition and the sterilisation of men and women to control population. The writer has characterized these people with a smile as their masquerade to symbolically present the malevolent power prevailing within the country.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh brings out in his book the "experience" of the entire nation during the Emergency period. He illustrates this experience in a sepia tone, with dark brown patches on some pages to connote blood marks and the torture that the powerless, vulnerable citizens were confronting. He does not restrict his socio-political study of the time to "Delhi Powerpolis" (Ghosh 7) alone, but also reaches out to the rural areas and expose the wretched situation in those places as well. The "experience of trauma" that he etches in his novel integrates the rural populace with the urban crowd. His characters in the novel, Parvez Alam, Vibhuti Prasad and Masterji struggle hard to achieve the dream of the Prophet which was to have a Total Revolution. For this reason they formed a band, the Naya Savera and wandered from the city to the remote villages. Nonetheless, the graphic novel divulges the reality behind such idealistic movements as there are ruptures in the unity of the group itself, in their idealistic stance and in their faith on such a revolution. At the end of the novel the dreams of these young revolutionaries gets thwarted by the harsh realities of politics. Ghosh merges together a personal "experience of trauma" with a collective one.

River of Stories is another graphic novel that explores a collective "experience", of a tribal community in the village of Jamli which is near the river of Narmada. This work, in a similar manner like that of Vishwajyoti Ghosh's novel, is about a critical period of time and revolves around a historic struggle of the tribal community and a group of social activists. Orijit Sen had written and published this graphic novel in the year of 1994, in support of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) which was a mass movement against the government's decision to build a dam on the Narmada. Sen delves into the lives of the tribal community of Jamli and some other nearby villages to document the injustice done to them by the

government. In its effort to construct the Narmada dam the government overlooked the difficulties which the villagers would face once the dam was built. The lands of the poor tribal people were confiscated and they were often beaten up by the police and "hired goons and musclemen" (Sen 52) for protesting against this exploitation. The novel juxtaposes two narratives, one that of the indigenous and the other is a macrocosmic picture of the modern world. It presents the "experience" of the suffering native as well as the opinion and views of the urbane populace of the city. Apart from recreating the milieu of the affected areas and its people, Orijit Sen has also registered some real voices of protest from the movement in the form of a newspaper article. One of such protesters is Khursheo, "a tribal peasant from Umargaon" who has said,

> "Our village will be submerged forever....The government says they will resettle us. But our community will be broken up. For countless generations, uncles, cousins, clan relations have lived close to each other....When they shift us to different places, we will all be cut off from each other. Our ancestors and spirits, who reside in the forests and hills, will be abandoned. Our music, our festivals, our gatherings, will all come to an end. Will there be any point in continuing to live after that?" (Sen 52).

Another protester is Buribai who is disturbed by the "*bazarias*" (marketers) who regularly go to the villages only to "create trouble", to "beat up" men and "molest" the women. She is perturbed by the question that "[n]ow the *sarkar* expects us to leave our villages to go and live amongst these same people?" (52).The novel further exposes that the problem does not lie only with the loss of the villagers' lands but also concerns health and economic issues.

While on the one hand Orijit Sen narrates the story of the indigenous, on the other, he also gives a picture of the city where speech bubbles reveal the two different mentalities of the residents, the cynical and the assenting. The latter are the ones who support the movement, who believe that something "wrong" is happening and needs to be questioned (55). Amongst those speech bubbles there are some conversations which are filled with sceptical questions, like:

> Do you think these environmentalists really care about tribals? They're in it to make a name for themselves. Anyway, why ask questions that have no answer?

> .... But if they stop development projects, how are we to progress? Obviously, a few people have to suffer for the good of the majority...surely these environmentalists don't expect us to go back to the middle ages, do they? What's the point of writing such negative articles? (sic) (54)

The world of the graphic novel is indebted to Art Spiegelman for bringing in the "experience" of trauma in the format of comics. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale-My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and *And Here My Troubles Began* (1991) are the two volumes of his graphic work which have depicted the horrors of the Holocaust. This Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novelist has been a great influence on all the aspiring graphic storytellers and it is very much perceptible in the writings of Vishwajyoti Ghosh and Orijit Sen too. This can be corroborated by a confession of Orijit Sen himself, where he states:

> As a student in the 1980s, at the *National Institute of Design*, Ahmedabad, I read whatever underground comics I could get my hands on. These included Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman. I was blown away by Spiegelman's *Maus*, which had just been published by a major mainstream publisher, and won a Pulitzer prize. I always liked to draw and make comics, but it was not considered the regular thing to do. *Maus* came as a great validation of my artistic convictions! It gave me a huge impetus to pursue my interest in drawing and making comics.

In many of the aspects of *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories* one can discern an understandable impact of Art Spiegelman's writing on them. One such impact is in the characterisation of the books, which are satirically named and given a humoristic approach. Sen and Ghosh have recorded the events of a historic time with journalistic adeptness, manifesting a style that Joe Sacco had introduced but their way of narration and composing of characters are very much akin to the style of Spiegelman. As in *Maus* the Jews are depicted as mice, the Germans as cats and the Poles as pigs, Vishwajyoti Ghosh has sarcastically named Indira Gandhi as Mother Moon, Rajiv Gandhi as the Pilot and Sanjay Gandhi as the Prince. In the manner that Spiegelman infuses his writing with a pinch of wit, Orijit Sen too constructs a very comic scene as his story's conclusion where an opportunist politician meets the village singer or *gayan* and debates about the "fruits of progress" (Sen 57). Although these facets of *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories* make them an interesting read, the aspect that makes them noteworthy is their recollection of a disturbing past.

The narration of the traumatic experiences of a particular historical time in the past is an essential marrow of both *Maus* and *Delhi Calm*. Lisa A. Costello identifies this retrospective aspect of *Maus* as "performative memorialization", an aspect which is present in both *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories*. She elucidates "performative memorialisation" as,

> To call the reader into the story is to force an active rather than a passive participation. For instance, the temporal jumps or fragmented narratives typical of postmodern writing do not allow the reader to simply absorb information. Readers must engage with texts in order to understand them. But even subjectively re-experiencing the suffering of the Holocaust at an emotional level can be only a fraction of the reality. Marianne Hirsch and Dominick LaCapra have noted aspects of working through Holocaust trauma in this way, where an emotional response can be productive. (23)

In *Delhi Calm* and in *River of Stories* as well the engagement with history is necessary on the part of the audience. These narratives not only puts forward a momentous period of the past but also compels their audience to partake in that experience of trauma. In her work, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory" Marianne Hirsch reflects that these graphic representations of traumatic experiences constitute "postmemory" which is "a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is meditated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation – often based on silence rather than speech" (220). This is conspicuous in the blotted colours on the panels which represent blood marks in *Delhi Calm* and is evident in both Sen and Ghosh's artwork as they resort to a number of unvoiced graphics to portray the repressed pain of the exploited victims. Hirsch further adjoins,

...this form of remembrance need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be more broadly available. (220)

Hence, an illustrative representation of the traumatic past is productive, although *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories* do not restrict themselves to a mere detailing of the history. Orijit Sen and Vishwajyoti Ghosh both reiterate the individual and intimate conscience within a collective experience through their graphic novels. Metaphorically saying, they have woven a "river of stories" which will flow from one generation to the other, enlightening every one of them about a historic past, about the bygone days when people were oppressed by the government. The "experience of trauma" that was suffered will be revisited time and again through their graphic novels.

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