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Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives by E. Dawson Varughese

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E. Dawson Varughese, *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* (Springer International Publishing AG, First Edition, 2018), 119 Pages, 4625 Rupees, ISBN 978-3-319-69489-4.

With every passing year, Indian graphic narrators are inching closer towards establishing Graphic Novel as a popular and serious genre in the nation; careful that their narratives aren't generalised as mass market (comic) works. Dawson Varughese, as an interested scholar, is eager to learn what post-millennial Indian graphic narrators have to offer, and how effectively they are dealing with conventional Indian identities. According to her, the post-millennial India is "ready to both consume and create Indian-oriented graphic narratives", which stand poles apart, in essence and presentation, from the classic *Amar Chitra Katha*. She believes that the 21st century Indian graphic narratives are portraying the "ideas of Indianness" – the conservative and repressive identities such as that of the selfless (home-restricted) mother – in "less favourable ways". Her focus then is on how the "reader-gazer" acquires knowledge through the acts of 'seeing' or 'gazing' these graphic narratives by referring to this act in the context of Indian religious terminologies such as *darshan*, *drishti*, and *nazar*, all of which are considered auspicious in nature. However, the graphic narrative works which she analyses in the book are, according to her, revolving around "a visuality of the inauspicious". Her preference for religiously-inclining terms such as "auspicious" over those like "favourable" reflects not just her creativity but also her awareness about Indian being a religion-centered nation where certain notions and conventions are so deep-rooted that it isn't easy for a mass market writer/publisher to narrate/promote them and not expect a backlash. She attempts to find out if these post-millennial graphic narratives distance themselves from the traditional representations of Indianness, towards something that's "inauspicious", which would ensure that they are not in

line with the traditional presentation and perception of the conservative Indian ideals. And, also how the "reader-gazer" would engage with these unfavourable depictions.

As a result of the controversial subjects of these post-millennial Indian graphic narratives, Dawson Varughese senses a "tension" between the author and the publisher. And, a "further tension" which develops out of the readers' experience with the "problematic ideas of Indianness" as presented in these narratives. However, it's exactly this particular unconventional feature of their narratives which distinguishes them from other graphic works; something which is also reflected in their illustrations. The works she has chosen have a common theme of engaging "in the narration of problematic, difficult and yet timely issues", such as child sexual abuse, unsettling historical events, casteism, elitism, etc. She has divided her in-depth analysis of the post-millennial Indian graphic narratives into two sections. In the first one she talks about the narration and representation of "inauspiciousness", and in the second about the representation of the idea of love and loyalty for the nation which suffers from issues it cannot deny. In her analysis of various Indian graphic narratives, Dawson Varughese has referred to each work appropriately by naming relevant works as "graphic short story", "graphic non-fiction work", "graphic novel", and "graphic novella" instead of resorting to an umbrella term. Her analysis of nine different Indian graphic narratives, written with deep insights, makes for a delightful read for new and seasoned (graphic narrative) readers alike.

The very first narrative she analysis is "The Photo" by Reshu Singh from the collection *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (2015). For Dawson Varughese, this work refrains from empowering the Goddess-like image of the Indian housewife who sacrifices her desires once she marries and accepts her domesticated role. According to her, "this graphic story does not celebrate the kind of revered femininity of Indian homemakers we might be used to seeing more traditionally, but it does foreground a sense of *shakti*". *Delhi Calm* (2010) by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, which is about the Emergency of the mid-1970s, is seen by her as a re-visioning of history from "an Indian aesthetic". Re-imaging history is an important concept for her as she sees it as a core theme in many western graphic narratives. She believes, *HUSH* (2011), a wordless graphic narrative, by Manta Ray's Pratheek Thomas and Rajiv Eipe, is impactful at destabilising "the idea of the (male) heroic and honourable", especially those who are able to cover up their

hideous acts with the powerful and highly-revered jobs they have. She is particularly interested in Sarnath Banerjee's representation of the "urban New India" in *The Harappa Files* (2011) and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015); the "urban culture" (such as in the Delhi-NCR region) and the elitism that comes with it. What makes these five works relevant to the author's argument is their exploration of "contested societal issues", and their capability to usurp the "established modes of seeing Indianness" by talking about the "inauspicious".

When talking about graphic narratives representing the idea of loyalty for a nation filled with suppressed "inauspiciousness", Navayana's *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011), for Dawson Varughese, is a celebration of "marginal Indianness" instead of just Indianness. She sees its use of *digna* and Gond art-style as an effective representation of separation and discrimination towards not just the lower castes, like that of Bhimrao Ambedkar's, but also the *adivasi* Gond artists. For a nation that prides on its army personnel, her opinion on *Twelve: How it ends* (2013) is that it questions the army's unquestioned oath of allegiance. For her, this book "challenges ideas of loyalty and allegiance to one's country". About *Kashmir Pending* (2007), she mentions how the dark colourway depicts the grim reality and helpless situation of the Kashmir state – "a dark tale echoed in its black printed pages". *Legends of Halahala* (2013) has as its content an amalgamation of religious idolatry, focus on female body, and celebrity culture in Indian cities like Mumbai. The book is described by her as a "direct critique of modern Indian society" with its "depiction of religion as divisive and self-indulgent". As a conclusive note, Dawson Varughese comments: "these four graphic narratives apprehend their reader-gazer through a visual language of the inauspicious".

Unlike Pramod K Nayar's perception of his work *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique* (2016), Dawson Varughese doesn't see her work – and, in effect, the Graphic Novel genre – as a part of the Indian Writing in English canon. Instead, she says, her work is an analysis of the (emerging) "visual cultures" in India. This reflects her desire for the Indian readership to see the Graphic Novel genre as an entirely different form which is absolute in itself. Her book is an accomplished attempt at an in-depth enquiry about the style and content (such as the abundance of achromatic colourway) of 21st century Indian graphic narratives. Her selection of texts for scrutinisation is well-aimed, and the conclusion is affirmative. The author's

hope is that these narratives could emulate the radicalism of the *Nayi Kahani* literary movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. But, she culminates the book by displaying her "uncertainty" about the continuity of this trend of thought-provoking Indian graphic narratives which are dismantling "favourable ideas of Indianness" when she considers that they are competing with narratives that celebrate "India's past through its epic and folkloric tales". However, the Indian Graphic Narratives genre has come a long way from Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) to *Longform* (2018), which is an anthology of several graphic narratives by various authors. If anything, the genre has learned to stand on its feet; it won't be too long before it starts walking and, eventually, running. We aren't too far from witnessing a Graphic Narratives invasion in the English curriculum in Indian universities. As a result, we can rightfully expect an increasing awareness of the genre, and with it the mass revelation of all that is *inauspicious*.