

Perception and Purpose of Indian Graphic Novel

Zahra Ahmad
M.A. II English,
Patna Women's College,
Patna University.

Article History: Submitted-29/07/2021, Revised-20/08/2021, Accepted-25/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

Abstract:

Post modernism, a major movement in the creation of fluid and flexible perspectives in art and literature of modernist era gave rise to several genres focusing on petit narrative. Graphic novels, an amalgamation of visual and the verbal medium is an important micro-narrative, being a confluence of comics and novels in Indian context. Graphic novels, now a global phenomenon with deep historical roots and new thematic concerns, give voice to the marginalised. This paper explores how Graphic novels are interpreted, purpose they serve and the problematic concepts brought to the mainstream by petit narratives. The intention is also to see how Indian Graphic novels try to incorporate local themes in the context of global impact and the subversion of traditional notions and perceptions. The paper analyses two Indian Graphic novels- Amruta Patil's *Kari* and *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* by Nataranjan et al.

Keywords: Grand narrative/Meta narratives, Petit narratives, Graphic novel, Marginalised voices.

Introduction

According to Lila Christensen “in contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often nonfiction, full-length, sequential art novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war with intelligence and humour.” (Christensen 227)

Graphic novels emerged out of comic books - a genre which employed the combination of the verbal (dialogues) and the non-verbal (drawing, symbols, images, paintings, etc.) and, which gained widespread popularity in the 20th century. So, they are books in which the story is conveyed with sequential art (multiple images along with the text arranged in sequence next to each other in time and space to form a story). They tend to deal with intricate and profound issues or themes and also, they have a self - contained plot unlike comics. Though most of our

digital communication happens through visual language by using emojis, pictures, illustrations, logos, etc. Graphic novels came with the expansion of the horizon of literature. Here the writers and artists of petit narratives bring voice of the marginalised to the mainstream employing literary tools and visual strategies.

The term “graphic novel” was coined by Richard Kyle in an essay of the comics fanzine *Capa-Alpha* (1964), a newsletter published by the Comic Amateur Press Alliance. But the term became popular after the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and the start of Marvel's *Graphic Novel Line* (1982). However, Art Spiegelman, the writer of the only Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, made it familiar. The collected editions of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1987) also played an important role. The roots of Graphic novel can be traced to Manga Comics which portrayed serious issues like effects of war, bombing on Hiroshima etc in the mid nineteenth century. Famous Manga series include *Astro Boy*, *Dragon Ball*, *One Piece*, *Golgo*.

Indian graphic novel

Amar Chitra Katha series and *Tinkle* comics are two of the works which were mass produced and garnered wide readership in India. Orijit Sen, creator of India's first graphic novel *The River of Stories* (1994) was a pioneer of the genre. It was perhaps world's first work of journalism through a graphic novel, capturing the plight of adivasis displaced due to construction of a dam. India's most celebrated graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee published his first graphic novel, *Corridor* (2004) from Penguin Books which attracted serious writers and artists bringing it from its nascent stage to mainstream. Many followed the trend. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) written by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand and illustrated by Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. The artists have kept alive tradition and heritage of their people. They also represented the politicised aspect of an individual narrative as in *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil and *Hotel at the End of the World* (2009) by Parismita Singh. Sarnath, Orijit Sen, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Parismita Singh, Vidyun Sabhaney, Amruta Patil, Srividya Natarajan, S. Anand, Abdul Sultan, Subhadra Sen Gupta, Tapash Guha, Naseer Ahemad are very significant ones among the creators of graphic novels.

The graphic novel is a powerful medium to express the suppressed voices through the revisioning of mythologies, old traditions and customs. It thus blurs the line and disrupts the hierarchy of the social order. They give voice to the marginalised individuals of mainstream

mythology, highlighting their problems and issues. By investing upon the narrative and artistic scheme used in *Bhimayana* and *Kari* this paper aims to prove the above.

Data / Sources

The data collected for this research is primary and secondary both, taken mostly from books, journals, research papers, internet sources, blogs, articles, etc. A comprehensive study has been done to understand the perception and purpose of Indian graphic novels through the use of narrative and artistic technique and choice of theme to subvert traditional notions and bringing the petit narrative to the mainstream.

Methodology

For the undertaking of this research, an analytical study of two graphic novels Patil's '*Kari*' and *Bhimayana* by Natarajan et al. was done focusing upon the methods employed in crafting the graphic novels. The creative use of narrative and artistic techniques to understand the impact on readers through modern approaches using the involvement of the themes, artistic and literary devises and subversion of traditional notions as well as giving voice to the marginalised section was explored. A detailed study of the works and related documents, researches and articles were taken into consideration to bring out the new ideologies and global impact created. The objective is also to show contemporary relevance of the topic in terms of lack of awareness, alienation and ignoring of the major part of our society which needs acceptance and inclusiveness. Postcolonial critical literacy and dissensual bildungsroman would also be utilized.

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability

It is a graphic novel which is multiple layers of meaning. On one hand it is a biography of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a Dalit icon who framed the Indian Constitution. It is an account based on the experiences of untouchability and oppression taken from his autobiography *Waiting for Visa* that shaped Ambedkar's worldview. On the other hand, it is highly subversive of the dominant ideologies at multiple levels. It attempts to negotiate sensitive political and cultural issues like caste and human rights within the Indian domain. Thus, it brings to the fore the history of caste system and subjugation of dalits and its continuity in contemporary times.

A well-known academician Prof. Pramod K Nayar in his book entitled *The Indian Graphic Novel*, says in the introduction that "the ethnographic regional novel, the urban satire

and other popular forms of Indian fiction in English one now adds, with pride, a brave new medium and genre: the graphic novel.”

It is radical both in form and content by adoption of verbal-visual literacy. *Bhimayana*, generates a postcolonial critical literacy. This makes the reader link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations. It also helps us reflect on the issues of otherness, casteism, atrocity and human rights.

The title itself is a powerful subaltern move since it subverts the Brahmanical hegemony and presents a counter narrative against them. It presents an alternate epic of heroism. The mythical god, Prince Ram’s exile from royal luxuries is from sacred Hindu text, *Ramayana*, who is depicted as an ideal man. *Bhimayana* presents a parallel narrative similar to *Ramayana* which is an account of everyday expulsion of Bhimrao Ambedkar, an untouchable, from civic dignities like water, shelter and travel. He is shown as the central figure fighting the battle of caste system.

The book is divided into five sections namely ‘One Day’, Water, Shelter, Travel and The Art of *Bhimayana*. ‘One day’ the first section itself presents the social issues and resentment of upper class against reservation (affirmative action by the government for the lower class) set at a local setting. This further elaborates by depicting the deplorable condition of dalits by portraying the struggles and resistance of Ambedkar and connects it with contemporary times by citing newspaper cuttings and articles. In the village of Khairlanji “... members of the Bhotmange family were bludgeoned to death in full view of people of the village.” (Natarajan et al. 13)

‘Water’ highlights the predicament of a ten-year-old Ambedkar in school. He is denied access to drinking water, a glaring discrimination, which is juxtaposed against his father building a water tank as a government employee.

It ends with an account of Ambedkar’s protest by organising the Mahad satyagraha against prohibition of access of water from Chavadar Tank. Ambedkar said - “We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others.” (Natarajan et al. 48) Thus, the text throws light on alternate history.

‘Shelter’ describes Ambedkar’s Baroda days. In spite of education at Columbia University and job he encountered hostility and discrimination from Brahmins and other religious groups. The hard choice had to be made between life and shelter by Ambedkar. Ambedkar begging for shelter in Baroda - “I implore you – let me stay for a week at least.”

(Natarajan et al. 68) It also shows the present atrocities and denial of basic needs faced by Dalits. Newspaper clipping from text “The Hindu: Dalit siblings thrashed by landlord for shelter”. (Natarajan et al. 73)

“These stories in fact go past Ambedkar’s humiliations”, since they occurred inside most recent ten years of free India which accept itself to be free from this social shame.” (Singh 782)

‘Travel’ depicts Ambedkar as an established icon of dalit, but still he faces discrimination which leads to an accident. “We are mahars ... Babasaheb, the tonga walas wouldn’t drive you here ...” (Natarajan et al. 81) It also gives details of the Ambedkar - Gandhi differences over equal rights and separate electorates for the depressed class. It mentions Indian Round Table Conference in 1931 to show his emancipatory politics and his conversion to Buddhism.

The book incorporates what is under- acknowledged in history books and also archives Pradhan Gond tribal Art for illustrations. It defied the conventional rules like sequential art forms of western graphic novel. It does not involve rectangular framing or unilinear time. Digna pattern is used to allow free breathing space for all. Lots of nature and animalistic imagery are used as symbols. Like water, fish, peacock, snake etc. Speech balloons like bird representing good and scorpion representing evil depicts the caste discrimination. Moreover, the usage of colour subverts divisions by only using black and white colours in some sections and using varied colours for showing convergence and unification. It works together to convey the atrocities of segregation based on caste.

The people are mostly represented as ‘type’ to blur the division. This makes the content and form most subversive. A local issue is depicted through local art, thus showcasing, reviving and popularising the tribal art and converting into a commercially attractive mode of illustrating a subaltern social issue, making it global as well. So, a counter narrative to the dominant ideology.

Bhimayana's innovations of form and content, vibrant in imagery, its extensive metaphorization and multiple registers serve to combine a personal story with the history of caste-based discrimination.

The intent to highlight the present condition of dalits is also fulfilled with so many newspaper clippings of the contemporary times. It also proves that inspite of various

legislations in Indian constitution for the dalits, persecuting, beating, killing continues even in free India. The text portrays the hidden apartheid system in India. Bhimayana thus represents, create awareness and attempts to give voice to the marginalised section by subverting dominant ideologies. It also creates global impact with postcolonial critical approach. Postcolonial theory which is primarily concerned with the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of euro-centric hegemony around the world in the 18th to 20th century period. Postcolonial critical reading of the text shows that petit narrative highlights the discrepancy in society towards marginalised section/ subaltern by bringing it to the mainstream.

“The dissensual bildungsroman may therefore read as the narrative rupture between the rhetoric of equality, democracy, rights and the lived experience of destitute, dalits, homeless and mentally ill” (Nayar 99)

It can also be read as dissensual bildungsroman since it depicts the contrast to the basic rights and dalits deplorable condition. The term was coined in 1819 by philologist Karl Morgenstern in his university lectures. Analysed using dissensual bildungsroman, dalit bildungsroman is a story of reversed growth of dalits which was hindered by various social and political institutions.

But in a nutshell, a lot needs to be done for the upliftment of the dalits.

Kari

Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008), the very first Indian graphic novel in English by a woman, is revolutionary for multiple reasons. It centres around a lesbian protagonist showcasing in a dark and resolute undertone, how she and her ex-lover establish their identity in a heterosexual normative society in different ways. Patil remarks in an interview with Paul Gravett that *Kari* brings to the fore an ‘unusual protagonist’, a ‘young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman — counterpoint to the hyper feminine prototypes one keeps coming across’.

Datta says “through heteroglossia and an experimental use of ‘ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images’ (Patil as quoted in Singh, 2008), the story captures *Kari*’s internal landscape in a heteroglossic way, creating a unique narrative framework predicated upon interiority.” (Datta 2)

The text starts with *Kari*’s life in the aftermath of a ‘slipshod surgical procedure’ (Patil 3). *Kari* and Ruth attempted suicide but both survived. Ruth saved by the safety net leaves the city and *Kari* crawls back into the fray of living saved by a sewer which depict class differences

in our society. Romance here has been smashed and dismantled from the very beginning unlike mass production. In the very first picture the body here is shown with heart, that is body parts. Even in later pictures showing the intimate relation of Ruth and Kari, or a nude picture of Kari looking at herself in the mirror, representation is very different. Nothing seems provocative rather acceptance of body as it is, thus deromanticized. Even objectification of women's body has not been done unlike the mass culture. The advertising agencies where Kari works as copy writer has asked her to "bring in the sex, bring glamour, and discover my inner fox" (Patil 11) for writing an advertisement for international hair product. She finally succeeds after thirty-six attempts and earns a promotion and an award. Gradually she accepts and creates her own identity by attending an important award ceremony with Buzz cut hair style, specific to male. Moreover, she declares in the end that she is ready to face the world with her identity and will not attempt suicide ever.

As Nayar said in the *Indian Graphic Novel* "For this freedom of representation, for taking the process of critique into a medium associated with just entertainment, for its opening up an array of story-telling strategies and for its insistence on tackling more social commentary and cultural critique of the nation's lacunae of flaws, the graphic novel heralds a major shift within IWE."

We get to know the story from the perspective of a homosexual protagonist in a heteronormative society, portraying various realities. Popular literature serves to move our attention to the urban life, smog covered cities and everyday work for survival which "is unaffected by the waxing and waning of personal moons." (Patil 10). The themes of homosexuality, alienation, love, lust, friendship, loneliness, different culture, corporate world's representation of women, subversion of home as a safe haven in Indian culture, pollution of the city, are depicted vividly through images. The use of colour in the text offsets epiphanic moments. The advertisement for hair product where Princess tries to reach Fox but can't, her imaginary house Crystal Palace where twelve dancing princes dance, her intimate moments with Ruth and several others are framed using varied colours. In her imagination she creates a no man's world. The panels showing her bonding with her mother also shows colourful pictures. "The only person who always wants to talk to me is my Mamma." (Patil 21). Most pictures are in black and white while greyscale is used for the mundane or the morbid. Though she initially misses her home and feels alienated but gradually fits in the larger picture of the city. The chapter titled 'Visitations' of her parents show that she is more into the present situation now.

Through her observations we also get to know about environmental issues in cities, particularly hazardous pollution. The rain and the waterlogging apart from portraying the inadequacy of drainage system also at times depicts her own turmoil in mind. At times it blurs the division between the roads and sewers where she imagines a place where everybody gets acceptance even the marginalised, othered classes like her.

With Angel (her ailing friend) Lazarus (her colleague), and the girls of Crystal Palace forming the chorus to her song, she explores the dark heart of smog city – loneliness, sewers, sleeper success, death – and the memory of her absentee Other. *Kari* heralds a new voice to graphic fiction in India illustrated and livened by wry commentaries on life and love which is a reflection of Kari's internal world. Queer theory was used in the analysis of *Kari* exploring the oppressive power of dominating norms particularity relating to sexuality. *Kari* starts with the double suicide of two queer protagonist. Kari and Ruth, two lesbians try to commit suicide because they do not get acceptance as homosexual partners. So, a global issue like homosexuality have been portrayed normative with the local settings. Homosexuality is still considered a taboo in Indian social setting inspite of the Indian constitution legalising it in 2018.

Conclusion

Indian graphic novels have no doubt proved to be the panacea for human ills. It is also the essence of bringing the petit narrative to the mainstream. The artists and writers of graphic novel associate Indian examples with an international network rather than affirming their indigenous cultural roots, creating global impact. They voice alternative perspectives through the revisioning of Indian mythology. The advent of multiple expressions of individual and societal voices into visual representations made the medium of graphic novel a highly politicized platform of discourse. *Bhimayana*'s content and form both are subversive of the dominant ideology at multiple levels and it lends voice to the dalits and other marginalised sections of our society. The narrative of *Kari* is also an appeal to the heteronormative Indian society to be inclusive of the homosexuals. The theories employed in the analysis of the texts challenge to disrupt binaries in hope that it will destroy differences as well as inequalities. Both these texts represent the lopsidedness of the Indian society which works on dominant ideologies and does not give space to its marginalised sections.

Works Cited:

Bakshi, Kaustav, and Rohit K. Dasgupta. *Queer Studies*. Orient Blackswan, 2019.

Christensen, L. L. "Graphic global conflict: Graphic novels in the high school social studies classroom", *The Social Studies*, vol. 97, iss. 6, 2006, pp. 227–230.

Creekmur, Corey K. "The Indian Graphic Novel." *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 348–358.

Datta, Surangama. "'Can You See Her the Way I Do?': (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008)", *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, vol. 4, iss. 1, article no. 13, 2020.

Desai, Prajna. "Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability", *The Comics Journal*, 2012.

Frey, Hugo and Noys, Benjamin. "Editorial: History in the graphic novel". *Rethinking History*, vol. 6, iss. 3, 2002, pp. 255-260.

Hansen, K. S. "In Defense of Graphic Novels." *The English Journal*, vol. 102, no. 2, 2012, pp. 57–63.

Natarajan, Srividya, et al. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*. Navayana, New Delhi 2011.

Nayar, Pramod K. "Towards a postcolonial critical literacy: Bhimayana and the Indian graphic novel". *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2012, pp. 3-21.

Oza, Vasvi. "Questions of Reading and Readership of Pictorial Texts: The Case of Bhimayana, a Pictorial Biography of Dr. Ambedkar". *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2012, pp. 351-365.

Patil, Amruta. *Kari*. Harper Collins Publishers India, 2008.

Pramod K. Nayar, *Indian Graphic Novel*, Routledge, 2016.

Pramod K. Nayar, *Writing wrongs The Cultural Construction of Human Rights in India*, Routledge, 2012.

Web Sources:

Pawar, Priya. "Creating an Epic for Dalit in Bhimayana as dissensual bildungsroman". *IJCRT*, vol. 6, iss. 2, 2018, <https://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1892213.pdf>, Accessed 22 Jun. 2021.

Sarma, Ira. "Negotiations of Home and Belonging in the Indian Graphic Novels Corridor by Sarnath Banerjee and Kari by Amruta Patil", *South Asia multidisciplinary academic journal*. vol. 16, (2017), <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4384>, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

Campbell, Eddie. "What Is a Graphic Novel?", *World Literature Today*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2007, pp. 13-15, www.jstor.org/stable/40159289. Accessed 22 Jun. 2021.

Singh, Anupriya. "Is the Novel Bhimayana a Step Towards Redefining Identity: A study in the light of Existentialism in the Cultural Context of Post-Revolutionary Mexico", *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 8, iss.III, 2017, pp. 775-783, <https://www.the-criterion.com/V8/n3/June2017Contents.pdf>, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

"What is a Graphic Novel?", *Buffalo & Erie County Public Library*, <https://www.buffalolib.org/get-graphic/what-graphic-novel>. Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021

Weldon, Glen and Mayer, Petra. "Let's Get Graphic: 100 Favorite Comics And Graphics Novels", *National Public Radio(NPR)*, 12 Jul. 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/12/533862948/lets-get-graphic-100-favorite-comics-and-graphic-novels>, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

"Graphic Novels & Comics". *Research Guides University of Maryland*, <https://lib.guides.umd.edu/comics>, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

Monika, Arockia. "Indian Graphic Novels - An Introduction", *Research Gate*, Dec. 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337705164_Indian_Graphic_Novels-An_Introduction, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

"Is It a Comic Book or Graphic Novel? Learn the Difference Between Graphic Novels and Comics" *MasterClass*, 8 Nov. 2020, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/learn-the-difference-between-graphic-novels-and-comics#what-is-a-graphic-novel>, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

Dhriatbrata, T. B. "A Brief Account of Graphic Narratives in India", *Sahapedia*, 18 Oct. 2016, <https://www.sahapedia.org/brief-account-of-graphic-narratives-india>, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

Jain, Isha. "Indian Graphic Novel and how it emerged". *Academia*, https://www.academia.edu/30083473/Indian_Graphic_Novel_and_how_it_emerged, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.

Mahurkar, Vaishnavi. “Kari: A Graphic Novel About Lesbianism and Big-City Love”, *Feminism in India (FII)*, 28 Mar. 2017, <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/03/28/kari-book-review/>, Accessed on 22 June 2021.

Fernandes, Richard. “Kari - A Review”, *IndieFolio*, <https://www.indiefolio.com/project/5819f20b5d8dc/kari-a-review>, Accessed on 22 June 2021.

Gravett, P. “Amruta Patil: India’s first female graphic novelist”, *Paul Gravett: Comics, graphic novels, manga*, 4 Sept. 2012, http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta_patil, Accessed on 22 Jun. 2021.