

Graphic Memory- Auto/Biographies in Indian Graphic Novels

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Abstract: The graphic novel in India from its emergence has been used to explore significant socio-cultural and political topics. It aims to give information, spread awareness, and reform the society employing methods of comics journalism, visual references, folk art, folk methods of storytelling to gain attention. They remind us of various socio-cultural and political events that we all have been through, via the lens of a real or fictional individual and depict how these affect our daily lives. Autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, recollections have a questionable accuracy and an element of functionality. Indian graphic novels use the methods of comics journalism and graphic treatment of memories, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies and political events. They remind us that in the cotemporary, digital society the private is the political and vice versa. These semi-autobiographical graphic novels are political and a coming of the age story, in which the protagonist and the reader-viewer comes to understand societal truths and realities, bringing about a vigilance and maturity.

Keywords: Memoirs, Coming of the Age Genre, Biographies, Indian Graphic Novels, Political and Socio-Cultural Awareness, Trauma, Censorship.

Graphic novels/ narratives on historical themes and the lives of iconic personalities in India is not a new concept. The idea of historical or autobiographical/biographical Indian graphic novels can be traced back to *Amar Chitra Katha* series, an indigenous Indian comic series that produced issues on historical past of India and on the lives of great personalities like Bhagat Singh, Veer Savarkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gautam Buddha, Swami Ramakrishna etc. Graphic novels have a constant theme of history, memory, and trauma in some form or the other. Therefore, graphic novels are used by the socially and politically marginalised groups to put their stance, as an alternative perspective to the mainstream. Graphic novels/narratives are considered a postmodern, post liberalized, post realist and innovative form to portray the marginalised experiences and the other side of official history, in a way so that it can reach its readers in the most effective and intimate way. It is equipped with the lightness of the comics medium and embodies a serious aim. An examination of historical events, memories, and traumatic experiences through the framework of graphic novels/narratives leads to re-examination of memories & events and an emergence of a counter narrative.

Graphic novels/narratives not only re-elevate history, trauma and memory but also redefine what can be counted as the above concepts. Critic Roger Luckhurst observes such an exploration into these concepts redefine social and institutional knowledge as well as contribute to the reshaping of political and cultural forms. Graphic novels involve the process of consolidating a so-called post-traumatic subjectivity and this is done via visual and popular culture images, icons, events, references. Andreas Huyssen points out that the environment where the event occurs, the selective construction by the creator and the selective remembrance forms the core of such graphic novels. It features self-reflexivity, duality of icons, intermeshing of forms and genres and the narrative relies on the response of the reader-viewer. Autobiographical/biographical graphic novels most of the time will also be a historical and trauma graphic narrative. Such graphic novels by default demand documentation, challenging the limits of representation and embody the anxiety of public circulation of risky recollections of an event or figure. They become the site for thinking about these complexities, these historical tensions. They challenge the culturally dominant form of history, trauma, and memory; reshape it, redefine it and aim to move beyond the traditional definitions of these concepts. This is done by employing techniques like reevaluating hegemonic and Eurocentric narrative temporalities visualizations and documentation via journalistic forms like comics journalism, developmental comics, visual reportage, reviewing alternative perspectives through concepts of victim-perpetrator, memory and post memory, genealogies. For instance, in *A Gardner in The Wasteland* by Srividya Natarajan and Aparajita Ninan, the creators overturn the stereotypical, mass recognized image of the Brahman, and critically examine it, to re-construct perspectives of readers from the traditionally known one. A caricature of a fat Brahman is created, complete with a caste thread, Tilak and a tuft of hair epitomize the morally devoid brahmin, casually committing atrocities, a role reversal. The graphic novel presents the other side of caste perspective and reverses the polarization of good godly Brahmin and the evil rakshasa like Dalit. Scriptures, myths, and tales are reconstructed, tales of the indigenous non-Aryan, Hindu mythical heroes uncovered and retold like of the tribal king Bali, the grandson of Prahalad. In present times Bali depicted as an asura killed by Vamana the 5th avatar of lord Vishnu. Page 56- 57 of the work shows Jotiba, the persona of Jyoti Rao Phule explains this is how the upper caste dominated the

culture and history of the indigenous people dismissing their sense of power and ownership.

Delhi Calm(2010) by Vishwa jyoti Ghosh narrates the troubling times of the Emergency period visually and textually. Many illegal, inhuman acts were conducted during the 18-month period of Emergency from 1975-77. It is set in the mid 1970's, re-narrating the lives and times of people during the Emergency period which involved joblessness, censorship, political propaganda, immediate arrests of leaders of the oppositional parties, forced sterilization drives etc. The illustrations depict a complete dominance of the State, embedded with iconic posters and slogans like "Talk Less, Work More" "Keep Distance, Keep Quiet" (Ghosh 5). *Delhi Calm* shows the political activism that followed The Emergency, Ghosh fictionalizes details of that period like historical incidents, names of political figures cities for example Delhi as Powerpolis, Indira Gandhi as moon and Jayaprakash Narayan as the prophet etc. Satire is used as a mode to represent the defects and faults of the nation's history even the civil society. The inherent deficiencies of the political systems the follies of the political leaders are represented in this graphic novel by exposing the economic, cultural, and social follies of our nation. Historical graphic novels use illustrations, sketches, newspaper reports speeches, slogans, Hand drawn maps, photos, images etc to highlight issue that were hidden or not spoken about earlier. Ghosh satirizes the country's socio- political issues by using caricatures and cartoons. The contrast between the original personalities and the caricatured version which are easily recognizable by the reader-viewers who are even slightly aware of the political landscape of the nation, brings out a dark comic effect, a key feature of political graphic satire. In *Delhi Calm* the visual images link to the archival, nostalgic style washes in sepia tones focuses on the psychic impact of the historical even on personal lives of the characters. A combination of the cartoon and caricature style to satirize and exaggerate historical figures of Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan, builds tension and anxiety within its readers since this caricature are immediately recognisable by readers who have some idea about Indian politics. Hence exaggeration and satirization works to reclaim history throughout this work. The images drawn in sepia tone indicate the actual incidents of 1975 and black and white images indicate separate stories of different political leaders like moon and the prophet. This is a cinematic technique, where the retrospective story is told in black and white or negative colours. Sepia is employed for old memories and nostalgia. Page 5 showcases the notorious Delhi traffic and the conditions during Emergency juxtaposed together, image of a crowded window of a bus with a slogan behind the bus "Keep Distance. Keep Quiet"(Ghosh 5), in the rear window we see faces wearing masks on their mouth symbolising their prohibition of speaking or expressing their opinions on the condition.

These together create an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, suspicion where commenting on the current condition is officially prohibited. The graphic novel interspersed with intertextual allusions to other popular images giving a new implication to these images for example the masks of the 'smiling saviours' reminds us of the mask of V (a revolutionary fighting for justice for the common man) from *V For Vendetta* by Alan Moore. But here it is used to show the government's oppressive machinery, representing the government agents conduct injustices on behalf of the government.

The juxtaposition of political, historical events with personal trajectories leads to a formation of a cultural aesthetics based on the political and social shifts occurring. Hence the readers need to move beyond the personal narratives to link to greater cultural phenomenon. Graphic novelists present the personal within the larger framework of history and society addressing issues like sexuality, politics, religion, traumatic events loss etc. Graphic novels have the potential to combine lived experiences with political by carrying out negotiations between time and space. Graphic novels can represent a nuanced and dynamic life in a way people tend to think giving them the capability of political influence and public ethical responsibility. Gillian Whitlock acknowledges that visual images can invoke moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewers for the sufferings of others. This is achieved by arousing a recognition of the experience of the marginalized Other, by the reader-viewer. Graphic novels open space for marginalized identities and 'map' multifaceted selves, creating interactive 'maps' via which the reader- viewers can investigate the ethical and connective experiences of marginalized self. Graphic novels produce nuanced and complex understandings of marginalized identities while making them accessible general readers.

Keeping in mind the feature of self-reflexivity of graphic novels, readers are reminded that this narration is not the truth itself but a re-narrativization of the truth. Accuracy is displayed through bringing in details from incorporating socio- cultural references and witness accounts. It presents an imperfect historiography and makes its readers acknowledged it as well. This is achieved through the portrayal of moments of self-reflexivity, self-awareness, doubts, gaps in memory etc. this forces the readers to stretch the limits of their knowledge and memory as well as question their experiences and opinions that they had earlier. All these features render the autobiographical/biographical graphic novel as believable. Aparajita Ninanthe illustrator of *A Gardener in The Wasteland* imagines the events from Savitribai's life her experiences of caste discrimination on page 12. She visualizes and creates fictionalised experiences; a critical reading panels lead readers- viewers to realise that the authors as well as the readers do not have

full access to this history. This dramatic irony is used by the authors to escape the problems of authenticity and accuracy related to autobiographical/biographical graphic novels. Graphic novels/narratives tend to induce the object with meanings helping the creators transform a fictional tale into a believable life narrative. Cultural memory can be reviewed, and history can be reconstructed in graphic novels when both authors and readers work together to unravel the narrative presented.

Hillary Chute in her 2008 article "Ragtime, Kavalier & Clay, And The Framing Of Comics" draws similarity between contemporary fiction and contemporary graphic narratives as both of them have similar themes and are product of the postmodern society and experiment with political focus. Hillary Chute adds that autobiographic/biographic graphic narratives are able to portray the personal nature and actual content of the subject i.e., individual in this case in a popular cultural form with political issues while foregrounding it in the contemporary postmodern world. Today autobiography is not only about exceptional personalities rather it has become more like a confessional or the record of one's daily lives or something that the protagonist wants to speak about. Graphic novels construct the reality as real within their framework of autobiographical/ biographical graphic novels by employment of the content as well as its structure (i.e., panels, speech balloons, frames, and gutters etc).

Creators of autobiographical/biographical graphic narratives negotiate their position as a subject in these works via the comics medium. As a result, these graphic novels are dynamic, and they are activated through the meaning making done by the author and readers together simultaneously. This is especially true in case of challenging traumatic and historical narratives where the meaning constructed is as significant as the process through which it is constructed. The interconnectedness of fiction and nonfiction in graphic novels help in narrating such narrative since the events, memories experiences that cannot be explained rationally are explained fictionally which sometimes is closer to the truth. History, memory, and loss can be aesthetically represented alongside politically charged events in graphic novels, by fictionally exploring and comprehending the past. Documentary methods or creating an archive is central to the idea of graphic memoirs, this collecting, investigating, and ordering of documentary material is part of creating a coherent narrative by linking past and present, fiction and nonfiction, author characters and readers, time, and space, eventually connecting the world within the work and outside the work together. Since these materials are reconstructed and recollected from the past therefore gaps and blank spaces exist due to insufficient data and lapses in memory of eyewitnesses. These gaps are the areas where the reader must step in and deduct a

meaning from their understanding of the information provided in the work and the knowledge that they have. Time, space, emotion, and perspectives are depicted through textual and visual techniques in graphic novels. Meaning is generated through the juxtaposition of images, its shape, its repetition and recollection of memories and recurring patterns.

Bhimayana by S. Anand and illustrated by Durgabai and Subhash Vyam, is a loose adaptation of Dr. R Ambedkar's autobiographical writing "waiting for a visa". *A Gardner in the Wasteland* by Srividya Natarajan and Aparajita Ninan is loosely based on Jyoti Rao Phule's seminal work *Gulamgiri* and narrates his and his wife Savitribai Pules fight against untouchability. These Indian graphic novels engage their readers actively and contribute to a autobiographical/biographical and historical graphic novels engage with history, memory, trauma, loss and life writing in two ways first by re-presenting historical events, retelling them from an alternative view point challenging the mainstream history traditionally available and the other is by a detailed description of the everyday life to the protagonist/narrator/ characters on a micro scale, depicting everyday lifestyles of these characters in the era, culture and society they inhabit. They are foregrounded around a major historical or social event. This is done by drawing reference from historical events from the subcontinent as well as historical narrative across the globe. The textual narrative of the work advances the story forward whereas the visual narrative embeds the events and actions with multilayer meanings, showing the social and personal dimension of the official history. They decent rehistorical documentation and challenge the notion that history is fixed truth by revealing the constructed nature of official history. *Bhimayana*, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, *The River of Stories* (1993) by Orijit Sen and *Delhi Calm* show that larger political and cultural processes or phenomena's affect the individual private life as well and by default the lives of a community. In *Delhi Calm* the declaration of the Emergency, which have large social and political effects but the immediate response that the protagonist has to it is not the fear of censorship and suspension of fundamental rights but his individual or personal economic subsistence and personal security as he wonders if it will hinder the payment of his monthly salary. *Delhi Calm* links a major national and historical event with the personal life histories of individual, humanizing the documentation of this historical event. This also proves that history is not a single major event rather an amalgamation of many individual histories which occurs over a period rather than on a single day which is recorded in history.

The work aimed to introduce the global public to the issue of caste discrimination practiced in India and parts of the subcontinent. Although the caste system is legally banned but its social practice and cultural thought process

still in existence today even in urban societies. The graphic novel is narrated from the viewpoint of a young Ambedkar as a little boy and follows his life as a young man and finally an iconic political leader. It can be seen as a loose bildungsroman since the narrative follows from his childhood till his death. The narrative incorporates major socio- historical events which are a corner stone in the anti-caste movement in India like the Mahar satyagraha, the round table talks regarding the spate electorates for Dalits, the mass conversion to Buddhism led by Dr. B. R Ambedkar himself, etc. in order to make the global audience about the segregation and discrimination that the Dalits faced based on the caste system, the graphic novel is divided into three books i.e. book 1 water, book 2 travel and book 3 shelter. These symbolize that Dalits were deprived of these basic amenities that a human being requires to sustain his/her live. The cruelty and inhumanity of the upper castes is depicted on pages 19, 20, 21 where little Bhim(the persona of Dr. B. R Ambedkar as a child) desperate plea for a drink of water is nonchalantly ignored by the upper caste school authorities instead Bhim is humiliated in front of other students because of his long hair. He is also made to sit separate and not given a mat to sit on, the attitude that the upper caste teacher shows are also hostile towards him. Water one of the basic necessities of life, which every human has a right to is denied to him because of being born a Dalit. Later on, page 23 we see that even animals are allowed to drink water from a pond, but a Dalit cannot, on page 54 when Dalits led by Dr.B.R Ambedkar lay claim to a pond to use in Mahad region.

Indian historical and biographical graphic novels attempt to put light on iconic historical figure who are deliberately unacknowledged by the mainstream Indian history. Mahatma Gandhi's life, social works and writings has been covered and highlighted by the mainstream, repetitively but political and historical icons like Jyoti RaoPhule, Dr. B.R Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule are only briefly mentioned a few times. Dr. B. R Ambedkar is only known as the drafter of the Constitution but his life as an untouchable and his actions as social leader to fight against caste discrimination is not highlighted. His various social treatises and political writings on the issue of caste and his socio- political suggestions are not accessible to readers in the Indian book market. These Indian graphic novels also focus on the personal aspect of the iconic personality; it humanizes them and makes these national, public personalities relatable and approachable. It makes the readers aware that before being a political leader and national icon,Dr. B.R Ambedkar was an untouchable, has experienced discrimination first-hand and was fighting for the Dalit right not on behalf of the community but as a part of the marginalized community himself. *Bhimayana* book 1 depicts how Ambedkar as a little boy when travelling with his family was denied transportation, a cart ride in that

period due to him belonging to the Mahar community (untouchable) page 36-37. In *Bhimayana* we are able to view Dr. B.R Ambedkar as a person, his experiences with his family and friends his inner thoughts rather than his political achievements which although recorded in history are sadly not highlighted enough. *Bhimayanad* depicts Dr. B.R Ambedkar personal experiences of untouchability, interlaced with contemporary newsreports about caste discrimination. In this way it connects the past and the present narratives, bringing to the fore that caste discrimination is still practiced today, and is deliberately hidden by authorities in charge.

Similarly, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* depicts the life events and the personal struggles of Jyoti Rao Phule and Savitribai Phule agent the caste discrimination. The graphic novel portrays the actions that the husband wife duo took to free the Dalits from the discrimination they faced under the caste system. Although it depicts the historiographies of the past even covering Jyoti Rao Phule's tracing of the origination of caste system visually, logically tracing the arrival and actions of Aryans on the Indian subcontinent and explaining the actions that the Aryans took to ensure their dominance of the indigenous people which according to Jyoti Rao Phule were the untouchables and Adivasis. The work is narrated from within a larger framework of Aparajita Ninan and Srividya Natarajan planning to write a book based on Jyoti Rao Phule's *Gulamgiri*, thereby connecting the past and the present together. As Jyoti Rao Phule compiles his experiences and investigations about the caste system and the supremacy of the brahmins. On the last page 123 we see Ninanand Natrajan sitting in a park and reading Savitribai poem and the readers entering the frame as the passer by public in the park stop and listen to them.

Post memory is a term used by Marianne Hirsch to describe connective memories or hand me down memories, refers to traumatic memories or memories of historical memories that still affect the individuals lives and families even though one has not experienced the event or trauma first-hand. It refers to memories of the third generational authors about events which still affect socio- cultural media and cultural practices. These memories are no longer reside in the mind of a living being who witnessed these events and felt those experiences and has already become a part of the historical past. These memories reconstructed through media reports, historical and cultural artifacts and testimonies like letters and diary writings. In case the protagonists don't have any first-hand experiences of the event then authors create imaginary spaces where they portray a fictitious conversation with the character that experienced it directly or asks and answers question about the production, the process and consumption and dissertation of the post memory. Hence the narrators of these graphic memoirs are partly a creation of documentations and testimonies, individual personal memories, and partly formed by the socio-cultural trends

and practices like films, media reports, books, posters, slogans, paintings etc. Cultural and national memory is depicted via individual and personal graphic narratives which may depict the transnational personal life stories of famous personalities as well as ordinary individuals experiencing large historical events or personal events which are a result of larger political, economic, or social decisions. Vice versa individual efforts when done collectively can have larger national, socio-political and cultural consequences as in case of Dr. B.R Ambedkar and Jyoti Rao Phule and Savitribai Phule who made efforts to educate the lower castes that education was the way to remove the practice of illogical caste discrimination. The visual-textual narrative needs to be untangled to understand its impact. They aim to analyze those periods' perspectives, practices, trends, and worldview, bring awareness of the actual historical period rendering it realistic. Readers positioned at a distance yet are empathetic participants of the graphic narrative.

The River of Stories documents Orijit Sen's experience of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the oral traditions and myths of the tribals there is preserved. The movement failed and thousands of people were displaced their livelihoods and homes lost but it shows that a community unified can challenge the government and gain global momentum. The story is still relevant to contemporary public life a commentary on the country's social and political milieu. Vishnu a journalist from Delhi goes to Balanpur where the Narmada Bachao Andolan is happening, his journey is described and the people he meets, and the responses of the protestors is described in detail visually and textually. It is narrated though a dual framework of the present and the past. The larger frame past narrative which tells the story of the origin of Reva (Narmada) river from the Adivasi's (tribal people's) mythic tales. Thereby connecting the past and the present as well as presenting an alternative history of the river Reva and the communities living in the Reva valley. This gives a voice to the minority people, offers their perspective on the situation which mainstream news and official history does not present rather deliberately hides. It documents the lifestyles, the beliefs, myths, and festivals of these Adivasi in detail. The movement against the construction of the dam also draws attention to the fact that this issue is linked to a global environmental issue. This elevates the issues, the crisis, and the sufferings that a small community in India to an issue that not only demands national but global attention and has a global relatability. Two contrasting narratives represent the larger debate between the modern developmental model of progress and the traditional self-sustaining tribal lifestyle and practices. Vishnu's journalistic reports smoothly transitions into Malgu Gayan's mythic telling of the history of Reva River, significant because the Adivasis still follow these beliefs and practices both in their lifestyle and

worldview. The history of the river is intrinsically linked with the historiography of the Adivasis. On page 3 a double page spread charts the origin and history of river Reva with commentary from Malgu Gayan at certain places. The page is a fictionalized hand drawn map tracing the route of the river and marks the places that are cultural significant for these people not a political map with political boundaries since that is how these people perceive these places and commit them to their cultural and collective memory. It juxtaposes the narratives of the indigenous people and the macrocosmic modern world, bringing marginal silenced voices, histories, and stories to the fore. It brings forward the opinions of the urbane populace have on these people's troubles or the response to their challenging the governmental injustice. The author incorporates the opinions of some real protestors in form of the article written by Vishnu for example Kursheo "a tribal peasant from Umargaon" on page 52 and Buribari who complains about the marketers who come to their village and beat up their people and molest their women. The graphic novel acknowledges that the issue is not only about their displacement but also about their loss of livelihood, culture and dispersal of their community which is not bound by political boundaries. It has an economic and socio-cultural dimension to it of top of the political one. Orijit Sen presents perspectives of sides, the tribal people's perspectives, problems, and voices are presented alongside the urban city picture. It calls the readers into the narrative, representing the individual conscience interlaced with the collective experience. These experiences make aware the future generations of the traumatic times that have been in the past.

Scholar Hillary Chute opines that the graphic novel format is conducive for the autobiographic, biographic and memoirs genre since it gives its readers access to the self-reflective narrator's voice and the experiences they experienced as well as access to seemingly simplistic yet vivid rendering of traumatic events in the past, visually presented. This comprehensive rendering of complex issues makes the characters of the same seem more relatable to the readers, especially adolescent readers, who live in a primarily visual world. Graphic memoirs/auto/biographies "present narrative strategies reminiscent of adolescent behaviours and subcultures, such as experimentation with self-image, a heightened awareness of the potential for images to produce shock in the viewer, and a fascination with the power of social and visual performance in the construction of identity" (Whitlock & Polettixviii). Graphic novels have high potential for generating awareness and appeal for sensitive issues like autism, social justice, sexual abuse, homosexuality etc, since they require the active engagement and intrigue of its readers, it helps in beginning to search for sustainable solutions for these issues. Indian graphic novels deal with sensitive, historical issues that are deliberately hidden by the mainstream. In order to

move towards a more just, equal and sustainable society these issues are required to be addressed and resolved.

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