

Re-visioning History and Visualising Caste: A Postcolonial Reading of *Bhimayana* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland*

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Abstract

The early graphic narratives from India, like the *Amar Chitra Kata*, focus on proliferating the sense of nationhood by representing mythical stories and historical events in the graphic narrative form. These graphic narratives are considered postcolonial in their attempt to counter colonial influence by invoking the nation's past glory. This paper problematises categorising a graphic narrative as postcolonial solely based on the coloniser and the colonised dichotomy. In his essay *Postcolonial Remains*, Robert JC Young proposes a shift within postcolonial theory by concerning itself with the subaltern within postcolonial societies. The graphic narratives *Bhimayana* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland* demonstrate that shift through the visualisation of caste in history. The idea of nationhood and a glorious past is questioned by constructing history from below. The visualisation of caste is at the centre of reconstructing or re-visioning history in both graphic narratives. In that process of deconstruction and reconstruction (re-vision) of history, a new visual aesthetic is produced, along with a shift in the postcolonial graphic narrative scene.

Keywords: Graphic Narrative, Postcolonial, Caste, Visualisation.

Introduction

In his foreword to *Palestine* (2001), Edward Said relates the act of reading comics with liberation and subversion. The comic form, including the graphic novel, was at the margins compared to other cultural forms. There was little pedagogical interaction with the form until its claim to legitimacy with the Pulitzer Prize award in 1992 for the graphic novel *Maus* (1991). The pedagogical interaction that followed was limited to 'literary' graphic narratives, mostly non-fictional (Chute 1-32). The mainstream graphic narratives received little to no pedagogical engagement. Postcolonial theory's rise to prominence coincides with the graphic novel's rise to legitimacy in history. Joe Sacco in *Palestine* (2001) draws himself to be reading Edward Said's writings. A direct reference to postcolonial theory in a seminal work like Sacco's establishes postcolonial awareness within the comics and graphic novel culture. The graphic novel, which has a history of being marginalised, provides a suitable framework for conveying postcolonial concerns. The main concerns of postcolonial comics and graphic novels are migration, cultural identity, and intercultural encounters, which they share in common

with the postcolonial literature proper. Without a stable canon, postcolonial comics encompass various works that belong to broad thematic and formal spectrums. Sandra Heinen classifies graphic narratives as postcolonial based on two conditions: 1. The text's origin from a postcolonial society 2. The text's concern with postcolonial topics (Heinen 265-88).

Graphic narratives written in India readily fulfil the first condition of Heinen to be considered as a postcolonial graphic narrative, but studying the comic lineage in India tells a story otherwise. The subject matter of early graphic narratives, like *Amar Chitra Kata*, is drastically different from the subject matters of contemporary Indian postcolonial graphic narratives. *Amar Chitra Kata* "laid foundations (for) informing children and adolescents about various Indian historical events and tales as its subject matter" (Yadav 50). These historical and mythical stories narrated in the graphic narrative form aim at proliferating the idea of nationhood through idealised stories about the glorious past. Anant Pai, the creator of *Amar Chitra Kata*, says that the purpose of his work is to tell the "pleasant parts" of history and "promote integration" through it (McLain 156 qtd in. Yadav 50). Mythological stories are placed alongside narratives about actual historical figures, blurring the line between history and mythology. Perforation of mythology into history plays into the idea of a glorious past with nationalistic undertones. The brand of nationalism in these narratives ignores the current ugly social realities prevalent in the country. It diverts attention away from the constructed past originating from positions of power. These narratives enable the privileged to maintain their status quo and erase the voices of disenfranchised people from both the past and the present. So, such graphic narratives that deliberately ignore society's lower strata and propagate the dominant narrative of history cannot be considered postcolonial graphic narratives, despite emerging from a postcolonial society. Robert JC Young says,

"Postcolonialism is not just a disciplinary field, nor is it a theory which has or has not come to an end. Rather, its objectives have always involved a wide-ranging political project – to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below". (Young 20)

Postcolonial theory can be reoriented to address any lopsided, unfair power relations. Young puts forward the dynamic nature of postcolonialism to repurpose itself to address various issues, evolving with time. He also says the postcolonial is not a "singular theoretical formation, but rather an interrelated set of critical and counterintuitive perspectives" (Young 20). So, a graphic narrative needs to address the unequal power relations existing in society by positioning itself from below to question those (with power) above. It is in this context that the two graphic narratives, *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar* written by Srividya Natarajan and S.Anand, illustrated by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, and *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* written by Srividya Natarajan and illustrated by Aparajita Ninan, are discussed as postcolonial graphic narratives in this paper. These graphic novels narrate the biographies of two of the most influential social reformers in Indian history. The biography form is the base structure for a complex narrative involving various visual and narrative techniques. Both texts discuss caste by tracing it in history from the past to the present through the life and ideas of Ambedkar and Phule. The graphic narratives integrate the history of caste oppression from the past to the present through retelling their written works and life stories. "According to Witek, it is preferable to explain social issues in the graphic novel form '...because of the complexity in representation that a mix of illustrative material and written word allows' leading to a unique approach in understanding of the issue" (Witek 245 qtd in. Yadav 50). The caste discrimination in contemporary times is juxtaposed with the discriminatory practices of the past, simultaneously questioning the authenticity of the dominant history and positioning the books as revisionary texts that narrate history from below. The visualisation of caste plays a central role in

the revision of history. The dominant visual codes and aesthetics are subverted through novel art styles and visual techniques in the revision process. Visual coding of caste performs a pedagogic function. The local, as well as the global readers, are shown instead of being explained about caste. The visualization of caste in various forms eliminates abstraction. It enhances the understanding of the reader about the caste system and the profound arguments of Ambedkar and Phule against the caste system. The multimodality of graphic narratives simplifies the ideas that must be conveyed through complex visual techniques. The historicization of caste through the multimodal medium of graphic narratives places the texts at the intersection of postcolonialism and new historicism in a novel format. The novelty also leads to complexity, the study of which is the primary concern of this paper.

Reconstructing History from Below

The Indian graphic novels “from their inception, represented contemporary Indian society and its serious socio-cultural and often political issues...” which holds true for *A Gardener in the Wasteland* and *Bhimayana* (Biswas 195). How history is constructed within the narratives sets these two texts apart from other graphic narratives dealing with similar issues. The history, as represented in these works, challenges the dominant narratives about caste, nation, and identity. In his foreword to *Bhimayana*, John Berger says that the book “replace(s) the stage of history with the body of a community. A body with a long past, a present of many voices, and a vision of the future”. *Bhimayana* begins within the contemporary time, at “a bus stop in an Indian city” (Natarajan et al. 11). The imprecise time and location, though indicating the recent past, preview the structure of the narrative and its primary concern. Placing the narrative in a partially indefinite space and time constitutes a collective history, where the central issue of the text, caste, is made into a collective issue though discussed through the body of a particular community, as mentioned earlier.

In *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, global collective history is constituted by references from texts, historical incidents, images and ideas of eminent ideologues from around the world as global popular culture references. “The graphic novel form, through its use of illustration, has a more direct and instant method of eliciting an immediate response in readers. The images used to depict historical facts present reality in ways that words cannot” (Yadav 51). The graphic novel, as a hybrid multimodal form, opens up infinite possibilities of representation. The visual aspect of the graphic narrative materialises history readily to the eyes of the reader, not as an absolute truth but rather as a narrative. Graphic narratives are aligned in spirit with new historicist perspectives, as history can only be represented as a narrative using this form.

Both the graphic narratives contain accounts of caste discrimination and caste-based violence in the form of newspaper clippings. The clippings are placed throughout these texts and function as the link connecting history to the present. One instance of the past, present, and future merging in *A Gardener in the Wasteland* takes place on page 79, where the panels on the top row show Jotiba Phule explaining how the Aryans built a sanctimonious identity for themselves and created laws that suit themselves. The panels in the second row show the authors of the graphic novel reading a newspaper article about the ban on cow slaughter by the Karnataka Assembly. The third panel shows a man wearing a t-shirt that reads “I love beef” imprisoned due to the law. The issue of caste is traced from the past to the present, along with its likely future impact (Natarajan and Ninan 79). In *Bhimayana*, on pages 11 to 16, the narrative shifts through three different timelines. It begins with three individuals discussing how caste is no longer an issue in the present (Natarajan and Ninan 11-16). The narrative shifts to showcasing bits from newspapers carrying the news of atrocities against Dalits spanning across the first decade of the 21st century, followed by the representation of the early life of Dr. Ambedkar. These sudden shifts in time and space illustrate the relevance of history in approaching the issue of caste in the present.

Both texts represent history's dissipation into the present and the future using various visual and narrative techniques. The issue of caste is always contextualised through history by rejecting the dominant narratives. In both texts, the voices of the people living in contemporary times reflect the dominant narratives about caste in India. These privileged voices are used as a starting point to delve into the history of the disenfranchised, methodically taking apart the fabricated stories passed off as history. Thus, a new history, problematizing the existing power hierarchy, is rewritten (or, in this case, redrawn) from the point of view of the oppressed.

Nonconformity in Visualising Caste

The artwork of *Bhimayana* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland* do not conform to the dominant visual aesthetics of graphic narratives. They do not use traditional structuring, panels, backgrounds, and colour schemes. Though the texts' primary concerns and approaches are similar, the visual outcomes are drastically different. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, the illustrators of *Bhimayana*, employ Gond art, a famous folk art style practised by the Gond tribe from central India. "They employ dignas (ancient auspicious decoration on home walls) instead of panels, rejecting the monotonous photorealism..." and other overused techniques of "sequential visual arts" (Mukherjee 33). The concept of the panel is redefined because throughout the graphic novel, the flowing patterned lines, which function like panel borders, are not repeated. Every patterned line is distinct from the other and never drawn in the same shape. When unpleasant events happen and discriminatory words are spoken in the narrative, these borderlines embody those. On page 35, the border lines become edgy and rough, and serpent imagery is incorporated into it to reflect the vileness of the spoken words. On the other hand, when pleasant and progressive events happen in the narrative, these border lines become smoother, and the art within them is incorporated with colours (Natarajan et al. 35).

Aparajita Ninan in, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* employs a mixture of Western and Indian visual aesthetics in line with the demands of the narrative. Like the Vyams, Ninan does not stick to the traditional narrative panelling style. There are multiple instances of images covering two whole pages, with action happening both in the foreground and the background, without clear demarcation through panels or page borders. While the artwork of *Bhimayana* has an abstract quality, the artwork of Ninan concerns itself with the concrete, but it does not equate to reality. The mythical imagination is materialised by depicting them literally, as described in the old texts. Such an endeavour problematises the legitimacy claims of ancient texts like Manusmriti, which validates the caste system. The images "meant for deconstructing the Manusmriti myths are widely spread out on entire pages of the novel, offering ample space and time for their internalization rather than making the reader struggle to find its meaning in the density of the tightly placed panels" (Yadav 51). The visual techniques used in the text perform the function of elucidating the ideas of Jotiba Phule and the deconstruction of the myths as argued in Jotiba Phule's text, *Slavery*.

The juxtaposition of images by dividing the panels into "Phule's perspective and "Brahman's perspective" clearly showcases the intent of the author to distinguish between the dominant historical narratives and the alternate history from the perspective of the oppressed (Natarajan and Ninan 67-69). The left side of the panel shows the alternate narrative, and the right side shows the dominant narrative. They are symmetrically drawn with a central figure whose physical features morph based on which side of the narrative they belong to. The background, meanwhile, has action pertaining to the same. Phule's arguments against the authenticity of Hindu mythology are presented through pages with black backgrounds without borders. Every avatar of Vishnu is deconstructed in several places in the narrative. The black backgrounds ironically represent the glorious past, signifying that they were actually dark times in history. Ninan also uses a grotesque

art style to represent the oppressors, which contrasts with the sanctimonious image they built for themselves. The Brahmin priests are drawn as hairy, unhygienic, and brute people. The illustrator reverses the dominant visual codes by showing the oppressor as unclean and uncouth throughout the narrative.

In both graphic narratives, the illustrators reject the dominant visual aesthetics in two distinct ways to reach the same end. The usage of Gond art in *Bhimayana* does not merely break the established visual aesthetics of the graphic novel form. It also provides an alternate visual language that can potentially be pathbreaking for Indian graphic narratives and postcolonial visual aesthetics in the larger scheme of things. On the other hand, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* does not steer away from established aesthetics of the graphic narrative form but employs innovative visual techniques to problematize the dominant aesthetic by employing the same to an extent. By materialising caste, a social phenomenon, into visuals on the page, the graphic narratives claim legitimacy for the experiences of the oppressed, simultaneously delegitimising the dominant history. Thus, visual nonconformity performs a two-fold function of conveying contemporary postcolonial concerns and creating new visual aesthetics.

Positioning the Local in the Global

The issues and concerns addressed in the postcolonial literatures coming out from various postcolonial societies may vary based on the context. However, they can all be connected as collective history by observing the similarities in the power structures these literatures seek to dismantle. So, the postcolonial graphic narratives from India can also be positioned in a collective framework of graphic narratives from other postcolonial societies. Tribal Gond art in *Bhimayana* is an example of using local aesthetics to address a national issue, caste. “*A Gardener in the Wasteland* provides an excellent example of how Indian graphic novels connect local and global histories and memories, removing aspects of distancing and othering: a collective common history or memory emerges, which transgresses the boundaries of time and space” (Biswas 190). The references to the civil rights movement in the U.S., images of eminent ideologues across global history, and Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man are all an attempt to locate the text within global history. The cross-cultural references prove that similar power structures exist across space and time, and people have undergone similar struggles to fight against them. Thus, both graphic narratives position themselves in global history through the means of the local.

Conclusion

According to Sandra Heinen, graphic narratives can be considered postcolonial based on two conditions. One, it should be produced in a postcolonial society. Two, it should address postcolonial concerns. Both criteria have their limitations. The problem with the former is that not every text produced in a postcolonial society addresses postcolonial issues, and the latter does not clarify the postcolonial concerns. These gaps are addressed by applying Young’s ideas about how postcolonial theory can be reoriented to address contemporary issues by making power structures the focal point. *Bhimayana* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland* can be considered postcolonial graphic narratives, as they address the issue of caste in contemporary times. They reject the mainstream historical narrative and reconstruct history by addressing the social issue of caste. The authenticity of the history is problematised through various visual techniques. The established visual aesthetics are modified or ultimately rejected, and a new visual aesthetic subverting the dominant aesthetic is formed due to challenging existing power structures. The new visual language produced to address the postcolonial issues and concerns positions these local texts within the global collective history of texts that challenge power structures. Thus, the history is re-visited through the visualization of caste in *Bhimayana* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland* in the postcolonial context.

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