

A Women's World: Capturing the Experiences of Patriarchy in Indian Graphic Novels

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Abstract

Graphic Narratives have paved a new way for the visual culture in India. Graphic Novels are a major shift in Indian writing in English, as it becomes '*a social commentary and cultural critique*' (1). The form of comics is being experimented by Indian Authors. It has become the tool to talk about larger issues of society's present, through stories of individual people. This is an important phenomenon to look into; as it is a shift in Indian comics culture, where now the subjects of these books were no longer the great people; but the common individual. Through these individual stories, authors create a history of the nation and an idea of society. Women writers have played an important role in this. Interestingly, over the years, it can be observed that this form has been used by women for expressing their experiences about society. It would be interesting to see how these novels create, counter, question, deconstruct and/or constructs the idea of society, using the graphic form. This paper attempts to explore how, through the amalgamation of words and graphics, society have been represented within the frame of the graphic novels by women and how these individual narratives, these stories of common women create a larger idea about the society.

Keywords: Visual-storytelling, Indian Graphic Novels, Cultural Studies, Society, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

The canon of literature has been evolving; the canon, which once had very selected literary works, is now being opened to different kind of literatures. Graphic Novels is a relatively new genre, but it has established itself as one of the impactful genre of literature. These graphic novels explore a myriad of issues of our society like identity, socio-political realities, sexuality etc. These graphic novels give a voice to those, who were suffocated in the larger idea of society. Graphic Novels is emerging as a medium to express voices which were unheard, a medium which accommodates marginal voices. As Antarleena Basu analysed the Indian Graphic Narratives and says that "*by focusing on the microcosm, that is, individual suffering, the graphic narrative flows up into the crisis in the macrocosm, that is, the national, social crisis.*" (37). The graphic novel creates an emotional impact on readers by combining both textual as well as visual elements, towards understanding of how society works. Prachi Agarwal also said that "*Caricatures are a very powerful tool which offers us an insight into the political realities, social economic conditions, historical occurrences highlighting the hypocrisies and dual standards of society*"(4). This appears to be the reason, that the graphic form has been extensively used to reflect suffocating spaces.

2. Capturing the experience

Women authors have played a significant role in the area of graphic novels. '*Drawing the Lines*' is a recent Graphic Novel which came after 2012's Nirbhaya rape incident of Delhi. It is about fourteen different women and their experiences. '*Kari*' is another path-breaking novel which reflects a woman's experience of living in a space which suffocates her. There are many other novels like '*Priya's Shakti*', which is about the sexual abuse victim and society around her. On one hand, there are novels like '*Hush*', which is black-and-white novel with no text and tells a story of abused girl-child; but on the other hand there are novels which are colorful and beautiful (visually and textually)

like 'Pashmina' where protagonist explore about women's choices and living without fear. Similarly, 'The Elephant in the Room' has been written by sixteen artists who explore how women see the world and see themselves in it. 'Picture This' is a visual journey which takes the reader to the women's movement of Gujarat. Through these examples, it can be argued that women authors have significantly contributed in graphic novel space, and these fictions narrate and represent personal stories, through which their world view of the society is expressed. Promod Nayar's book titled 'Indian Graphic Novels' is one of the first critical book on Indian Graphic Novels, in which he says that "caricatures are the distorted representation of any individual with a fair amount of exaggerated physiognomies to reflect the inner nature of the individual"(155).

3. Suffocating Society

Kari is one of the Amruta Patil's well known graphic novel. It very remarkably shows how suffocating the society can be. It's about the experience of a girl named Kari and her experience of living in the society. Kari has been read and analysed from different aspects, for example Pia Mukherjee explore Kari in terms of the postcolonial and the postmodern ideas (23). This paper focuses on the relation with the society. In the novel, Kari refers to Mumbai as "smog city" when she says "On my way back home like on any other day, I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent smog city from choking me. I wish I could detach my lungs"(13). Even the pictures support the idea of suffocation. There is another statement by Kari where she says "Please let me breathe! Please let me breathe" (90). This idea of suffocating, of not being able to be who she is, becomes "a metaphor for her experience of living in a heteronormative and patriarchal society" (Dogra 154). Patil tries to create a contrast between Kari and society, creates a melancholic picture. The symbol of Fairy-tales is being used many times in the novel; this is to create contrast with reality of her life where she feels suffocated in the society. It is a suffocation that she feels because of society. Prof. Sakshi Dogra in her examination of the Kari, says that it is "a graphic story of the experiences of minorities' in metropolitan cities"(157).

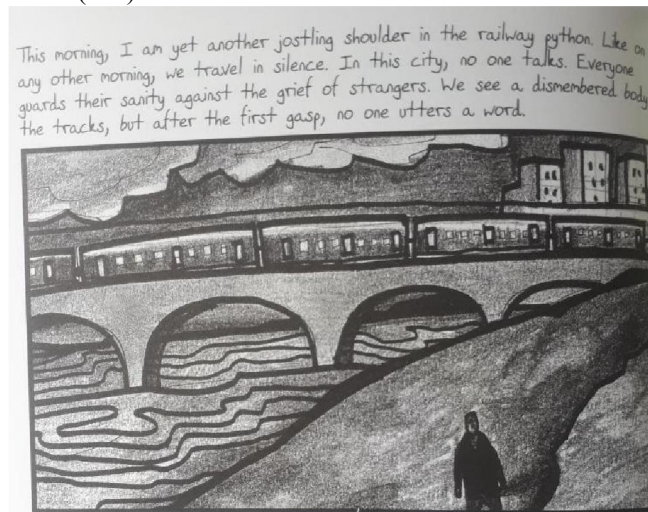


Figure 1: The visual depiction the city where no one talks (Kari)

On many occasions in the novel, one can see idea of loneliness, for example the panel where she is walking alone (Fig.1), or the panel she is shown at railway station. Patil uses these panels very carefully as these panels in a graphic novels can play an important role in our understanding of the novel. These panels contain a *figure*, which does not look as real as in photograph, still one relates to it. Reader feels that the circle and two dots are a human face. There are scientific reasons that make graphic novels such a powerful medium to express human emotions. McCloud believed that the abstract art of comics actually becomes a better way of expression the ideals. Their simplistic form allows the reader to relate with it and feel a connection with it. People see the picture as themselves because they have lesser features. Although the simpler the picture is, the farther it is from reality, still one relates/gets involved with the cartoon, as there are lesser details. In carton, we focus on specific details. He called this process amplification through simplification. E.g. by removing all the facial details, the image is left with specific details, which creates a meaning. This meaning can be amplified in a way a realist image cannot do. This meaning has far reach. It is open to our interpretation. This idea is key to understand graphic form, and its impact. So to explain it a little further, one can understand it through the example of a mask. If we think our face as marks,

we have image of this mask (our face) in our unconscious. Our image of ourselves remains in General Placement (of facial features). When we see other person, we see them in vivid details. So, cartoons are vacuums, where we put our meaning. Just two dots and a line in a circle, becomes the face, and it will be seen as face by unconscious even if we try not to look at it.



Figure 2: The depiction of congested and confined space which reflect Kari's state of mind

The way reader see *Kari's* encounter with society, one can also see the depiction of society in the Graphic Novel '*Drawing the Line*', which is collection of 14 stories written by women about the experience being a "woman" in everyday life. The very first story is titled as '*That's not fair*' by Harini Kaninan. It targets the social construct of fairness, the idea that it is better or superior to be fair skinned. The hypocrisy of society is shown through the eyes of an unborn girl child. '*Photo*' by Reshu Singh is another story that talks about the expectations that society imposed on girls, through the example of marriages. Soumya Menon's '*Ideal Girl*' questions Gender roles created by our society.

In '*Drawing the Line*', the last story is '*Someday*' by Samidha Gunjal, which is about eye-teasing on roads. It has no text and there are just panels with graphics. It is left to reader to perceive the story. A lot of author use gutter for creating a story without saying it. That's what makes this form of graphic novels so powerful. The gutter is a space between panels in any comics. It allows the reader to think and perceive what happens between the frames. Nothing is given still the reader creates an idea of reality that this would have happened. McCloud gave example of 'scene of killing' in comics, where killing is not shown, just dialogue "Ahhh..." and picture of weapon is shown; but it is being perceived by the reader that someone has been killed. Through this reader participate in the story, becomes part of the story. In '*Drawing the Line*', a lot is left on reader to draw the meaning. That's something, which makes it more powerfull as the novel is not preaching a lesson on feminism, but letting the reader feel the experience of how it feels to be a women, and how they see the society around them.

In the end, graphic novels in India do have a recurring theme from the start, and which is a social and political concerns. As a form, graphic novels are a powerful medium, and it has been used to bring the issues in light that matter. Through these graphic novels we get to see how women's gaze towards the society and how they see and position themselves in it. These fictions are the representation of their world. Fortunately, there are more graphic

novels on women and by women than ever before, and it is opening the new avenue for next generation writers and readers. *Kari* and *Drawing the lines*, are just two graphic novels, out of many, which raises critical issues of individual's existence in a society.

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