

Inclusiveness in Indian Graphic Novels: *Bhimayana* and *Kari*

Zahra Ahmad

M.A. English student, Patna Women's College (India)

zahra02ahmad@gmail.com

Received: 15/11/2022

Accepted: 23/11/2022

Published: 15/01/2023

Abstract

Graphic novels employing multimodal semiotic strategies and using verbal and visual mediums are micronarratives. Postmodernism and cultural studies gave rise to several genres focusing on petit narratives. Modern Indian graphic novels depict social issues of marginalization and exploitation, bringing them to the fore. It is simultaneously inclusive of varied themes in their narrative. *Bhimayana*, a critique of the hidden apartheid movement in India showing the struggles of Dalit icon Ambedkar, also includes as its themes: historical events and legislation, ecocentrism, zoomorphism, current happenings and subversion of Brahmanical hegemony. Similarly, *Kari*, a queer text showing the struggles and resistance of a lesbian, also includes themes of migration, alienation, ecology, disease, death, capitalist society and subversion of heteronormativity and patriarchy. This paper intends to analyse the themes and narrative techniques of two graphic novels - *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Natarajan et al. and Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) to show the inclusiveness of varied issues. The paper also illustrates the social issues that are dealt with. It also demonstrates the purpose of graphic novels to give voice to those at the periphery and to show their resistance to the status quo.

Keywords: diversity, homosexuality, identity crisis, petit narrative, racism

Zahra Ahmad, Email: zahra02ahmad@gmail.com

1. Introduction

1.1 *Graphic Novels*

The term *graphic novel*, coined by Richard Kyle in an essay in the comics fanzine *Capa-Alpha* (1964), became popular with the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978). Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A survivor's tale* (1986) was the most significant, while some other graphic novels are Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood*. (2003) Manga Comics, the Japanese style of art, portraying severe issues like the effects of war, the bombing of Hiroshima etc., are considered its root.

According to US psychologist Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory (1973), a prototype consists of characteristic features unlike defining properties given by Plato and Aristotle. Thus, a graphic novel was known as a complex genre with several distinctive gradable types: "1) multilayered plot and narration, 2) multi referential use of color, 3) complex text-image relation, 4) meaning-enhancing panel design and layout, 5) structural performativity, 6) references to texts/media, and 7) self-referential and metafictional devices" (Hesche, 2016, para. 1).

According to Eisner (2008) in *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, graphic novels are: "universally understood images, crafted with the intention of imitating or exaggerating reality" (p. 3). He further comments that focus on graphic elements like page layout, unique techniques and excellent colours minimized the stress on literariness leading to its criticism. Graphic novels employing multimodal semiotic strategies are an amalgamation of verbal and visual mediums to tell a story. For aeons, it was considered a book of entertainment for children. But it gradually evolved to become a cultural artefact. This transformation is evident in the content and form as they epitomize the apprehensions of the age, unlike their original purpose. It encompasses the revolts of the marginalized, depicting the division between the subaltern and the mainstream. Christensen (2006) says, "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." (p. 227)

Indian graphic novel includes social issues and protests in society. It has its root in Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha*, an Indian comic series. *Tinkle*, *Diamond Comics* and *Chacha Chaudhary* were other popular comics of the bygone era. Some foreign comic book series such as *Phantom*, *Mandrake*, *Superman*, *Batman* and *Spiderman* was also published later. Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994) portrays socio-political concerns as a pioneering work.

The post-millennium graphic novels being popular literature, represent culture, and its multiple concerns, through repressed voices, thus becoming a highly politicized platform of discourse. It, therefore, blurs the line and disrupts the hierarchy of the social order. Many employ native art forms such as Gond Art and Payal Scroll pattern, which showed Indianness. Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), Parismita Singh's *Hotel at the End of the World* (2009), *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) by Natarajan et al., *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni (2012), Suhas Sundar's *Odayan* (2013) are few examples.

Nayar (2016) in his book *The Indian Graphic Novel* said, “the ethnographic regional novel, the urban satire and other popular forms of Indian fiction in English one now add, with pride, a brave new medium and genre: the graphic novel” (p. 3).

1.2 Postmodernism

The term postmodern was coined in the forties by Arnold Toynbee, a historian. It was a movement that included every realm: literature, art, and culture. According to Fedosova (2015), postmodernism has several characteristics. Postmodernism challenges standard norms and canons. Some basic features of postmodernism include:

rejection of strict rules of a plot construction; the ironic attitude to reality; a discourse fragmentariness; collage; montage; hybridity of genres; paradoxicality; playing with the text, with time, and with the reader; intertextuality; citation; pluralism of styles; a multilevel text organization; orientation at the plurality of text interpretation; a principle of reader’s co-authorship, etc. (p. 79)

Hutcheon (2004), in her books *The Politics of Postmodernism* and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, gives several features of postmodernism. In the former, she differentiates postmodernism from modernism saying, “In general terms, it takes the form of a self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (p. 1).

According to Lyotard (1979) in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, postmodernity is incredulity towards the metanarratives, representation and universalization. It is anarchic and anti-systematic.

Postmodernism has three possible interconnected but dissimilar meanings as proposed by various theorists: Roland Barthes, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson. It can have a connection with power shifts and the dehumanization of the era after the Second World War.

Some characteristics of postmodern work are extreme self-reflexivity, irony and parody, the breakdown between high and low cultural forms, questioning of grand narratives, visuality and the simulacrum versus temporality, late capitalism, disorientation and fragmentation.

All types of postmodernism depend on the method of deconstruction to study socio-cultural conditions. It has given rise to micro-narrative and petit narratives that talk about local practices and events as one of the realities and not as universal. It questions and negates metanarrative giving voice to the marginalized section.

Postmodern theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari gave a philosophical meaning to rhizome, from the Greek word ‘rhizoma’, meaning roots. According to them, several things exist in the postmodern culture, which does not come from a single origin instead it grows from everywhere and is the same at each place. Since it does not have a centre, postmodern culture resembles a rhizome structure.

1.3 Cultural Studies

Culture comes from the Latin word ‘colere’, meaning to inhabit, care for, till, and worship. It is “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d, par. 1) Cultural Studies developed in 1964 with the start of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. The efforts of Marxist scholars like Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart (*Uses of Literacy*) and Raymond William (*Culture and Society*) led to the start and growth of cultural studies. It widened the study of literature by forming its relation with “the prevailing social, material, historical and ideological conditions” of a particular age. (Gupta, 2008, p. 1) Moreover, it expanded the purview of literature by including “pamphlets ..., non-written texts, and even cultural phenomenon of various kinds.” (p. 1) Cultural study is interdisciplinary and dynamic, leading to civilization. It shows the resistance of dominant ideology through popular culture and subculture. It provides “space for the study of hitherto unheard voices like those of women, Dalits, or other marginalised communities” (p. 10). Popular culture is the culture of the masses or subordinate groups.

2. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011)

Bhimayana by Natarajan et al. is a critique of the hidden apartheid movement in India, which portrays the struggles of the Dalit icon, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The book draws material from Ambedkar’s autobiography *Waiting for Visa*, which recounts his experiences of untouchability, oppression and struggles. The Pradhan Gond tribal artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam have done the illustrations. The book, written as a frame story, is divided into five sections, namely, One Day, Water, Shelter, Travel and The Art of *Bhimayana*. The story has a local setting, starting with a conversation between an upper-caste man and a lower-caste woman at a bus stop. Though it appears as a biography of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, it is a multilayered text giving space to various things. It is inclusive of various topics depicting postmodern rhizome structure.

The title subverts Brahmanical hegemony and forms a counter-narrative against them. The novel exposes the hidden apartheid system in India. Taking a powerful subaltern move challenges and disrupts dominant ideologies and depicts the inhuman treatment meted out to a large section of people on the grounds of an age-old caste system still creating havoc. Postcolonial critical literacy focuses on ecocentrism and making a global impact. By modelling on the lines of the sacred Hindu text *Ramayana*, the story of Prince Ram, *Bhimayana* takes a political turn. Comparing the heroic deeds and struggles of both, an alternate epic of heroism was created, portraying a common untouchable hero.

On one level, *Bhimayana* can be called a biography of Ambedkar. Subjugation, oppression and discrimination form a song to his life, highlighting the power relation between upper and low caste. The novel depicts his traumatic experiences right from childhood to adulthood. The concept of purity and pollution marks the hierarchical caste system. The book also portrays his struggles and resistance in fighting against the caste system. The chapter Water, depicts the denial of potable water to young Ambedkar in school, while the irony is that his father, as a government employee, was building a water tank. While travelling to his father’s place, he says, “... that trip, when he was ten years old, was the first time he had been forced to face the full reality of caste-” (Natarajan, Anand, Vyam, & Vyam, 2011, p. 45). The chapter Shelter, portrays that caste discrimination continues

irrespective of high education or wealth. Ambedkar, despite having a job and being educated at Columbia University, was deprived of shelter in Baroda. Ambedkar begs for cover, “I implore you - let me stay for a week at least.” (Natarajan et al., 2011, p. 68) He had to choose between life and shelter. Ambedkar faces humiliation and was denied proper transportation causing an accident in the chapter Travel, after becoming an established icon of Dalit. One of his followers said, “We are mahars ... Babasaheb, the tongawallas wouldn’t drive you here ...” (p. 81).

The story also presents the resistance put up by Ambedkar. He protested and campaigned for the rights of the lower caste and organized Mahad satyagraha against the prohibition of access to water from the Chavadar Tank. He said, “We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others.” (Natarajan et al., 2011, p. 48), thus creating alternate history. He also tried to get a separate electorate for the lower caste however failed. While framing the constitution, he tried to propagate equality to all.

Apart from portraying Ambedkar, the book also deals with social and political issues. The story starts with a discussion on the reservation, an affirmative action by the government to uplift the lower caste, who are blamed for the scarcity of jobs. The conversations bring out the resentment and hatred of the upper caste against reservation and lower caste. There is a subversion of dominant ideology at various levels- the title, the use of tribal art, the creation of alternate history, and protests. Thus, it can also be called a book of protest.

The various legislations of the constitution to combat the caste system are incorporated into the body of the text. Historical events like the Round Table Conference, letters penned by Gandhi, Mahad satyagraha movement: to allow Dalits to drink water from Chavadar water tank also find space here.

Primary source materials are used in the form of Newspaper cuttings. It shows the deplorable conditions of Dalits which continues even in contemporary times despite government policies. There are several newspaper clippings in the text: In the village of Khairlanji, the Bhotmange family were beaten to death, “gruesome incident occurred ... news of this brutality did not enter the mainstream news ...”, “Two Dalit teenagers were assaulted ... in Uttar Pradesh’s Rae Bareli ...”, In Madhya Pradesh “Dalit killed for demanding wage.” (Natarajan et al., 2011, p. 13), “The Hindu: Dalit siblings thrashed by the landlord for shelter” (p. 73). They show that *Bhimayana* is a dissensus bildungsroman as Dalit bildungsroman is a story of reversed growth of Dalits hindered by various reasons. “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, 2012, p. 99) The story critiques the hypocrisy of society and the government, by exposing caste-based discrimination in contemporary times.

Pradhan Gond tribal Art has been used here for illustrations. Pradhan Gond community are “traditional keepers of their people’s cultural heritage and lineages ...”. (Natarajan et al., 2011, p. 100) Ecology, nature and animals predominate the painting of the tribe as they believe in the interdependence of man and nature depicting ecocentrism. They paint in bright colours with natural colours from charcoal, soil, grains, and moa grass. Colours work together to convey the atrocities of segregation based on caste. Zoomorphism is displayed, as inanimate objects represent animals- train expressed as coiled snails. The Gond artist uses the ‘digna’ pattern, “traditional auspicious design patterns applied to walls and floors in Gond homes - as a way of dividing up a page” (p. 102). Speech

bubbles are shown as a bird's beak, scorpion tail and thought bubble. Bhimayana defied the conventional rules like sequential art forms and rectangular framing of the western graphic novel. Indian art depicts the Indian issue.

Bhimayana is thus a collage of different topics put together. It is a multilayered text showing inclusiveness to various issues. The marginalized voice comes to the forefront with the reflection on casteism, brutality, human rights, legislation and subversion of the dominant ideology. Tribal art also finds space.

3. Kari

Kari by Amruta Patil is about a queer protagonist who struggles to establish her identity and get accepted, in a heterosexual normative society. The queer theory explores and opposes the oppressive power of a patriarchal society, which propagates heterosexuality. The story is from the perspective of the eponymous character, Kari and her view of the world around her. The text starts with failed suicide attempts of two lesbian partners, Kari and Ruth. Popular literature brings the 'othered' class to the mainstream as well as draws our attention to varied issues in a postmodern way. The text is inclusive of various things, presented as one of the realities. The themes of homosexuality, alienation, love, lust, friendship, loneliness, cultural difference, the corporate world and ecology are depicted vividly through images.

The cover of the book is red and black coloured. The colour red symbolizes death, passion, sexuality, blood, and a stop (symbolizing a traffic light), while Kari's expression shows alienation, scorn and contempt in her eyes.

Sexuality plays a pivotal role here and is visible in different types. The unacceptance by the heteronormative society of lesbian partners, Ruth and Kari is depicted. They attempt double suicide. However, Kari is saved by a sewer and Ruth by a safety net, finally parting ways. The glaring class difference also becomes evident. Kari's life in the aftermath of a "slipshod surgical procedure" follows (Patil, 2020, p. 3). Romance has been devastated and dismantled throughout. The nude picture of Kari observing herself in the mirror, casual sex in the bathroom, and the image showing the love-making of Ruth and Kari are very different in representation. Deromanticizing of sex occurs instead of glamourizing. Therefore, nothing looks provocative, rather appears as a matter of fact. Her roommates, Angel (her ailing friend) and Lazarus (her colleague) often question Kari due to her difference and show non-acceptance, as she explores the city. There is, however, respect for diversity, which is challenging to accept but still accepted. Heterosexual couples Billo and Zap or Vicky, Delna and Orgo are live-in partners who practice couple swapping and group sex also. Nothing appears obscene since occurs as one of the many things, in a postmodern way. There are different levels, and all are accepted. In contrast to Mahesh Dattani's writing on homosexuality, Amruta Patil's *Kari* presents sexuality as one of several ideas.

Migration is an important theme in the text. The characters Kari, Billo, and Delna come to a metropolitan city Bombay from small towns. They live in a tiny and shared space due to financial issues- bookshelves act as walls and toiletries of five people are accommodated in a single small toilet. But women in small towns lack freedom, individuality and the opportunity to have a say and choice. Since city life has less stereotyping, girls trade privileges and choose freedom in place of a large home in small towns. However, in city life, alienation, loneliness and subversion of home as a

haven, are very much present. Kari feels “The only person who always wants to talk to me is Mamma. Every Friday, at 10 p.m., is the long call home” (Patil, 2020, p. 21).

Ecocentrism takes into account the entire ecosystem, including living and non-living components. Ecology is another topic that finds space here. Environmental issues have been put forward right from the start. Kari falls into a sewer and is saved from a suicide attempt but mentions the stinking river in the surrounding. She says, “I was saved by a sewer, by the stinking river of effluents that snakes past our neighbourhood, the one our buildings avert their faces from.” (Patil, 2020, p. 8) The images on pages thirty-two and thirty-three show the deplorable condition of the city with dirt, filth and an overflowing drainage system. The smog city with polluted air is problematic to breathe. Later, Kari talks about the stench coming from the sewer. She says, “It’s hard to fathom the exact composition of the smell. It must have something to do with the city’s digestive system. When a digestive system is unwell, it poisons the body with toxins of its own making” (p. 41). There is also mention of how heavy rain causes water logging to immobilize the city. “First rains! ... Road and sewer are one.” (p. 52) The city’s turmoil juxtaposes with Kari’s mental turmoil. Moreover, it also depicts the subversion of divisions. The usage of potted plants as an ashtray shows the disregard for nature.

Disease and death also appear as one of the many realities. Though literature always over-romanticized it, here, it is denoted as an alien romantic idea, where death comes typically after disease. Thomas Gray’s *Elegy written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) mourn death. However here, Angel is sick, undergoing treatment, actively dying and struggling to live and pay bills. The text, unlike movies and traditional literature, depicts no sympathies; it portrays physical death, as one of the many worries. The office immediately finds a replacement and regular work continues showing no time to mourn. The disease has been coupled with hospital bills, while death is associated with replacement. Multiple dynamic ideas are portrayed; one is challenging the other without romanization and nothing is the central idea. Ruth and Kari are saved by a safety net and a sewer respectively. It just represents the difference between the suicide of different classes of people.

The Metropolitan city forms the setting of the story. Working in the corporate world is laid bare. Delna worked as Head and Foot stand-in and had to be satisfied with the meagre role she got. Kari worked in an advertising company. Two aspects of the same city are exposed: the presence of glamour contrasted with open sewers. Professional life hardships become apparent. As Kari comes to her office after failed suicide, she says, “Work, on the other hand, is unaffected by the waxing and waning of personal moons.” (Patil, 2020, p. 10) She had to write an advertisement for an international hair product brand called ‘Fairytale Hair.’ Her work is rejected thirty-six times before the final accepted version. Ironically, her boss tells her, “to bring in the sex, bring in the glamour, and discover my inner fox.” (p. 11) The corporate world objectifies women and uses sex to sell all products, including Fairytale Hair. However, Kari’s imaginary world is without men, as seen in the advertisement she creates and her imaginary house, the crystal palace. As the story progresses, we witness Kari’s resistance, acceptance and creation of her identity. She attends an award ceremony with ‘2mm buzz cut’ hair and declares never to suicide for anyone. Despite the Indian constitution legalizing homosexuality in 2018, it is still considered taboo in India. However, the text shows acceptance.

Ideas of past and present appear in continuation. Kari sometimes remembers Ruth and sometimes muses about her parents. Graphic novels experiment with time and space. Space between parents and children, as well as space in the city, is depicted.

The map on page forty-three talk of unexplored places. It is a postmodern idea. Bombay, a metropolitan city, has a lot of unknown areas and Kari finds a home with a cat that might be real or a fabrication of her imagination.

The place of home as a haven is subverted here. Kari is not comfortable in her parental home so leaves for Bombay. A shared apartment in Bombay is also not very comfortable, and lacking privacy. For her, “The thought of home is oppressive” (Patil, 2020, p. 10).

The relationship between Kari and Angel depicts friendship with affection and care. While Kari, Delna and Billo also show good camaraderie. Kari also forms a friendship with Lazarus, her colleague. Context has been given to every idea, even Billo, Delna, her roommates’ background, mother and boyfriends.

Kari is thus a collection of several realities showing inclusiveness. Petit narratives are present, which have a rhizome structure of postmodernism. Sexuality, migration, ecology, disease and death, metropolitan city, and the idea of past and present together have been given space.

4. Conclusion

Postmodernism and cultural studies have made the study of petit narratives possible. They have provided a platform for the inclusion of micro-narrative. Thus, by giving a voice to the marginalized, othered sections are brought to the mainstream. Popular literature is a narrative that tells tales of masses and local issues and shows resistance against the status quo. *Bhimayana* and *Kari*, the popular literature, are petit narratives. *Bhimayana* challenges the Brahmanical hegemony by employing postcolonial critical literacy. While *Kari*, the story of the queer protagonist, contests heteronormativity by using queer theory. Both texts try to disrupt binaries and critique society as well as the government for discriminating against the subalterns. However, they are multilayered texts, inclusive of several issues that form a sort of collage. Deleuze and Guattari, postmodern theorists' rhizome structure which proposes the absence of a single central point of origin, is evident here. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* reflects on themes of casteism, brutality, human rights, social issues, legislation, subversion of the dominant ideology, and tribal art. Similarly, *Kari* explores sexuality, migration, ecology, disease and death, metropolitan city, and the idea of past and present. Both texts are thus inclusive of several issues.

About the Author

Zahra Ahmad is pursuing MA in English from Patna Women's College(Autonomous). She authored 'My Stories' vol. 1 and II, for primary schools. She has published and presented research papers both at the national and international levels. Her recent publications include poems in Setu Magazine, RIC Journal, Das Literarich, Live Wire and research papers in The Criterion, Motif, Langlit and Re-Markings. She is an academic editor of the esteemed New Literaria Journal and a reviewer of The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal.

email – zahra02ahmad@gmail.com

My Twitter handle- @ZahraAh61829728

Instagram- zahra.ahmad.79219

5. References

- Cambridge University Press. (n.d). *Culture*. Available at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture>
- Christensen, L. L. (2006). Graphic global conflict: Graphic novels in the high school social studies classroom. *The Social Studies*, 97(6), 227–230.
- Eisner, W. (2008). *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*. New York and London: W. W. Norton.
- Fedosova, T. (2015). Reflection of Time in Postmodern Literature. *Athens Journal of Philology*, 2(2), 77-88. DOI: 10.30958/ajp.2-2-1.
- Gupta, N. (2008). *Cultural Studies*. New Delhi: Worldview Publications.
- Hescher, A. (2016). *Reading Graphic Novels: Genre and Narration*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. DOI: 10.1515/9783110445947.
- Hutcheon, L. (2004). *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Natarajan, S. et al. (2011). *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Nayar, P. K. (2012). *Writing Wrongs: The Cultural Construction of Human Rights in India*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nayar, P. K. (2016). *Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, history and critique*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Patil, A. (2020). *Kari*. Noida: Harper Collins. (Original work published 2008)