

BHIMAYANA- REPRESENTATION OF DALIT EXPERIENCE IN THE GRAPHIC NOVELS OF INDIA

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Abstract

The medium of graphic novels has been extensively used to express the voices which are unheard. Interestingly, it can be argued that the genre of comics or sequential arts was marginalized within the larger idea of literature and what qualifies as literature, since comics were largely not considered a piece of literature. It took years, and extensive work by scholars within academia, which made it possible, that comics and graphic novels get recognition and acceptance as something which is 'worth'. That is why it is interesting to examine, how this genre lends itself to themes and issues of marginal voices from society. This paper attempts to examine how the Dalit experiences are being depicted in the graphic novel Bhimayana (2011). The paper focuses on marginalization, representing the untouchability and idea of using life narratives as a critical tool to present different perspectives on the creating of the 'other'. It can be argued that even though the novel maintains its focus on the leader, but it does provide a creative platform for Dalit imagination.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Lived-experience, Ambedkar, Bhimayana, Marginalization

Dalit literary canon in India has been a beacon of light for the marginalized and suppressed voices. Dalit literature in India has one key element, which is representing life. It can be observed that there are many autobiographies and biographies that let the reader see how Dalit identities are being constructed and reformulated in the socio-cultural context. Life narrative form in the novel helps to expand the impact of the novel. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, Srividya Natarajan, and S. Anand's novel amalgamates the past with the present, real events with the story and presents a powerful political message as well as an awareness about untouchability.

"Literary narratives, like all kinds of narratives, are deeply intertwined with the life of the community where they originate. In the same way that there are no communities without a language, there are no communities that do not tell their stories in some way or another. Because these stories are either told or silenced, they reveal all: what the community does or refuses to do; what it believes in or considers a prejudice; its virtues and also its deep injustices. And this epistemological relationship between the narratives and the community is an everlasting" (Festino 26)

A life narrative represents a form, which can reach to masses, which is one of the key reasons, why novels like Bhimayana holds a special place in the Dalit literary canon. The author S. Anand in one of his interviews, says that he feels that graphic books provide an alternative for readers, who might not have ever read The Annihilation of Caste or Gulamgiri (Kaur 12). After the publication of Bhimayana, Anand also published A Gardener in the Wasteland.

Bhimayana provides Ambedkar's lens to see society. We find the young Ambedkar dealing with daily life. An experience depicted in the chapter called Water, he could not drink water from the same tap, from which his upper-caste classmates can drink. Another incident is given in the book, where he and his family are on a trip, but the whole family is denied water from the fear of being polluted. Along with such life incidents, we also find modern-day news articles in Bhimayana which re-establishes that it is not something from the past, but it still occurs.

"But back in Satara, Bhim is set apart at play and in the classroom. He is also having a tough time just getting a glass of water. From the school water pump to the village trough, untouchables are denied access at every turn. At one point, a teacher farcically blames Bhim's thirst on his long hair. The child himself would love a trim, but from whom exactly? Barbers will not touch untouchables. Through such gentle ironies, Bhim's confusion at caste inequality expresses the wrench in simply being Dalit: 'Animals enjoy more freedom!'" (Desai 1)

An incident from Gujarat also finds space in the novel. In the chapter named Shelter, now adult Bhim is denied accommodation by a Parsi Hotel in Baroda, and later in a friend's home as well. The 'travel' chapter talks about Nasik where he is denied by drivers (tongawallas), and he ends up in an accident. The tongawallas refuses to drive Ambedkar and so his tonga has to be driven by an amateur, leading to the accident. One of the key interesting things is the chapter-names in Bhimayana. Shelter, Water and Travel are things that are basic fundamental for one's survival. Naming chapters after essentials refers to the idea, of how equal access to the basic essentials is being denied.

It is essential to emphasize the idea of lived experience in literature, argues Sarukkai when writing on Dalit theory. He further adds that thematizing lived experience is to recognize that there is no element of choice or freedom associated with it. In general, we find ourselves placed in a situation, and we have to live with what we are given. When a rich man partakes in the experience of the food of the poor, he has a choice, and he is asserting that choice. This also implies that he has a choice of not participating in that experience. It is the subject's will that decides on whether a particular experience is experienced or not. Experience of this kind, often referred to as vicarious. But in the Dalit experience, the choice and freedom are not there as they are denied by the 'other' (imposed). (2)

It can be argued that the Bhimayana's protagonist is Ambedkar, and at the same time, he is not. Because his character symbolically represents the Dalit life of Ambedkar's time. This novel presents an alternate heroism, capturing life-altering experiences. The author provides modern examples along with the story to provide relevance. The idea of untouchability works by creating a 'space' thus resulting in the mindset of 'pollution' and 'untouchability'. In a society where Dalits have been facing 3Ds, i.e. discrimination, deprivation denial, the role of such writing rises a lot.

The novel is also an amalgamation between modern comic book conventions and the traditional art form. It uses traditional gond art and does not follow most of the conventions of western comic books or graphic novels. As the author Anand says that they would like to state one thing very clear from the outset, that they would not force their characters into some kind of boxes. It stifles them. They prefer to mount their work in open spaces. Their art is khulia (open) where there is space for everyone to breathe" (100). The novel is a prime example of Indian writing in English and Indian Graphic Novel canon, where the traditional art form is used, showing how Indian Graphic Novels as a genre is distinct.

Gond tribe and their artwork have been part of India for centuries, but a new clan of the artist were formed in the 1980s who were dedicated to transmitting older Gond ritual performances into narrative visual art using everything from silkscreen prints to acrylic paintings to detailed ink drawings, and they were called Pardhan Gonds. As Damulji in Can the Subaltern Draw says that the most ingenious part of Bhimayana is the concept of using Pardhan Gond art, in the format of graphic novel or sequential art. It effectively repackages the forgotten and overshadowed the legacy of a civil rights leader in India into something worth tweeting about. (2) Another interesting observation is that the authors still use many Western sequential art conventions along with their traditional illustrations format. As we see that Ambedkar, who is the protagonist and the only constant character, does not appear in a consistently drawn in the book. This amalgamation of formats allows openness in the narrative, as the reader proceeds and sees different life experiences of Ambedkar's life in loose chronological order and sees the illustrations that function both as a convectional graphic novel and a peek into Pardhan Gond art.

To conclude, this piece of literature is, politically active, very conscious of its aim and reach, unapologetic in depicting the harsh realities, and provides a platform for the negotiation of identities for an alternate mode of resistance. The novel presents the marginalization in contemporary society through the lens of history. Each chapter is layered with metaphors and symbolism, and these layers are something that makes the impact. In one of the panels, we see the speech balloons in the shape of a bird, which represents the victims who speak softly. The novel humanizes the experience by providing the graphic account of Ambedkar's life, and how the ordinary daily life experiences that led to the emergence of extraordinary politics. Bhimayana seeks to reach a wider readership and spread the message of awareness.

"A just society is that society in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society."

-B.R. Ambedkar

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