

THE DALIT LITERATURE IN SOUTH ASIA: A GRAPHIC NOVEL AND THE CASTE SYSTEM

Author: **Chhavi**

B.A.(Hons.) English graduate from Miranda House, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

This is a book review of *Bhimayana* which, as a meta-text and a graphic novel, goes beyond probing the caste system prevalent in the continent of South Asia, in general, and in India, in particular. It merges the community with the individual. There are references to the past and the present memory which makes each episode polychromic where moment/time is cyclical and interruptions are acceptable. The authors have invited the readers for a new kind of reading that relies upon reading the visuals which is associated with non-linear aesthetics of a collage or montage. There is also an inter-sectionalist edge to the text where memory of the public and private meets. “Migrants engaged with past...they are not ostensibly part of.”ⁱ In this context its complex since Ambedkar was a sufferer at the hands of the caste system but he denotes such experiences of his community. And the photographic images portray this individual inserted in the community memory. Documents used, thus, forge memory citizenship of the protagonist and the readers, as a part of the memory citizenship: “Untouchability is a blot on Hinduism. It is a canker eating into its vitals.”ⁱⁱ Hence, this book review carries the intention of achieving a mass consciousness, brobdingnagian awareness and cognizance amongst its readers about the caste system through a newfangled medium of canon production, i.e., a graphic novel. The Varna system came into reality from the later Vedic era, as the historians have noted, on the landmass of South Asia and dug its claws as a non-changing reality deep within the minds of the general public. And when a Dalit woman is brutally gang raped in Hathras (India), in a very recent year of 2021, it becomes an area of a modern reader to deliberate upon, as it is still not a practice of the past.

BOOK REVIEW

Bhimayana is a graphic novel designed mainly by the two *Gond* artists, Durgbai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, got published in year 2011. It is an interwoven text that brings together the historical events along with the perpetuating contemporary incidents against the untouchables in India. And, hence, tries to negotiate the socio- political issues associated, with the help of emerging aesthetic of visuals combined with the text: “It studies the dynamics of these visual forms vis-à-vis traditional regimes of representation and discusses the former’s significance within the backdrop of Dalit aesthetics and politics.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Bhimayana has been considered as a part of the Dalit Literature which is the literature of protest/social- reform and the objectives are: appeal and stirring the imagination. As an emerging genre, it tries to carve out autonomous sphere having specific characters with the possibility of subversion of the existing dominant Brahmanical ideology. And for achieving this, this text places the reality in the ‘realism of fiction’ with the support of the text and visuals.

Hence, *Bhimayana*, foregrounds the relation between the Dalit Literature and realism by appealing the reader to protest and seek for a change in the social hierarchy using diverse illustrations. The narration is free flowing and diffused, not linear. Panels, which often restrict the narrative, have not been used in *Bhimayana*. Animal imagery is a common part of the text: be it fish, lion or a peacock and each of them carries significance. This imagery acts as a narrative trope which further exposes the cruelty of the caste divide. In this sense, the Dalit Literature looks for a form which has to be free of the dominant ideology and aims that it would help in harnessing the political potential of the text in order to reform/re- fashion the realist.

Therefore, *Bhimayana* has chosen the *Gond Art*. Art, which doesn’t represents the dominant culture of India. It is a tribal form, not a colonial one. Thus, this form is reclamation of an alternate version of the cultural memory of the Dalit community having challenge at the heart of it. It allows to broaden the argument, provides space for a more suitable realm of imagery. New iconography has been adopted in the text to signify different elements of caste system in India. Uniqueness of iconography is that it has not been burdened by the history and hence, has the potential to evolve.

New iconography uses elements such as exaggeration of the features which distinguishes Brahmins from the Dalits. Skin colour has no role to play as all figures are either white or black which means irrespective of the caste, race, class, gender all individuals are fundamentally alike i.e. all are human beings. But when it comes to the treatment, the difference emerges. Brahmin is shown carrying a stick which, symbolically, represents the violence associated with the caste system. And this iconography uses Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to represent the entire community. Physiognomy is used for a larger collective as Dr. Ambedkar becomes the face of the bus. He is shown as the life giving force to the oppressed and marginalized, while these images articulate the tension between the upper and the lower caste.

But, the text is not all about the visuals. There is a constant balance of narrative through both, subjective and objective aspects. Documents and newspaper used, give the account about the nature of injustice against the Dalits in the contemporary India. It is not just a biography of Dr. Ambedkar but the author and publishers; they have tried to bring forth the caste sentiments prevailing despite the progressive and cultural modernization. They have used this sort of form to probe the traditional genres, ideologies and literature with the expectation of re- fashioning the current inequity and inequality. It's the text with the satirical take on the contemporary realities as far as the caste, as an institution is concerned. Hence, producing the alternate realities, coming from the experiences. This text is about Dr. Ambedkar's personal story of sufferings, in particular. Equally, it is also a reflection of the miseries of the larger community, in general.

Additionally, there is an enormous use of imagery/visuals in the text. Polarization of the characters in the speech bubbles representing anti- caste perspective, ideals and concept. Thought bubbles denote the stream of conscious, words not spoken yet. Also, there is a concept of the 'third-eye' of Buddhism which represents the inner wisdom. For instance, fish might represent Dalit's thirst for: simply water as they were denied of its consumption or lost in crowd, even as a symbol of prosperity, peace and happiness. Pointing fingers could be seen as well. These might represent the discrimination against the untouchables by asking them to stay away. Or these are depicting the possibility to free oneself from the clutches of discrimination and moving towards progress.

Metaphorically, the text is the portrayal of a collective movement. Use of blue colour is associated with the Dalit movement as Dalits used to greet each other with 'Neel- salam' during the anti- caste movements. Animals, birds and beasts have been used randomly to convey the emotion of the characters like the face of a lion has been used to represent something intimidating. It's like without the actual use of the words, these visuals are conveying the human emotion. Use of the visuals, archives and newspaper cutting makes it all different. Even the form of art is different. New vocabulary of tribal art is coming up which talks of urban life, shift in visual dynamics and a negotiation between the traditional *Gond Art* with the urban. There is a representation of religious ideas in the visualization of Brahmin. He's shown wearing a sacred thread, *tilak* on forehead and ponytail. All of these are the stereotypical signs of a particular caste. At one place the face becomes a landscape which is, indeed, the contemplation of the hostile realm of the upper caste.

Interestingly, the text sometimes also deviates from typical norms of a graphic novel. There are no panels but sketched borders called the *Dignas*. They allow the viewer to look at the visuals in not a linear/sequential manner. This fragmented narrative which is a collection of disjointed memories of personal and collective, randomly uses the speech/thought balloons. This is a sort of interplay of words and images, yet a kind of symbolism. Also, the accompanying written text is the carrier of information which would help to understand the real narrative. Hence, it's a pictorial/graphic text.

Also, text uses *Multiple Temporalities* as a strategy of merging. Newspaper pieces from Young India (1992), news from 2007 and from 1956 are used. This back and forth narrative helps the reader to move across time zones and history by representing the documented history of oppression, exclusion and suffering. The text also comes up with the use of *Iconostasis* which explains how to look and interpret the visuals. Like the use of inverted triangle or distortion of the colours of the flag which is the depiction of inversion of ideals instead of their establishments. It slows down the process of scansion by repeated use of history.

Bhimayana plays around the autobiographical note on Ambedkar and represents it in a new media of graphics. Three basic characters of this text are: humanizing of history, construction of public and private and the construction of a human icon. Humanizing is the embodiment of history of the caste system, evident in the school scene where he is shown pleading for water.

It represents the 'plead' for a denied life giving force i.e. water. Ambedkar is shown on the peripheries while the peon is at center and Ambedkar wants to move towards the center. This represents that the center has the power to push him towards the margins, his legitimate space. Location of an individual indicates the denial of choice of location and lack of agency. This graphic auto/biography is about an amalgamation of the personal anguish trying to mediate with the National history and collective trauma: "combines national history with the powerful micro montage of those belongings to deprive..."^{iv}

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Textual references from, *Bhimayana: Experiences of untouchability*. By Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam (art) and Srividya Natrajan, S. Anand (story)
2. The Case of Bhimayana and the Search for a New Dalit Aesthetic, Shweta Khilnani. From Lapis Lazuli journal.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Pothberg and Yildiz

ⁱⁱ Mahatma Gandhi

ⁱⁱⁱ The case of Bhimayana and the search for a New Dalit Aesthetic, Lapis Lazuli

^{iv} Michael Charey