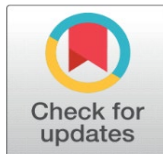# "THE ARTISTRY OF BHIMAYANA: FROM GRAPHIC ART TO SERIOUS GENRE"

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ABSTRACT

"Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability," a graphic novel crafted in the form of story within a story on the life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the historical beacon of Dalit voice, stands as a masterwork of intricate artistry and evocative content unveiling the caste realities in India. It transcends traditional storytelling and addresses critical societal issues. In its comprehensive analysis, the researcher delves deep into the nuanced artistry of "Bhimayana" and attempts to determine its genre within the realm of graphic storytelling. "The Artistry of Bhimayana: From Graphic Art to Serious Genre" explores its innovative style and technique that seamlessly weaves together visual storytelling to vividly depict the significant 'incidents in the life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar'.

Keywords: Graphic novel, genre, Gond Art, Digna, Ambedkar, Dalit, Bhimayana

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, an evocative graphic novel, stands as a testament to the power of visual storytelling. This compelling work intricately weaves art and narrative to chronicle the life and legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar while shedding light on the enduring struggle against caste discrimination. In a remarkable collaboration, S. Anand and Srividya Natarajan unite their creative acumen to craft the story of incidents inspired and based on Ambedkar's Autobiography *Waiting for Visa* and accomplished Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam contribute a cultural dimension, infusing the project with symbolic visuals that draw upon their Gond heritage. This synergy of narrative, artistic brilliance, and cultural authenticity culminates in a profound exploration of history, identity, and the ongoing pursuit of social justice.

2. DETERMINING THE GENRE

Bhimayana is popularly called a "graphic novel", a term first coined by Richard Kyle in 1964 within the November edition of the Capa-Alpha newsletter fanzine. It is claimed in David Madden, Charles Bane, and Sean M. Flory's book *The Primer of the Novel: For the Readers and the Writers* :

"Originally, the term referred to comic books that had been published in a higher quality format than traditional comic books. These long form stories were printed on high quality paper and bound rather than stapled. In 1978, artist Will Eisner popularized the term by using it on the cover of his novel *A Contract with God*." (Madden et al. 43)

The perennial debate over whether the "graphic novel" falls under the comic book category or constitutes a distinct genre remains a contentious issue. Many creators and critics disdainfully view this label as an unwarranted and ostentatious attempt to set it apart from comics. Alan Moore, renowned for his work *Watchmen*, vehemently criticized the term in a call-interview, deeming it a mere marketing label: "It's a marketing term. I mean, it was one that I never had any sympathy with." In his research paper titled "Towards a postcolonial critical literacy: Bhimayana and the Indian graphic novel," Professor Pramod K. Nayar defines the graphic novel within his context as "stand-alone stories in the format of a comic book, but not categorizable merely as the 'funnies'." A graphic novel could be differentiated from the comics in the sense that graphic novel is a more serious form of literary artistic genre that generally have a significant and serious influence on the readers. According to Lila Christense, "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 humor." While Bhimayana shares some visual and narrative characteristics with comic books, it transcends the conventional boundaries of the comic book format. It can be more accurately described as a graphic novel due to its substantive length, thematic complexity, and artistic depth. Bhimayana thus falls within the serious genre of visual storytelling, as exemplified by the works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which portrays a Holocaust survival story, Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, narrating the story of contemporary anxieties, social, moral, and political, and Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*, which presents a story of experiences of a child's growing up during the Iranian Revolution.

3. ARTISTIC CONTEXT

Language without context does not mean anything. However, it is not necessary for the context to be fixed or confined solely to the past, as this would limit the free play of the text. Nonetheless, it remains important as the foundation for the artistry, as well as for the meaning and message of the text. In the case of Bhimayana, the context is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Indian tribal communities, the caste realities of India, and the broader Indian cultural tradition. The artistry within *Bhimayana* is nothing short of masterful, a profound fusion that intertwines the rich symbolism of Gond Art with the evocative potency of modern graphic storytelling. Gond art, which finds its roots in the Pardhan Gond community within the broader Gond tribal culture in central India, serves as a testament to their rich heritage. Traditionally, Gond art has been a means of preserving their community's cultural legacy, encompassing genealogies, legends, and oral histories. The pioneering Indian artist Jangarh Singh Shyam was instrumental in bringing Gond art to the mainstream, ultimately paving the way for prominent artists like the Vyams. On *Bhimayana's* page 6, which serves as the book's dedication, a large painting depicts a man wielding three brushes in each hand, with his body adorned by various animals, fishes, birds, and objects. This figure symbolizes the rich cultural heritage of the Gond community. In Bhimayana, this tribal art form takes center stage, offering an intricate and creative storytelling medium to delve into its depths.

Bhimayana is crafted in some sense as a story within a story and it can also be categorized as a bildungsroman, which presents the growth and transformation of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar from a helpless, curious schoolboy to a highly educated leader who has experienced the harsh realities of casteism through direct encounters, fought against them, and secured the constitutional rights to the oppressed. This journey from casteism to constitutional rights is central to the main story, while the frame story features two individuals from "the recent past" who engage in an ongoing discussion about the main narrative throughout the novel.

In Book 4, titled 'The Art of Bhimayana,' Durgabai Vyam says, "I really enjoyed drawing Ambedkar's life along with my husband Subhash. While doing the book, I once told Anand, this is like the Ramayana! He said, 'No, this is Bhimayana' — and that's how we hit upon this title." (Vyam et al. 104)

Ramayana is an ancient Sanskrit epic revered for its religious significance. The term "Ramayana" originates from two words: "Rama," the central character of the epic, who is often regarded as a deity in Hinduism, and "ayana," meaning "travel" or "journey." So, "Ramayana," etymologically, signifies the "journey of Rama." When the title of our text, "Bhimayana," draws parallels with "Ramayana," it carries profound significance. Rama, a revered figure, is juxtaposed with "Bhim," who fervently fought to break the chains of systematized social slavery, illuminating the path for Dalits, a light they had not witnessed in recorded history. The practice, which had religious and cultural support, was challenged

by this great man. He organized them into an integrated community and finally ensured the constitutional rights for them. Bhimrao Ambedkar emerges not only as the savior of the Dalits but as the *Messiah for the Marginalized.*

4. DIVERGENT ARTISTRY

Throughout the book, a myriad of symbols unfurls, each layering new dimensions of meaning onto the narrative canvas. Right from the outset, the artists behind *Bhimayana* were unwaveringly dedicated to forging a distinctive path. They didn't seek to imitate existing art forms; instead, they became iconoclasts, boldly shattering the conventions of their genre. Refusing to confine their characters within the rigid boundaries of boxes, they opted instead for an open canvas where creativity could breathe freely. Their art was "khulla," a space where all could thrive:

"We'd like to state one thing very clearly at the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is khulla (open) where there's space for all to breathe."
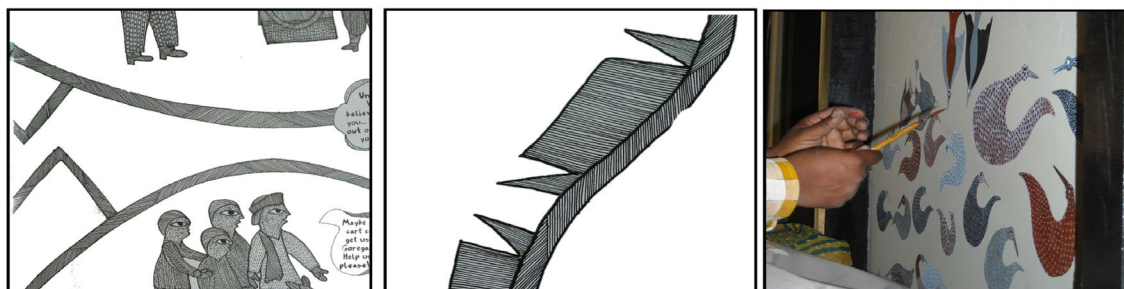
(Vyam et al. 100)

In a display of artistic ingenuity, the novel employs a trifecta of bubbles – the avian dialogue bubble, the introspective thought bubble, and the piercing scorpion sting bubble – each bestowed with distinct purpose and meaning. These bubbles transcend mere aesthetics; they are narrative devices that breathe life into the story. The speech bubble becomes the resonant voice of the characters, articulating their dialogues and interactions. The thought bubble, far more intimate, delves into the intricate labyrinth of their innermost musings, casting a psychological tapestry upon the narrative canvas. It serves as our passage into the innermost recesses of the characters' minds, a gateway to comprehend the profound anxieties they bear in the face of the caste conundrum. And then, the sting bubble, a venomous instrument, is reserved for those who embrace the poison of casteism, their every word dripping with toxicity, and their touch leaving a scalding mark. Through these symbolic bubbles, the narrative acquires depth, giving readers the power to traverse the treacherous terrain of caste-driven mental turmoil.
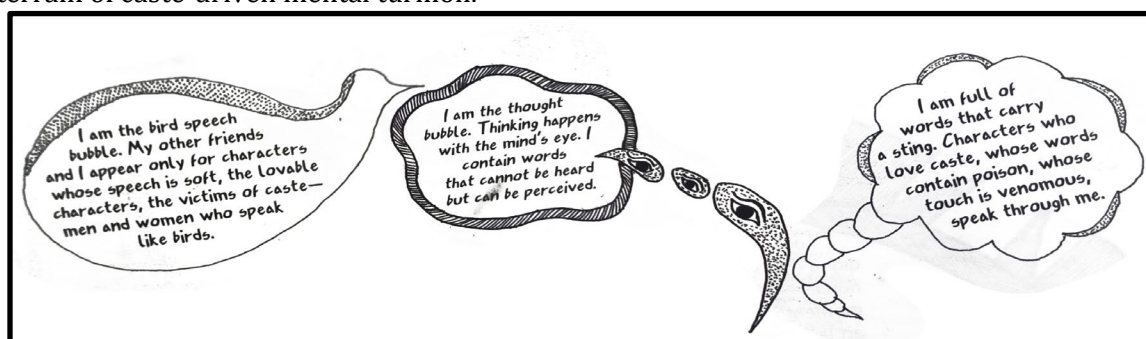
(Vyam et al. 100 and 101)

The integration of 'digna,' described as "the traditional auspicious design patterns applied to walls and floors in Gond homes," is a pivotal and innovative addition to *Bhimayana*, introducing an entirely new dimension of artistry to the narrative. Initially, *Bhimayana* was being crafted without 'digna,' as they promised to 'not force their characters into boxes.' However, upon the completion of a 16-page sampler, a tension-filled transformation occurred – it assumed the semblance of a picture book, and the anticipated length of the full book appeared 'unwieldy and unaffordable.' After months of enduring frustration, replete with fruitless attempts and arduous brainstorming sessions, it was Subhash Vyam who proffered a brilliant solution: the inclusion of 'digna' to partition the pages, rendering the book both financially viable and endowed with the quality befitting a novel.

(Left to Right: (i) Vyam et al. 35, (ii) Vyam et al. 102, (iii) Digna-made Gond art on a wall)

The artistic significance of the dignas used in the novel is layered and intricate. On one hand, they represent the cultural identity and heritage of the Gond community, seamlessly merging tribal tradition with contemporary graphic art. It adds a sense of motion in the narrative. However, they also underscore the presence of social division and discrimination, as their primary use lies in page partitioning. As practical tools to make the book more affordable, they highlight the economic disparities faced by marginalized voices

In the introduction to Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book* (2005), Sirish Rao and Gita Wolf state, "Gond Art does not represent, it signifies." Within the pages of *Bhimayana*, fish imagery emerges as one of the most recurrent and compelling symbols. These fish do more than represent; they signify a profound longing, a thirst for something essential. Initially, it's the thirst for water, a basic need, but this thirst resonates on a deeper level, becoming a symbol for the thirst for a discrimination-free society and peaceful coexistence. Just as the Dalits yearn for social acceptance, akin to the fish's need for water to survive, the parallel is striking. This claim gains credibility when considering the artists' affinity for portraying aquatic life, possibly due to the similarities they perceive. It was this affinity that led S. Anand to suggest framing some pages in the likeness of fishes, reinforcing the powerful significance of this recurring symbol in the narrative:

> "When I realized that the Vyams loved portraying aquatic life, I suggested they could consider framing some pages like a fish."

(Vyam et al. 102)

Recurring throughout the narrative are the innumerable snake-like insects. These images, rooted in the deep connection of tribal communities with nature, hold a dual significance. On one hand, they depict the profound relationship of these communities with their environment. On the other, they serve as potent symbols of the untouchable Dalits, who bear the weight of society's disdain and exclusion.

For example, train's wheels and the sleepers of the railway are made of snake-like insects signifying the Dalits or atleast the culture of the Dalits and the train represents the people of the upper castes as they were the primary travelers by train, while the people of the lower castes could occasionally work as coolies. You may notice that the animal on the front of the train bears a striking resemblance to the one associated with the upper caste station master on page 35 and even with the animal associated with the Muslims in page 86. When these upper castes' people become crueler, the animal is provided with teeth (i. e. page 12, page 50) Therefore, it carries significant weight that Mira aunty warns the children, "Don't go to the edge of the platform! The train will crush you…" (Vyam et al. 27)
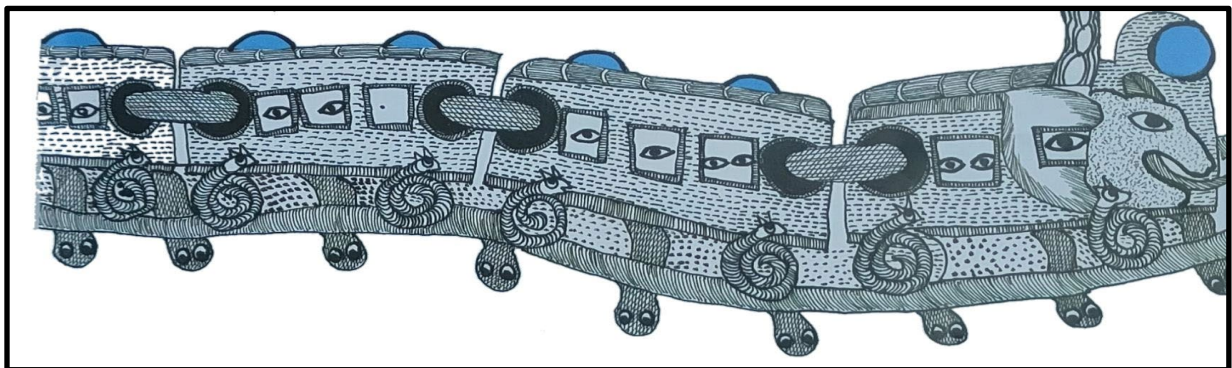
(Vyam et al. 27)

Apart from these, colours hold deep significance in the book. Black & white often signifies the helplessness and suffering of the untouchables and the cruelty of the upper castes against them (for instance, pages 19 to 21, 46 to 47, 50 to 51, etc.). On the other hand, colours signify hope, reconciliation, fleeting moments of enjoyment, and the expression of realization as seen on pages 27 to 28, 32 to 34, 48 to 49, etc. It's worth noting that page 66, which erroneously anticipates the co-existence, and page 86, where Dalits find words like "Hey, watch your mouth!", are both partially colored. Additionally, the presence of numerous eyes, hands with extended index fingers, personification of objects, and at times, the animalization of human beings, all carry their own contextual or overarching significance within the narrative.

Incorporation of the newspaper clippings not only lends an air of authenticity to the novel but also intensifies the emotional impact, making the readers connect more deeply with the narrative. Literature, at its core, is profoundly concerned with humanity and humanism, carrying the weighty responsibility of liberating oppressed and exploited individuals from the relentless chains of slavery and systemic discrimination. The presence of these clippings symbolizes acts of resistance and the relentless pursuit of justice, often portraying moments where individuals or communities dare

to challenge the established norms. It serves as a rallying cry, inspiring readers to actively champion change and strive for equality.

In the visuals on page 46, as Ghatke is being killed, the human faces remain expressionless, much like other human images. But what is particularly striking is that the lifeless arm appears to shed tears, and the cows, a recurrent symbol throughout the book, convey pain as they are depicted lowing upwards. This use of expressionless human faces alongside expressive depictions of cows and lifeless arms can be seen as a deliberate artistic choice that signifies the intensity of emotion and suffering. The expression becomes more than an individual's pain and trauma.

Similarly, It is very significant to note that page 72 portrays Ambedkar's traumatized head in the form of a park, which typically serves as a source of enjoyment for children but here symbolizes the trauma of Dalit mind. So the juxtaposition of the playing children inside the head of Ambedkar serves as an extended metaphor.

5. CONCLUSION

Bhimayana, with its meticulously crafted artwork and thought-provoking narrative, serves as a testament to the power of visual storytelling in addressing complex and socially relevant themes. This graphic novel has effectively carved out a space within the serious genre of graphic art, contributing to a broader conversation about the intersection of art and social issues. It has been transformed by its creators into a medium through which the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar and the ongoing struggle for social equality are vividly portrayed.

In a society where words may sometimes fall short, *Bhimayana* speaks volumes through its artistry and narrative, reminding us that art has the power to be a potent catalyst for change. This is particularly evident when the individual associated with the scorpion sting bubble in the frame story, who represents those in India opposing reservation throughout the narrative, is provided with a bird bubble and when in his/her concluding speech, he/she equates the customary farewell, 'bye,' with 'Jai Bheem.'" (Vyam et al. 92)

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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