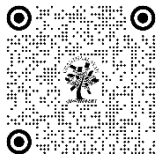# CRITICAL LITERACY THROUGH GRAPHIC NOVELS: A CASE FOR INDIAN LIBRARIES FOR SUSTAINABLE PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the role of graphic novels in fostering critical literacy, underscoring libraries as a space to promote this skill. It highlights how the visual-verbal medium of graphic novels inculcates critical and creative thinking and comprehension. The paper advocates for the inclusion of graphic novels in Indian libraries, contributing to education and sociocultural development. The paper begins with a fundamental reading to define critical literacy and graphic novels, followed by close reading and visual-verbal analysis of select Indian graphic novels to demonstrate their capacity to foster critical literacy. The paper employs Ciardiello's (2004) critical inquiry practices as the theoretical framework.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Graphic Novels, Indian Libraries, Social Justice, Ciardiello's Instructional Model

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical literacy as a theoretical framework posits that "education can foster social justice by allowing students to recognise how language is affected by and affects social relations" (Behrman, 2006, p. 490). This perspective highlights the importance of positive discourse in education and literacy in promoting critical social awareness and empowering individuals to address social concerns. In contemporary times, the increasing modes of information and cultural production and consumption are predominantly visual and multimodal, making the choice of medium in disseminating

critical literacy crucial in social justice. Information through the internet and communication technologies is vast in contemporary times. This enormity of information does not guarantee quality or critical understanding. On the contrary, they have imposed various ideas and contrasting beliefs on adolescent students, making them vulnerable to ethical judgments and critical perception. To make the students "critical consumers of the many sources of information", the social studies and liberal arts classroom is one of the most effective interaction places (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487).

Critical literacy is consistently evolving overtime and is a continuous process. Hence, there is no correct or universal model. It entails naming and renaming the world, seeing its patterns, designs, and complexities, and developing the capacity to redesign and reshape it. Definitions of literacy have expanded to include engagement with texts in a range of semiotic forms: visual, aural, and digital multimodal texts, including graphic novels. As libraries are inclusive public spaces for learning and communal engagement, including graphic novels in their collection will bridge the gap between traditional curricula and contemporary social realities, fostering redistributive and cognitive justice. Within this purview, the paper suggests graphic novels as an effective medium for critical literacy and further advocates for including graphic novels in Indian libraries, which would contribute to education and sociocultural development. The paper examines select Indian graphic novels using Ciardiello's (2004) instructional model for critical literacy practices to prove its objective.

2. CRITICAL LITERACY: CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGY

The term literacy refers to the reading and writing of text. Critical literacy refers to the use of print technologies and other media of communication to analyse, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life. (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Critical literacy is "habits of thought, reading, writing and speaking" (Thomas et al., p. 129) using information and communicative mediums towards deep understanding and critical interpretations and their implications of the ideological, cultural, social, economic and political aspects. Additionally, this process involves subjective experiences and observation in meaning-making from varied perspectives towards social justice and self-identities (Luke, 2012; Soares & Wood, 2010). Critical literacy has evolved through various scholarship and intellectual traditions, including feminists, postcolonial, poststructuralist, critical race theory, critical linguistic and cultural studies, and rhetorical and cognitive models. These approaches critically examine power structures, cultural narratives, and ideologies embedded in textual and cultural storytelling. Rhetorical and cognitive models further underscore the role of dialogue and analysis in fostering critical engagement.

This paper employs Ciardiello's (2004) instructional model of critical literacy practices to examine critical literacy in practice. This model is particularly oriented towards social studies as a conceptual tool for examining critical literacy curriculum and pedagogy but is not limited to it. It can also be applied to humanities and literature, which the study follows. Ciardiello's (2004) model identifies five critical inquiry practices for critical literacy, each offering a lens to analyse texts and pedagogical practices:

1) **Examining multiple perspectives:** The readers are encouraged to identify literary characters, explore the nature of the events in which they take part, and analyse the outcomes of their living experiences to connect issues of the past to relevant issues in their world today. Taking a critical stance while questioning and responding to social issues.

2) **Finding an authentic voice:** The notion of voice is dynamic, as Bakhtin's dialogic theory describes language as an interactive process that anticipates the listener's response (Soares & Wood, 2010). Freire expands on this by advocating for a critique of dominant discourses promoting marginalised voices (Giroux, 2010) as the readers learn to criticise the language of texts influenced by the social, cultural, political, and historical forces that function as interrelated processes through dominant discourses. This practice encourages individuals to recognise and confront unequal power dynamics in literary and cultural texts and society. In addition, literary and cultural narratives, like graphic novels, offer counter-narratives to mainstream pedagogic histories (Nayar, 2016).

3) **Identifying and acknowledging social barriers and borders of separation:** Understanding and acknowledging harmful assumptions perpetuating stereotypes, stigma, and judgements reinforcing social division is essential to confront inequity across demographics.

4) **Regaining one's Identity:** Identity is contextualised, situated, and shaped by societal norms, ideologies, prejudices and systemic discrimination. Democratic discourses and critical literacy can help the learners

analyse how these factors influence self-perception and societal roles, contributing to a positive approach towards sustainable development.

5) **The call to service:** Civic education and service learning strengthen social justice and democratic interactions. By addressing local manifestations of broader social issues, learners develop a nuanced understanding of their knowledge as a tool for collective acts of service. For instance, Soares and Wood (2010) focus on the social issues of racism in public school social classrooms, using Ciardiello's instructional model to elaborate on how critical literacy is taught to elementary learners.

Ciardiello's model has been applied in various educational contexts to address racism in public school classrooms (Soares & Wood, 2010). Comber (2015) has underpinned critical literacy to social justice and suggests an equity-based inclusive curriculum for teachers and students. Vasileva & Golubev (2019) point out that comics, similar to graphic novels, in educational mediums, are powerful tools: a. to foster and shape public awareness of environmental concerns; b. motivate students, c. develop critical thinking, d. popular, appealing, and more appealing than traditional educational approaches; f. creative approach of narration and storytelling. Graphic narratives provide an easier approach to social justice issues by reducing cognitive load compared to traditional storytelling mediums (Barter-Storm & Wik, 2020). Moreover, they are visually appealing and emotionally impactful, compelling, engaging, and radical narratives. They simplify complex issues, making them more accessible and providing an engaging space and emotional connection (Chun, 2009). They also provide immersive experiences through their verbal-visual medium. Thus, graphic novels are an effective medium for conveying contemporary social issues because of their critical literacy.

Williams and Peterson (2009) argue that libraries supporting educators and the public should assess and prioritise including graphic novels, considering their growing relevance, popularity, and valuable instructional resources. Downey (2009) suggests using graphic novels in the curriculum and instruction collections, primarily in academic libraries, elaborating on the significance of graphic novels in fostering critical literacy through critical and creative thinking. Graphic novels are also effective cognitive tools and social causes through the visual-verbal medium. Heaney (2007) provides a comprehensive review of the significance of graphic novels in collections, commenting on their challenges and scope. The study also recommends that librarians include graphic novels in their collections. This paper analyses select Indian graphic novels to elucidate the significance of graphic novels in fostering critical literacy and, hence, the need for their serious inclusion in libraries. Many libraries across the globe have adapted graphic novels, designating separate cataloguing for comics and graphic novels. American Library Association Institutional repository suggests "Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC21" prepared by the Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table, GNCRT Metadata and Cataloguing Committee (URL handle: http://hdl.handle.net/11213/18623). Though Indian libraries have a wide range of graphic novels in their collection, there is a gap in serious research scholarship and centralised cataloguing of the collections with an objective of critical literacy and social justice.

3. THE ROLE OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN FOSTERING CRITICAL LITERACY

Scott McCloud defines comics as spatially "juxtaposed pictorial and other mages in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994, p. 9). However, many critics state the difference between comics and graphic novels with the latter being the self-contained artful (Nayar, 2016; Moeller, 2016; Marshall, 2016) and a lengthy version (Tabachnick, 2017; Baetens & Frey, 2018) than the former. Graphic novels reshape the content, style, format, publishing policy, and cultural values of comics with serious stories. In addition to fiction, graphic novels include non-fiction, autobiography, biography, history, journalism, and storyless works on abstract concepts (Baetens & Frey, 2018, p. 238). Tabachnick gave a similar definition for graphic 'novels' being fictional, "the term graphic novel includes not only fiction, but also serious non-fictional historical and political issues, and graphic novels are often autobiographical or biographical" (Tabachnick, 2017, p. 26). Another feature of graphic novels that differentiates them from comics is the intention to rise to high culture. This constitutes a negative impact as comics gain power from popular culture and real-time interaction through serialisation (Baetens & Frey, 2018, p. 239). On the other hand, Saraceni (2003) points out that the difference is just a matter of labels, and it has nothing to do with the content or any other features. He adds that graphic novels were an attempt to replace 'comic books', which they never did, but they have been used for commercial reasons. Baetens and Frey (2018) point out that graphic novel is a subset of comics but with rapid expansion. Nevertheless, the success of the graphic novel is wide in the contemporary literary and cultural scene. Unlike any other textual medium, the visual-textual components create a better interaction between the issues

and the reader. The genre's cultural position should be considered, and utilising this in creating attitudinal changes in providing critical literacy can be rewarding.

The achievement of the graphic novel is that, first, it "not only appropriates but also "remediates" and hybridises a previous verbal medium, in this case, the novel. It manages to do so because it combines words and images, which makes it fitter than its competitor in the attempt to create more appealing forms of storytelling" (Baetens & Frey, 2018, pp. 239-40). Second, it has extended its scale to global from a local form. Graphic novels, like comics, have extended the field and scope in temporal and spatial terms due to worldwide usage inclusive of acknowledgment across "cultural, geographic and social diversity" (ibid, p. 241). Most graphic novels in India provide minority and broader narratives of the nation-state critiquing contemporary constructions. For instance, Orijit Sen's The River of Stories (1994) delves into marginality and power dynamics, offering a nuanced critique of contemporary sociocultural constructs within the broader narrative of the nation-state. The narrative depicts the contrasting perspectives of Indigenous people affected by large-scale infrastructure projects and the authorities advocating for development. This encourages readers to question dominant narratives and explore the narratives of vulnerable communities within any massive high-end developmental initiatives.

Indian Graphic novels have a prominent space in gender concerns and critical gender literacy. Rohila (2021) has demarcated women's contributions to Indian graphic novels, commenting on Amruta Patil's Kari (2008), Saraswati Nagpal's Sita: The Daughter of Earth (2011) and Draupadi: The Fire Born Princess (2013), Samhita Arni's Sita's Ramayana (2012), Kripa Joshi's Miss Moti and the Big Apple (2007) and Miss Moti and Her Short Stories (2012) and anthologies - Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back (2015), Eat the Sky, Drink the Ocean (2014). Graphic novels on historical and social concerns from women writers are Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability (2011) and A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jyotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty (2011). Other contributions to various serious sociocultural issues include Tina's Mouth: An Existential Comic Diary (2012), Nidhi Chanani's Pashmina (2018), and Debasmita Das Gupta's Nadya (2019).

Figure 1. Banerjee, S. (2015). All Quiet in Vikaspuri, p. 49 ©2015

Graphic novels also capture socio-political and cultural realities and holistically represent the country's contemporary conditions. In Sarnath Banerjee's All Quiet in Vikaspuri (2015), the interconnected environmental realities of urban communities are conveyed through social, economic, and political influences. The narrative invites the

readers to critically examine the multiple perspectives of various stakeholders involved in urban environmental issues, from inhabitants to activists, highlighting the affected and marginalised people. The story also exposes the diversified social barriers like class and how they affect access to resources, creating an understanding of systemic inequities. This encourages the readers to question the connection between power relations, social structures, and natural resource disparities. The images (Figure 1) convey the lack of critical ecoliteracy resulting from the dependency on modern infrastructure, showing the people's detachment from the source of their fundamental utilities. The final image illustrates the building supplying all kinds of resources, representing how people are either not concerned about the origin of the supplies or are unaware of how energy is derived from natural resources. This prompts the readers to debate the urban perceptions of self-sufficiency and critically examine ecological realities for sustainable and conscious resource consumption. His other graphic novels of social commentaries are Corridor (2004), The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers (2007), The Harappa Files (2010), and Doab Dil (2019).

Another significant characteristic of Indian graphic novels is their mythological adaptions and historical representations. These narratives perpetuate critical literacy among their readers, where national narratives of counter-hegemony, decentralised histories, social justice and sustainable development align with the individual and personal narratives of self-identity, gender roles, intersectional discriminations, marginalisations and resilience. One such graphic novel is Amruta Patil and Devadutt Pattanaik's Aranyaka (2019), which explores humans' social and biological evolution through mythological and ecological lenses. The story uses a dialogical narrative structure that combines mythic storytelling with contemporary issues, pointing out ethical aspects of environmentalism.

Figure 2. Patil, A and Pattanaik, D. Aranyaka. p. 97. ©2019

The dialogue between a panther and the cattle herder in Figure 2 highlights the ethical inconsistencies in societal norms and their implications for justice. The man asks the panther to spare his master's cow and hunt a deer. The panther's reply shifts the narrative from human-centred concerns to the moral implications of human actions within complex socio-environmental issues. The recounts the cruelty on oxen by humans while the herder pleads for a cow's

life, bringing forward the questions of moral responsibilities among readers. This facilitates a discourse of critical thinking and enables the readers to examine systems of discrimination and hierarchy from alternate perspectives.

Figure 3. Ghosh, V. (2013). A Good Education. This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition. p. 159. ©2013

The graphic anthology Vishwajyoti Ghosh's This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition (2013) negotiates the emotional and historical landscapes of the aftermath of India-Pakistan in 1947 and the Bangladesh partition in 1971. The graphic narratives in the anthology "revisit and restore a collectively repressed and wilfully forgotten trauma that is inextricably connected to the foundation of the subcontinent's nations and their contemporary political landscapes" (Payal and Sengupta, 2020. p. 148). The author's other work, which uses similar historical and social imaginations, is Delhi Calm (2010), a social and political representation of Delhi during the emergency declared in India from 1975 to 1977. Nayar (2016) states that "the cultural artefact of the graphic narrative that enables the creating of a larger social imaginary of historical wrongs, the need to redress these wrongs, the faults in our social and cultural fabric and the crisis of identity" (p. 198). In a similar thought, the image in Figure 3 uses poignant visuals and stories of partitioned refugees to represent the sociopolitical realities of loss, displacement, and the dynamics of survival. The mother's willingness to let go of the children is unusual, but here, it comes from a place of survival and emotional resilience with a hope for their children's growth through education. The narrative under the section "A Good Education" contrasts sharply with the dire reality depicted while ironically framing the intersection of individual agency and systemic inequality, underscoring the need for collective responsibility among the readers.

Indian graphic novels employ innovative visual and narrative strategies to foster critical literacy by encouraging dialogic engagement and reflection among readers on systemic inequalities, environmental and gender concerns, and sociocultural structures. They serve as a transformative tool for critical literacy by encouraging readers to question dominant narratives, analyse power structures, and engage with complex social issues. The visual and verbal form and multilayered storytelling make graphic novels a significant and innovative medium for educational and cultural discourse.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the educational potential of graphic novels as an effective medium of critical literacy. Through the multimodal blending of visual-verbal narratives, graphic novels engage readers in multilayered dialogues beyond surface-level comprehension, addressing deeper social, cultural, and ideological dimensions necessary for social justice. Drawing from Ciardiello's instructional model of critical inquiry practices, this paper underscores that critical literacy is necessary to cultivate democratic values, question power structures, and amplify marginalised voices. Graphic novels are an engaging tool that embraces post-millennium readers and popular culture and accommodates critical literacy practices - examining multiple perspectives, finding authentic voices, recognising social barriers and crossing borders of separation, regaining one's identity and a call of service. The paper expands the discourse on critical literacy and its interactions with multimodal texts for researchers in literature, education, library science, humanities, and social sciences. It encourages librarians to create practical guidelines to promote critical literacy and incorporate multimodal texts like graphic novels. This paper also suggests curriculum designs and narratives that foster critical literacy. The study recommends the inclusion of Indian graphic novels in Indian library collections with appropriate and serious and centralised cataloguing space to facilitate enhanced educational and cultural landscapes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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