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GRAPHIC NARRATIVES AS COUNTERCULTURE IN MALIK SAJAD'S MUNNU: A BOY FROM KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the evolution of comics as a countercultural form of resistance and explores how the medium has historically challenged dominant sociopolitical narratives, particularly in the context of American underground comics of the 1960s and their influence on contemporary graphic storytelling. It posits that graphic narratives, derided as ephemeral or childish, continue to be shaky witnesses to the testimony and traumas of history. Through a close reading of Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir by Malik Sajad, the paper illustrates how the legacy of underground comix continues in contemporary South Asian graphic narratives, particularly those emerging from conflict zones. Sajad's work marries autobiographical memory and political commentary with formal experimentation, including anthropomorphic figuration and fragmented visual layouts, representing the lived experiences of consciousness of ineffable phenomena: locationality and the implications of a body in relation to history. By embedding the personal within the political, Sajad reclaims the narrative from statist and separatist appropriations, producing a subversive visual archive that exemplifies the enduring potential of graphic narratives to unsettle hegemonic truths and foreground alternative epistemologies.

Keywords: Graphic Narratives, Trauma, Resistance, Memory, Kashmir

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of modern graphic narratives have ancient roots, beginning from the time of cave paintings, the earliest known example of illustrated narratives. Japanese "manga" has been in existence since the seventeenth century and became increasingly popular in America with the publication of the widely famous Astro boy created by Tezuka Osamu. In America, comic strips had begun to appear with the advent of cheap printing in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Mc cloud). They became an important feature of American newspapers in the early part of the twentieth century, depicting complex events with a humorous twist. For the most part, these illustrators could get away with things that writers would be strictly censored for. This period, as William Leach notes, marked a sharp shift towards a culture of commodification in the society, which led to a meteoric rise of low budget comics for advertising and entertainmen t(Booker 27). In fact these low budget comics began to emerge from the margins of society as commodities in themselves. Pulp fiction was an important forerunner to the genre and with the rise of superhero comics,a new golden age began for the writers of comics. As Scott Mc cloud writes,"I don't think comics were invented in America as is often claimed, but the U.S did give comics an exciting rebirth in the twentieth century"(Mc cloud).

Predictably there was a fierce backlash from the proponents of high culture who viewed comics, with its mass appeal, as a threat. Not only was it considered a lesser version of the written word but also a means of perverting young minds. Frederic Wertham's vitriolic "Seduction of the Innocent" was instrumental in vilifying the content of these comics which he considered an "injury to the eye"(Wertham). With the enforcement of the Comics Code in the 1960s, a stringent censoring mechanism, most of the comics went underground, printed with cheap ink, to cater to a growing audience. It

is important to note that the diatribe against the content of comics as violent did not spring from thin air, but was actually a reaction to its changing content through the decades in the twentieth century. In the era of the World Wars, comics dutifully subscribed to the state sponsored narratives with the Nazis shown as villians beyond any redemption and superheroes like Superman as "guardians of the system" ready to save the world from unimaginable evil(Allred 264). But the 1960s saw the rebellious spirit of the post war generation,influenced by beat and rock culture, percolating the subject matter of these comics. In her book Trauma and Recovery Judith Herman writes that " the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness… atrocities, however refuse to be buried"(Herman 1). So writers like Robert Crumb, with his visual representation of the angst of the middle classes through groundbreaking works like Despair; began to question the unsullied belief in the narratives of the state through bitter and humorous content, which critiqued the prevailing values of mainstream culture. There was a movement from militaristic to pacifist narratives in the Cold War era, including cartoons like Tom and Jerry which became significantly less violent in the 1960's(Lehman 86). The Comics Code was not a reaction to the unashamedly violent content of these comics but to the challenge they symbolised to the mainstream, at a time when the Cold War was at its height and recruits were badly needed for the Vietnam war. The war in itself was significantly absent from the theatres and the cinema, with the possible exception of Martin Scorcese's "The Big Shave", since this was the era of live television and any fictional accounts of the events would have lacked the punch of live action in the forests of Vietnam. Movies like The Green Berets which came out in 1968 provided a one sided, pro war narrative of the conflict. Comics were one of the first art forms that dealt with the conflict, and significantly raised questions upon the desensitization of the public towards the horrific violence.The violence of the World Wars had been far off, but the violence in Vietnam was ever present in the living rooms of millions of Americans, without any conceivable justification for it. Marvel published works like The Nam and The Punisher as allegories of the violence in the society, poking fun at the idea of wars.

Comics as a genre in the latter half of the twentieth century was mostly dominated by working class artists like Gilbert Shelton,Trina Robbins, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee who critiqued the rise of a capitalist society through characters like Batman, Spiderman, Dr Strange and series like the Watchmen which raised the spectre of nuclear war as the only foreseeable end to the arms race in the era of the Cold war. As Will Brooker has pointed out in Batman Unmasked: Analysing a Cultural Icon, the paranoia of the times is deeply embedded in these comics along with a trenchant critique of the postwar society which had lost its moorings(Brooker). A new level of realism was bought to these narratives in opposition to the jingoistic attitudes prevalent at the time. Comics attempted to portray issues not directly addressed in mainstream media in the 1960s like racism and the problems of drug addiction, with a whole new vocabulary of street slang and untranslated words. There was movement towards satire, parody and dark humour as is evident in works like Wonder Wart Hog by Gilbert Shelton. As Nadya Zimmerman writes,

"The countercultural sensibility was pluralistic not oppositional; it embodied an anything goes mindset … it attracted on the whole people who sought to disengage from the mainstream society"(Zimmerman).

As Zimmerman observes, comics traditionally emerged as a challenge to the monolithic conservative culture and this feature has persisted throughout generations. Groundbreaking comic series Watchmen has been repeatedly adapted for cinema and television in the past few years, signifying the relevance that such issues still hold in present day America. The genre developed not only as a vent to the postwar angst of the generation but a culture of resistance to the status quo and a means of countering the dominant narratives, sometimes within the comic industry itself. In the present era of technology, the advent of digital comics has ensured that there are even fewer restrictions to the dissemination of content and has made censorship even more difficult. Being viewed as ephemeral and commercial entertainment, it is less likely to be censored by the state, while reaching mass readership. There is a prolonged tradition of rebellious and novel content that comic artists are heir to, and this reflects significantly in their own content. It might be an alternative genre but is certainly not esoteric, and presents a possibility of increased political engagement. By undertaking a close reading of Malik Sajad's Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir, this paper seeks to prove how comics, with their roots in counter culture are not only conducive to traumatic representation, but also a means of challenging the prevailing status quo.By reexamining the rise of underground comics in twentieth century America, we can hope for a better understanding of the cultural and economic milieu of the alternative comics in the twenty-first century(Hatfield 10). As Art spiegelman observes in the preface to Joe Sacco's Palestine:

As we also live in a media saturated world in which a huge preponderance of the world's news images are controlled and diffused by a handful of men sitting in places like London and New York, a stream of comic book images and words,

assertively etched, at times grotesquely emphatic and distended to match the extreme situations they depict, provide a remarkable antidote.(Spiegelman 3)

In the past decade graphic novels such as Malik Sajads Munnu :The Boy from Kashmir and Naseer Ahmed's Kashmir Pending have emerged, along with works like Viswajyoti Ghosh's This Side That Side, to deal with the ever changing socio political scenario in South Asia. Joe Sacco, the celebrated cartoonist, prefers the term "comic" to "graphic novel", in order to highlight the realism of the newly emergent alternative comics, which focus on autobiographical elements and personal stories of the comic artists. There is a need to dwell on how this alternative subculture has shaped contemporary comic art, along with deconstructing its affiliation with American countercultural underground comics milieu. These stories while foregrounding "the asymmetry between text and image", pose interesting questions upon the nature of representation itself(Meskin 90). There exists as Sacco writes in his preface to Journalism, " a tension between those things that can be verified, like a quote caught on tape,and those things that defy verification, such as a drawing purporting to represent a certain event"(Sacco 9). It is by deferring the possibility of reaching an objective reality that comics make the most impact on the reading public.Hilary chute has written about how politically oriented graphic narratives confront the problematics of representation through disruptions and reconfigurations of narrative elements"(Chute) Linking the personal with the political, Malik Sajad in Munnu paints a poignant picture of the quotidian sufferings of the people in Kashmir, choosing to present the perspective of a seven year old Munnu who can't even understand the conflict, and yet can't escape its ramifications. Kashmir is a region in South Asia which is claimed in its entirety by both India and Pakistan, both of whom control large chunks of the territory. The neighbouring countries have already fought twice for the control of the region and since 1989 an armed insurgency for a separate homeland has flared in Indian occupied Kashmir which has claimed thousands of lives and is an ongoing conflict destabilizing the region. In the 1990s thousands of men crossed over to Pakistan in order to train for fighting the Indian state and most of them lost their lives in the ensuing conflict in the most militarized zone in the world. Sajad's Munnu traces the coming of age of its protagonist using the medium of comics for making a social and political critique amid the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. Remarkably, following the footsteps of Art Spiegelman (who represented the Nazis as cats and the Jews as mice in his Maus), Sajad chooses to represent the Kashmiris as hangul deer, an endangered species of deer in Kashmir. Drawn with antlers and large eyes, the hangul deer are evocative of the vulnerability of the average Kashmiri, who is caught between the two sides. The style of illustration is reminiscent of the intricate woodwork practiced by Kashmiri craftsmen. In Munnu Sajad recounts the violence of the insurgency since the 90s and how the violence has continued unabated since(mandhwani 10). The innocent vision of Munnu is inextricably intertwined with adult knowledge of the conflict and the reader/viewer is made to imagine the unseen violence outside the domain of Munnu's experience. As it is, he is a witness to multiple traumatic experiences, especially the killing of the rebel Mustafa by the armed forces, who was so invested in Munnu's education, and unlike the state sponsored narrative is dearly beloved and respected by the people. The stark black and white imagery in Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir is symbolic of the trauma that the protagonist has undergone and the warped world view that a victim is subjected to.On one page, we see three adjacent panels where the first shows us a humanoid of Munnu in extreme close up. The remaining panels show a shadowy figure across a dark background, symbolising a diminishing sense of self and a loss of hope for Munnu. On another page two adjacent panels show Munnu learning to draw at home and engaging in other mundane activities, which is followed by an oversized panel showing a military crackdown, with text bubbles scattered through the page with no coherent narrative form and masses of bodies stuck together in formation creating a claustrophobic image.. In this way the violence becomes a feature of the story as well as the text, linking the form and content to "engage the reader in a visual and tactile experience"(Soon Ng 2). As Harriet Earle suggests, even the wide eyed stare of a character can become a representational tool , one that allows violence to be implicit, dependent on the reader's imagination(Earle).Sajad brings together extreme acts of violence with everyday humiliations of living under occupation, marking the various facets of state sponsored terror, while recognising the ambivalence of victimhood. While the humanoid of the hangul seems to be representative of passive victimhood, we also see images of these humanoids fighting back, both with guns and stones, disrupting the "politics of pity" endemic to such representations(Boltanski 19). Sajad does not fight shy of presenting a strictly patriarchal society with an ever shrinking space for dissent, stressing the fact that victimhood is layered and seldom as heroic as it is made out to be. Sajad even defies the mainstream separatist position in Kashmir by astutely observing the corruption within the separatist movement.Rather than romanticizing the oppressed, he also showcases Munnu's disillusionment with Kashmiri society, boldly portraying unlikeable figures like the image of three men assaulting a woman late at night while other people watch on, thus challenging the "victim/hero affiliation of conventional masculinity associated with conflict zones"(Kozol) Even shahadat or martyrdom loses its consecrated value when it is countered with the stark images of

children picking up the almonds and candies that are showered on the grave of Mustafa. The image of showering almonds and flowers is embedded in Kashmiri culture and reminiscent of festive occasions along with funerals conducted for the men laying down their lives for the cause of freedom, symbolising an elevated emotion of consecrated grief. But these images are undercut by the images of children robbed of their innocence and childhood, and reduced to drawing AK 47s on their notebooks, a subtle allusion to the fate of entire generations lost to conflict in Kashmir.

Sajad has created images of crackdowns, shootings and beatings, experiences all too familiar to the people of Kashmir, then and now. The emotion of raw anger is palpable in the drawings and while Art Spiegelman dealt with intergenerational reverberations of trauma, Sajad deals with the festering wound of ongoing conflict in Kashmir. He links this with the bloody history of the valley, where the lamentations of the saint Habba Khatoon become metaphors for the pain of the people which is ever present and omniscient. This becomes apparent in a section entitled "footnotes", in which Sajad presents three adjacent vertical panels featuring a Mughal, Afghan and a Sikh ruler, each of whom seeks to establish their rule over the valley while the hangul looks helplessly on.One of the most interesting images in the book features the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, where the Dogra Maharaja bought Kashmir for Rs 75 lakh from the British.A pair of scales weigh the money under the eye of the soldiers while a group of Kashmiri people look on. Maintaining congruity with the underground comics of the 1960s the narrative parts of the book include colloquialisms and untranslated words of Kashmiri while dwelling on the effects of colonialism on Kashmiri culture. The phrases and colloquialisms used by Sajad illustrate this point further, where a completely different vocabulary to the one used by the Indian media is employed in the narrative. So the word "terrorist" becomes "mujahideen", and they are not "eliminated" by the armed forces but rather "martyred" for the cause of freedom. Munnu's worldview, though fraught with inner complexities, shows a world that an average Indian reader would not be able to recognize. Leonard Rifas' definition of counterculture in underground comics consists of this inclusionary, individualistic art which is pluralistic rather than oppositional in nature(Rifas). Rather than creating a polarized position, Sajad's Munnu presents a different worldview by highlighting the subjectivity of experience. As American journalist Edward R Murrow said, "Everyone is a prisoner of their own experiences. No one can eliminate prejudices- just recognize them". The shared ideology of underground comic artists was not determined by engaging with any particular political stance, like the propagandist maoist comics in China,but rather in the belief in individual expression. By defying categorization with any known political position in Kashmir, Munnu reinforces these very same countercultural influences. To be countercultural is not necessarily anti establishment, but rather shows us what hides behind the mainstream, which is precisely what Sajad is able to achieve. There is a slow recognition of the fissures in our own viewpoint and the multidimensionality of experience which comic artists like Sajad bring to the fore. In one panel, there is an image of an everyman Indian who looks on as Munnu is arrested in Delhi for seditious activities, which forces the reader to ponder the cost of a criminal silence and holds up a mirror in which the perpetrator and the bystander are inextricably intertwined.

Most underground comic artists, predominantly Robert Crumb and Emory Douglas, drew on discomforting visuals from the past which were based less on historical consciousness and more on personal memory(Creekmur 29). In Munnu Sajad portrays the life that he lived and remembered, without pretending to understand the political intricacies that went on behind the scenes; the focus is always on personal experience and individual memory. The shift from experience to memory opens up new ways of storytelling for every individual. In a political atmosphere where the statist narrative becomes hegemonic over all other narratives, representations of subjective experiences can open up new ways of destabilizing the status quo. The genre of alternative comics that the present day graphic novels are a part of, trace their origins to the countercultural underground comics of the 1960s and the 1970s. It was the countercultural comics movement which gave rise to the idea of comics as a medium for personal self expression(Hatfield 9). The intermingling of the underground comics with the mainstream in the latter half of the twentieth century laid the ground for the unique genre of alternative comics, which were economically advantageous and also sustained the possibility of individual artistic expression. Not only do these countercultural origins inform and enliven the field of comics in the present but they also provide the possibility of further innovation. "Today much of the creative promise of comic art rests on the undercapitalized and fragile microcosm of alternative comics … heirs to the underground, born of the direct markets unique subcultures and yet anxious to reach a wider audience"(Hatfield 31).Comic artists like Malik sajad, Joe Sacco, Nora Krug and Jason Lutes have further revolutionised the narrative structure of comics by including photographs and documents, while seeking to uncover the commercial aspects of representations of trauma, thus creating the possibility of "ethical spectatorship"(Kozol). Unabashedly focusing on his own complicity, Sajad shows us the voyeuristic impulses that go into reporting acts of atrocity in Kashmir. While documenting the acts of state sponsored atrocities in Kashmir ,a grown up Munnu is shown to be obsessed with camera angles and photographic evidence fostering the awareness about

how spectacles of violence in conflict zones are utilized for commercial enterprises.There is a growing sense of disillusionment with the self and the other by the end of the book where Munnu is wary both of the Indian state as well as of the separatists and the intellectuals. However, while remaining deeply suspicious of any endeavour to document and address trauma, Sajad remains true to his own individual experiences and through his drawings shows us how representations can become acts of insubordination. Sajad's achievement is to have contributed to an already established genre of autobiographical comics, jolted into life by the socio economic upheavels of 1960s America and the underground comics movement. Unsettling the notion of authenticity, Sajad beautifully portrays a defiantly personal account of the textures and nuances of quotidian existence in Kashmir; keenly observing everything around him while debunking the supposed objectivity of narratives.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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