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Literary Research Paper

Graphic Novels: Exploring Intermedial Spaces between the Graphic and the Inscriptive

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Abstract: Genre study is endemic to pedagogy. It is difficult to restrain genres in watertight compartments. Painting and poetry, for example, are fused together to create a new form of "visual poetry." Graphic novel, too, stems from comics, but gradually it evolved. It is now stamped with acceptance as an iconoclastic genre. In the proposed paper, I intend to explore the genre of graphic novels: its genealogical evolution and departures from comics. Western philosophy and enlightenment situate the logos at the centre. It asserts the primacy of speech over writing and, therefore, privileges phonocentrism. This privileging of speech over writing or writing over image connects with the dynamics of power and hegemony. The genre of graphic novel questions this logocentricity in narrative texts vis-à-vis the word/image hierarchized binary. This marks the basis of my paper, referring to the concept of "Intermedia," which voices forth the urgency of genres to cross or fuse boundaries, and thereby encourage 'creative play.' A graphic novel, as this paper argues, is a novel expressive format that explores the intermedial space between the graphic and the inscriptive.

Keywords: Comics, Genre Studies, Graphic Novel, Intermedia, Logocentricity

Introduction

Genres are never fixed. As literary and artistic practices evolve, they frequently overlap, borrow from one another, and generate new forms of expression. The graphic novel is one such form that resists rigid classification. Although it emerged from comics, it has gradually established itself as a distinct literary genre with its own narrative depth, aesthetic possibilities, and critical recognition. Its significance lies in the way it tells stories through continuous interaction of words and images. This paper explores graphic novel through the idea of "intermediality." By tracing its evolution and examining its formal features, the paper shows how graphic novels reshape storytelling and encourage readers to see words and images as complementary elements that work together to create meaning.

Theoretical Framework

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1-2)

In Greek philosophy, the Greek term *logos* translated as "word," "speech," "principle," or "thought," refers to a universal divine reason or the mind of God. In New Testament, two Greek words, *rhema* and *logos*, are translated as "word." *Rhema* usually means "a spoken word." *Logos* implies a ''total message,'' and refers to God's message to mankind. The Western philosophy and enlightenment situates the *logos* at the centre. It asserts the primacy of speech over writing and, therefore, privileges phonocentrism.

Jonathan Culler in his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* notes that the Western philosophy distinguishes "reality" from its "appearance;" "things" from its "representation" and

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"thought" from "signs" (Culler, 2011, p. 9). Hence, "speech" is considered "the immediate manifestation" (Culler, 2011, p. 9) of "thought" while "writing" is regarded as "an artificial and derivative representation of speech" (Culler, 2011, p. 9). Writing is thought to be "potentially misleading sign of a sign" (Culler, 2011, p. 9) because it is operated "in the absence of the speaker" (Culler, 2011, p. 9). Culler refers to Rousseau who treats writing "as a supplement to speech" (Culler, 2011, p. 9) and, therefore, "an inessential extra" (Culler, 2011, p. 9). Even, Leonard Bloomfield in the second chapter entitled "The Use of Language" of his book *Language* emphasises that writing is merely a way of recording speech by visible marks" (Bloomfield, 1994, p.21).

This privileging of speech over writing or writing over image is linked with the dynamics of power and hegemony. The genre of graphic novel questions this logocentricity in narrative texts vis-a-vis the word/image hierarchised binary. The concept of "Intermedia" employed by Fluxus artist, Dick Higgins, voices forth the urgency of genres to cross or fuse boundaries, and thereby encourage creative play. Graphic novel is a novel expressive format that explores this intermedial space between the graphic and the inscriptive.

We are experiencing a communication revolution similar to what occurred after the invention of the printing press, ushering modernity. Now, there has been a paradigm shift. This is more an image dominant world. The revolution of visual culture is initiated through a surge of image literacy via internet, film, television, comic strips and computer. Furthermore, language is culture and context specific. Jacques Derrida, in the lecture "Foreigner Question" (Of Hospitality), claims that expecting a foreigner to speak in the local language of the place he/she visits is "the first violence to which foreigners are subjected" (Derrida, 2000, p.15) to, and it shows lack of hospitality. Mutual intelligibility is thus a major constraint in case of oral or written modes of communication. The visual and tactile communications come to rescue in such crisis. When written language is regulated by a repressive state, visual rhetoric may be employed craftily as a means of subversion. Thus the contemporary culture that dominates public and private sphere is visual culture. We must equip ourselves with visual literacy to better navigate this world. Graphic Novel is a cultural artefact of this modern multimodal era of visual culture.

The basis of graphic novel lies in the remnant of the past. Paleolithic Era, is known for their exceptional figurative stationary art like cave paintings or rock arts. It shows early human's ability to assign meaning to their surroundings, and communicate through engraved images. *Cantastoria* refers to the Italian antique performance of picture-story recitation. It involves sung narration accompanied with painted banners, scrolls or placards. The picture-reciters of Bengal are known as *chitrakars* known for their *patua* art. Women *patua* artist, Moyna *Chitrakar* of Nirbhaypur village in Paschim Midnapore has done the illustration for the graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni, a Bengaluru-based writer. Professor Frank J. Korom's book *Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal* is a path-breaking work on the art form of *patachitra*. Many *chitrakars* converted to Islam to escape the plight of their lowly Hindu caste. Despite the conversion, they have been illustrating Hindu mythical tales from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, "Manasa-Mangala" and "Behula-Lakhindar" and events of Santhal Revolution.

Even as researchers are vouching the benefits of graphic novels both as a "teaching aid" and "autotelic text," many academicians frown at them with disdain as peddling "low" culture. They marginalize it as popular art of the masses, trivial, infantile and an inferior sub-genre. There is also accusation that graphic novels are patently unreal, and suited to childish representation of flamboyantly costumed superheroes restoring poetic justice. Thus the genre of graphic novel is accused of infantile immaturity that renders them incapable of representing sensitive issues like the historical events of violence/trauma.

Literature Review

The term "graphic novel" gains currency within the comics-community with the publication of William Erwin (Will) Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978). Eisner carves a niche in the arena of

comics industry with his works like *The Spirit* and *Comics and Sequential Art*. He employs the term "graphic novel" to distinguish his book *A Contract with God* from the collection of newspaper comic strips.

The history of graphic novels is inextricably tied to the history of comic books. Richard F. Outcault's single panel cartoon *The Yellow Kid* attracted extensive public attention in the year 1895. It was commercialised in America, and widely marketed by being featured on unisex T-shirts, cigarette cards etc. Besides 'radio' as source of entertainment; by 1920s comic strips like E.C. Segar's *Popeye*, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* became household names through newspapers. In Germany during 1920s and 1930s, there flourished the new form of "Wordless Novels" or "Woodcut Novels." These novels resorted to progression of caption-less images to narrate a story. Frans Masereel's *25 Images of a Man's Passion* (1918) belongs to this category. However, in the year 1933 the market exploded when two Jewish kids from the Midwest, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, created *Superman*. It ushered a new tradition of heroic adventures such as Bob Kane and Bill Finger's *Batman*, William Moulton Marston and H.G. Peter's *Wonder Woman*, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's *Captain America* and Jack Cole's *Plastic Man* (Weiner, 2012, p. 1 - 4).

During Second World War, the publishers and artists made these superheroes fight against the Allies in comic pages. The cover page of *Captain America*'s inaugural issue (March 1941) displayed the protagonist landing a roundhouse punch on Hitler's chin. With an eye to catching children's attention towards such superhero adventure narratives, artists endowed superheroes with a "teenage sidekick like Batman's Robin, Captain America's Bucky, Wonder Woman's Wonder Girl, and the Human Torch's Toro" (Weiner, 2012, p. 1 - 4).

The American postwar market identified the target group called "Teenager" for consumption of comic books. "Educational Comics" (EC) owned by Max Gaines changed its approach under his son William who inherited the company after his father's death in 1947. Educational Comics published *Picture Stories from Bible* and *Famous Funnies*. Under William it changed into "Entertaining Comics," and published *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Haunt of Fear*. Teenagers were fascinated with the changing face of EC as it now dealt with contemporary stories having violence, death, divorced parents, spouse murder and corrupt politicians. However, Fredrick Wertham came as a spoilt sport in 1954. The creation of "Comics Code" by Comic Magazine Association of America toned down the sensationalistic materials. It hampered the business (Weiner, 2012, p. 5-8).

To recover the loss, DC comics created "an army of good guys perennially fighting an army of bad guys" (Weiner, 2012, p. 9) which "did work well in the sanitized environment" (Weiner, 2012, p. 9). Editor and head writer of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee, created "a competing band of superheroes" (Weiner, 2012, p. 10) such as Spectacular Spider-Man, Fantastic Four, Thor and the Uncanny X-Men. In 1956, DC comics invigorated The Flash ("the fastest man alive"). Such superheroes attracted the "Baby Boom Generation" of 1960s in America which was marked by nuclear threats. Jeffrey K. Johnson discusses this issue in the third chapter, "The Nuclear Era (1945-1989)," of his book *Super-History*: *Comic Book Superheroes and American Society*:

> In other words, by 1963 nuclear energy was so much a part of American society that Marvel did not use it as a gimmick, but rather as a "natural way to give heroes fantastic abilities. Heroes like the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, daredevil and Spider-Man were citizens of the Nuclear Age and thus expectedly gain their powers from nuclear accidents. The Baby Boomers were a generation that always lived with the knowledge and threat of nuclear power and their heroes reflected such an attitude. Atomic power was socially and culturally relevant and its increased presence in comic books showcased this societal change (Johnson, 2012, p. 60).

The year 1960 witnessed the encouraging concept of "Fandom" as "comic book fans gathered in hotels discussing and buying comic books as well as shaking hands with professional comic book creators" (Weiner, 2012, p. 11). Jules Feiffer's tribute work *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965) was a product of such fandom. It also ensured that "Dr. Wertham had been wrong; they weren't delinquents or crazy, in fact, several of them had gone on to achieve success in real life, but they still liked comic books" (Weiner, 2012, p. 11).

The year 1960 is also significant for "underground commix" movement. It differs from mainstream comics. As a reaction to the exaggerated Puritanism of Comic Code Authority; underground comix depicted free sex, drugs usage, violence, hippie culture, rock music, pornography. They also had their say on political issue like opposing Vietnam War. Robert Crumb's *Zap Comix* (1968) labeled "Fair Warning: For Adults and Intellectuals Only" featured dirty jokes, racist African native caricature, sexual exploitation, bisexual male drug addicts, anthropomorphic horny hound dog, murder and rapes. *Zap Comix* became so popular that the term was used "interchangeably with underground comix" (Weiner, 2012, p. 12).

The year 1970 saw the mushrooming of comic book stores throughout the United States. For "comics" fans, it was a "kind of heaven: a room full of comic books, populated by other people who liked them without any judgments" (Weiner, 2012, p. 14). New companies such as *Fantagraphics* and *Warp Graphics* emerged to cater the rising demand of market. However, underground comix movement was denied access in such stores. Founder of Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, Denis Kitchen, tracks the cause of collapse of underground comix movement:

> The underground comix industry – which had been burgeoning, mushrooming in size – ran into a couple of hurdles in 1973. First, the Supreme Court came up with a new definition of obscenity that basically threw the definition back to local communities to define. That sent a chill through all the head shops that were the base of our distribution. These retailers were already paranoid because they were selling drug paraphernalia and the authorities were looking for reasons to bust them. So they figured underground comix were where they were the most vulnerable. Overnight, a lot of our head shop accounts literally stopped buying underground comix. (as cited in Lopes, 2009, p. 86)

Findings and Discussions

Genre study is endemic to pedagogy. It is difficult to restrain genres into water-tight compartments. Painting and poetry, for example, are fused together to create a new form of "visual poetry." This innovative form is pioneered by American artist, Dave Morice. His adaptations are collected in *Poetry Comics: A Cartooniverse of Poems (*1980). Genres subtly blend, but retain its quintessential savor. Genre has the same root to gender. They both populate and are marked by evolution. Some genres remain or sustain. They become time-honoured. Some dwindle. Some return with a new vigour and vitality.

Graphic novel too stems from comics, but gradually it evolved. It is now stamped with acceptance as an iconoclastic genre. Generically, the term "comics" is also used to define a "graphic novel." The shortest definition of graphic novel describes it as "book-length comic books that are meant to be read as one story" (Weiner, 2012, p. xi). Attempts to differentiate between comics and graphic novels appear to be an elitist stance. However, there are noteworthy differences between the two:

a) Comics are serialised stories and episodic in nature. They unfold the plot over month or even years. They are like periodicals or magazines with issue numbers. On the other hand, graphic novels are standalone entities, composed and marketed as a single publication. Their plot is wrapped up within one or two volumes.
b) The story-telling structure marks the difference between the two. A cartoonist is required to narrate a story through a month. So each issue must end with a "cliff-hanger" to stir up suspense, driving readers to buy the next issue. They also need to bear the monotony of "recap" at the beginning of each new issue as a reminder of prior events. There are no such constraints in case of graphic novels.
c) Comic books are usually printed on lower-grade matte-finish papers while expensive graphic novels have been published in glossy or slick papers. Modest budget comics are still held together with staples whereas graphic novels are marketed in both hardbound and paperback.
d) Thematically, the contents of graphic novels are more complex, subtle and wide ranging. They encompass socio-political concerns, personal spaces, alarming ecological issues, historical narratives and whatnot. On the contrary, comics have usually been restrained to spandex clad superheroes beating up villains or adventure stories to entertain a cult of readership like kids or teenagers. The target readers of graphic novels range from "young adults" to research scholars and academicians.

The term "Graphic Novels" owe its coinage to one of the founders of *Comics Fandom*, Richard Kyle, who in his essay "The Future of Comics" writes:

> Charles Biro coined the word "illustrories" to describe his attempts at adult "comic book strips." E.C. coined "picto-fiction" for a somewhat similar effort. But I believe there is a good word, already in the dictionary, which does a far better job than either of these. My Merriam-Webster defines "graphic" as "of or pertaining to the arts (graphic arts) of painting, engraving and any other arts which pertain to the expression of ideas by means of lines, marks or characters impressed on a surface."
>
> So, in future issues of *Wonderworld*, when you find me using the term "graphic story" and "graphic novel" to describe the artistically serious "comic book strip," you'll know what I mean. I may even use them on some that aren't so serious. (Kyle, n. d.)

American first self-proclaimed graphic novel is *Bloodstar* (1976). It is illustrated by Richard Corben, and based on short story of Robert Howard who created the sword and sorcery hero – Conan, the Barbarian. George Metzger's *Beyond Time and Again* and Jim Steranko's *Chandler: Red Tide* published in the same year also decreed themselves as graphic novel and illustrated novel respectively.

> First British cartoonist to work in America, Alan More, known for *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, was piqued with the neologism of 'graphic novel.' He expressed his discontent with the term 'graphic novel' during a telephonic interview with Barry Kavanagh on 17th October, 2000:
>
> It is a marketing term. I mean, it was one that I never had any sympathy with. The term "comic" does just as well for me. . . The problem is that "graphic novel" just came to mean "expensive comic book" and so what you'd get is people like DC comics or Marvel comics – because "graphic novels" were getting some attention, they'd stick six issues of whatever worthless piece of crap they happened to be publishing lately under a glossy cover and call it The She Hulk Graphic Novel. . . (A. More, personal communication, October 17, 2000)

Graphic novels became increasingly popular after the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986) by Pantheon Books. Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) [illustrated by Miller and Klaus Janson] and Alan More's *Watchmen* (1986-87) [illustrated by Dave Gibbons] boosted the sales of graphic novels. They both were published by DC Comics. Even films based on graphic novels grossed large amount of profit. The milestone films adapted from graphic novels are *Batman* (1989), *Captain America* (1990), *Batman Returns* (1992), *Batman and Robin* (1997), *Blade* (1998), *Spider-Man* (2002), *American Splendor* (2003), *Daredevil* (2003), *Catwoman* (2004), *Batman Begins* (2005), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *300* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *The Avengers* (2012), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016).

The graphic novel, as a genre, has almost attained the status of serious adult literature in the West. Comic book crossover movies earn dollars with every release. Now, the vital question that needs to be addressed is that where Indian graphic novels stand in comparison to its western counterparts.

Anant Pai has significantly contributed towards the foundation of the comic book industry in India. In 1961, Pai joins the *Times of India* 'Books Division'; and starts publishing Indrajal Comics featuring reprints of *Phantom* and *Mandrake the Magician*. His series of *Amar Chitra Katha* since 1970 has attained an iconic status selling more than 90 million comics with more than 440 titles. "Krishna" is the first *Amar Chitra Katha* to be published. Soon the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are also published. The books are initially published in English and Hindi; but soon made available in Bengali, Marathi, Assamese, Gujarati, Punjabi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil Sanskrit and Urdu.

The Indian graphic novel is not entirely defined by spandex clad superheroes trying to ape their western equivalents. Gone are the days when *Chacha Chaudhary* and *Amar Chitra Katha* reigned supreme. Chennai-based digital marketing company, Digitally Inspired Media, formed the DI Comics. They bring out varieties of graphic art – character sketches, mascots, illustrations, game art and storyboards. "Comic Con India" – an international convention on graphic novel and comic book – is the latest buzz. New frontiers are opening, and a whole new Renaissance ushered in. Orijit Sen's graphic novel *The River of Stories* (1994) explores the issue of Narmada Bachao Andolan. Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor: Of Twists and Tales* (2004) narrates stories of a bunch of youngsters who are typically confused and even idealistic. Naseer Ahmed's graphic novel *Kashmir*

Pending (2007) [illustrated by Saurabh Singh] traces the life of a young reforming militant armed with the determination to bring about a change. Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) voices the queer identity amidst the heterosexual metropolitan cultural space. Viswajyoti Ghosh's graphic novel *Delhi Calm* (2010) reimagines the troubled times during Emergency of 1975. Subhadra Sen Gupta and Tapas Guha's graphic novel *Feluda Mysteries: The Criminals of Kailash* (2011) is an adaptation of Satyajit Ray's detective series. Poulmoi Mukherjee's graphic novel *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves: Reloaded* (2011) [illustrated by Amit Tayal] is a retelling of the legend of Ali Baba from the *Arabian Nights*. However, the plot has been contemporised since the novel deals with Mumbai underworld. The "dalit" issue and the social curse of untouchability have been contextualised in the graphic novel *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) co-authored by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, and illustrated by Durgabal and Subhash Vyam. Saurav Mohapatra's graphic novel *Moon Mountain* (2014) [illustrated by Sayan Mukherjee] is a graphical adaptation and retelling of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's classic Bengali novel *Chander Pahar*. The theme and social-cultural milieu explored in these graphic novels are quintessentially Indian and not imitation of the West.

Conclusion

Meaning producing is increasingly becoming a multimodal phenomenon. It is no more limited to textual; and includes visual, spatial, aural and gestural. Graphic novel, a cultural artefact of multimodal era, intervenes through pictures and texts; and hones one's ability to produce meaning by problematising inscriptions and graphic as exclusive/essential and making them "talk to each other" meaningfully. This smart experimental intervention of graphic novels is attuned to the "popular" ethos, and accordingly engages with relevant issues of contemporary interest in a refreshingly avant-garde way.

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