



Aesthetic Dimensions Of Subversion, Resistance, And Pride: Subliminal Visual Semiotics In Bhimayana And Gardener In The Wasteland

Garima Dahiya

Academic Counsellor,

School of Open Learning, University of Delhi

Abstract: Graphic novel is a blend of sophisticated artwork and literary themes aiming to generate critical thinking in the readers. Unlike comic books, this academic discipline transcends the idea of enjoyable reading and foregrounds the social, political and communal consciousness in the readers' minds by the end of the narrative. *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* and *Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Struggle for Freedom* are milestone works in this regard as it provides new aesthetic and narrative methods for discussing topics concerning caste repression, resistance activities, and cultural assertions within India. These writings not only provide the historical accounts of struggles but also subvert the aesthetic hegemony in the making, which offers spaces for the margins and native artistic expressions.

Keywords: Graphic novel, resistance, art, eco-aesthetic, visual semiotics.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Newspapers and television reports have an overwhelming presence of unjust violence against the lower castes of the Indian society. So, caste system in India, becomes a prominent issue to have the focus of people. The normalization and internalization of caste hierarchies in the minds of the oppressors and the oppressed needs to be countered with Phule's thoughts, his visions and the challenges he faced, to provide a deep understanding of social and religious setting. Hence, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* by Natrajan and Ninan provides the context and the commentary to the continuing relevance of Phule's message in contemporary India. His historical journey and the modern-day reflections of the authors, is a modern re-imagining of Phule's radical approach towards caste oppression. The narrative in the novel, is informative yet avoids being overly instructive, making it accessible and engaging for both academic and casual readers.

The art and storytelling in graphic novels serve as a potent form of activism. Through vivid illustrations, they can elicit strong emotional reactions, rendering the issues more immediate and impactful. Therefore, this article posits graphic novels as a form of historical documentation, capturing and preserving the struggles and triumphs of oppressed communities for future generations. It focuses upon the present academic discussion towards aesthetics of the representation of oppression, resistance, and pride with specific emphasis on graphic novel *Bhimayana* as well as *Gardener in the Wasteland*.

2. AESTHETICS AS A MEDIUM TO PRESENT OPPRESSION AND RESISTANCE:

The incidents of the life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in *Bhimayana* reclaims and retells the narratives of Dalits through the art of a tribal community. Written by Anand, it takes inspiration from true events in Ambedkar's life which is depicted by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam in the form of Gond art. The art uses subtle metaphors to represent abstract concepts. For instance, water imagery is used to symbolize purity and life, contrasting with depictions of drought and dryness that signify oppression and deprivation. Moreover, the title of the graphic novel is an attempt at creating an alternative mythology as it subverts the traditional Hindu mythological narratives by celebrating a Dalit hero who challenged the status quo. As against the ceremonial loftiness of an epic, it is showing Ambedkar attempting to forge a day-to-day living while confronting obstructions which attempt to strip dignities.

Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* helps to understand the question of interplay of aesthetic and politics in the novels can be understood. This highlights the interaction between art, society, and ideology, providing very important insights into how artworks oppose dominant cultural discourses while at the same time confirming the identities of oppressed groups. He emphasizes the concept of "truth content" in art, which is present in its ability to discover and criticize social realities. This is achieved through form, material, and the negation of aesthetic expectations. The novels resist commodification by having a non-linear structure and organic forms, as propounded by Adorno, the idea of art as a site of negation and critique. It compels readers to confront the lived realities of caste oppression, thus disrupting aesthetic expectations.

The employment of Gond and Madhubani visual traditions defies mainstream visual cultures while validating local views. The non-representational representation of the figures in these traditions gives priority to universality over individuality, thereby heightening collective resistance. Additionally, the dramatic facial expressions and dynamic gestures of the figures significantly heighten the emotional strength of the narratives being told. The aesthetic quality of the artwork is significant, because one of the most insidiously imbedded things inside the traditions of minority societies is their visual. So, the celebration of the Gond art as performed in *Bhimayana* stands as a reclaiming against the history of their discussions in mainstream art. The work *Gardener in the Wasteland* enriches its written text with a modern, yet poignant, artistic methodology that draws attention to the universality of Phule's struggle against caste systems. Collectively, these pieces form a rich basis for discussing how aesthetics can contest deep-rooted societal conventions, yet simultaneously pay homage to the strength and dignity of marginalized groups.

3. ECO-AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICS OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION:

Eco-aesthetics combines environmental awareness with artistic expression and explores how art represents and criticizes human involvement with nature. In the selected texts, eco-aesthetic principles play a role in describing oppression, resistance, and pride, as it often is intertwined with caste, labor, and community. The two works make use of environmental themes to portray ecological injustice in comparison with social injustice and to express how deep interrelations between environmental and social justice exist. This can be an example of environmental exclusion as represented within caste hierarchies and desert territories, besides fragmented water supply as symbols of deprivation and systemic neglect.

Based on sign and symbol analysis, visual semiotics is the holistic presentation for explanation of how texts work in fighting traditional graphic codes towards giving a voice to opinions. Anchored in Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes, it therefore opens means of close analysis regarding complex meanings that are woven in graphic novel's visuals. For example, the concept of myth, as developed by Barthes, is the ideologies constructed culturally embedded in visual signs. Such novels can deconstruct myths built to propagate caste hierarchies and instead build myths of resistance and pride.

Furthermore, both the novels condemn caste as a system deeply ingrained and exploitative in nature, as class in Marxist thought, while aesthetics serves to reinforce such a condemnation. Metaphors of vision like water scarcity in *Bhimayana* reflect how Dalits are alienated from necessary resources. It brings forth how caste functions as a parallel for class exploitation. Phule condemns the Brahmanical ideology that validated caste exploitation. It represents how the land and labor of lower castes were seized, which simulates Marx's idea of primitive accumulation.

4. INTERSECTIONALITY IN AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION:

Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality helps in the graphic novels, to explore how different forms of oppression—such as caste, gender, class, and ethnicity—converge to produce particular experiences of marginalization and resistance. It explains how visual and narrative techniques could be used to speak to the complex, interrelated forms of oppression encountered by marginalized groups while simultaneously affirming their agency and pride.

In these stories, women are presented through traditional folk imagery, which reflects oppression as well as empowerment. In *The Gardener in the Wasteland*, Madhubani-style depictions of women working in the fields or engaging in community discussions affirm their role as guardians of knowledge. This is evidence that environmental justice movements have long been aided by women's labor and knowledge. The subtle nuances of Madhubani painting tend to focus on women's relationship with nature and their rebellion against patriarchal systems. Both novels visually challenge the notion of women being confined to the home. By being present in protests, fields, and public spaces, these women are icons of resistance against caste and gender-based oppression.

To address the pressing questions about representation, identity, and power in these graphic novels, the book *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* by Margaret Dikovitskaya, provides an in-

depth analysis of the domain of visual culture studies, investigating its development, methodologies, and theoretical constructs. It offers a critique and evaluation of how visual culture studies surpasses traditional disciplinary limitations to engage with current concerns regarding representation, power, and ideology.

5. CONCLUSION:

Using the frameworks of postcolonial theory, intersectionality, Marxist critique, and eco-aesthetics, this research illustrates how these graphic novels reconceptualize caste oppression as a complex phenomenon that encompasses spatial, environmental, and cultural injustices rather than just a social issue. Both narratives harness aesthetics as a means of resistance, using indigenous and culturally specific artistic expressions to stake claims of agency and to contest dominant narratives. This study enriches the current academic discourse regarding aesthetic experiences as connecting individual experiences to collective forms of resistance. Further, it provides new perspectives with its analysis of eco-aesthetics and the convergence of environmental justice with caste, thereby showing that both social emancipation and ecological emancipation are interrelated.

In conclusion, the study supports the thesis that the aesthetics of *Bhimayana* and *Gardener in the Wasteland* are more than just artistic choices but are meant to be intentional expressions of political practice. They show that visual culture can express what cannot be put into words and challenge dominant ideas and envision a more equal and just world. Hence, these graphic novels are critical cultural texts which continue to provoke debates regarding oppression, resistance, and pride within contemporary India and beyond.

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