

BHIMAYANA: THIRST FOR KHULLA

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In *Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability*, a graphic novel by Srividya Natarajan Lions

and crocodiles, represents the anger of the oppressive Brahmin. Fish and elephants represent the thirst of the Dalits. In figure 1, Ten-year-old Bhim Ambedkar, the famous Dalit revolutionary, stands in front of his teacher with a fish in his stomach asking for a drink of water. The teacher calls him a nuisance because he cannot wait till the bell rings, but when the bell rings the peon, the man at the well gives, all the other students water and the peon goes home. Ambedkar has to leave for home still thirsty. As an untouchable, the South Asia society forbids Ambedkar to make bodily contact with the tap. He might infect the water. The pictures deliver information to the reader the quickest, most effective, way possible. It's this type of image that makes this graphic novel, *Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability* by Srividya Natarajan and all political graphic novels, so powerful. In this paper, I will talk about how the graphic novelists use both visual devices and literary devices to tell their stories. This gives the reader an emotional charge other forms do not have. They connect to the story on a personal level.



Figure 1

It is becoming more common for authors to use the graphic novel to tell their stories. Literary and visual artists are beginning to combine their media's to discuss social and political issues and share the cultural experiences seen in the societies in which they live. Authors choose to exercise this form not just because it is fun, creative, and new but because the combination of picture and

text gives them something that other forms of writing do not have. They do not just incorporate words; they combine text and images to discuss social and political issues and deliver this information to the reader in the quickest most descriptive way possible. Graphic novels allow authors to provide their readers with a multi-sensory slap in the face. The combination of picture and text forces the reader to come face to face with the social issues these authors are portraying. This visual confrontation is something literary novels, which just feature text, cannot provide.

When people hear the term graphic novel they think of comic books, but comic books and graphic novels are not the same. Comic books are usually self-interest stories, such as a superhero stories, and typically consist of a serialized, never ending series of books. However, scholars are still using the two terms interchangeably. Graphic novels have characteristics that are much different from comic books. They usually consist of sequential art, “a multilayered narrative; black and with drawings; animal symbolism and anthropomorphization; and biographical elements” (Martin, “Graphic Novels or Novels Graphics”, 171). They feature a beginning, middle, and end. This consists of rising action, the climax or turning point, falling action, and the resolution or denouncement. This is something many comic books do not have. Graphic Novels incorporate both literary devices and visual devices to help them tell their story. They generally discuss more serious subject matter and are commonly “described as a ‘sophisticated, rich, visionary storytelling.’” (Martin, “Graphic Novels or Novels Graphics”, 171) While there are many kinds of graphic novels, the most famous address serious often tragic moments in history and engage in social critique. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* are two well know examples. Art Spiegelman wrote *Maus* in the graphic novel style to tell the story of his father’s experience as a Jew during the holocaust. *Palestine* is a book about the time Sacco spent in *Palestine* and deprivation he witnessed while he was there.

With the rise in popularity of this form, authors and artists are starting to expand the boundaries and incorporate their own creative visual styles. Some authors have chosen to feature photography in their books giving an exact image to a scene, while others choose to include abstract art leaving the meaning of the picture hidden and open for interpretation. In 2011, the new graphic novel *Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability* by Natarajan broke many of these conventions. This book changes the characteristics that are typically associated with the graphic novel. In *Bhimayana* the artists, Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam eliminate sequential art, which is one of the most common elements in a traditional graphic novel and what most people think tells the story. Srividya, the writer and Durgabai, and Subhash unravel Ambedkar’s life story and teachings through

a traditional India art form called pardhan gond art. The story and pictures flow through the pages. When asked to be the illustrators, artists Durgabai and Subhash Vyam said, “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.” (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 102) Durgabai and Subhash draw on digna art as a guideline for how to create structure without boxing in the characters. Pardhan Gond art originates from the digna. “The ecology of Pardhan Gond art is such that even when dealing with urban subjects we see freefalling animals, birds and trees in landscapes without a horizon. The train becomes a snake, the intimidating fort a lion. The happiness of the people of Chalisgaon who receive Bhim Ambedkar is not conveyed through smiling faces but a dancing peacock. An earthmover used by a dalit, who is killed for digging a well, sheds tears as two cows bear witness.” (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 102) Gond art does not represent what is actually going on, it applies images to signify emotions and events.

Marjane Satrapi, writer and illustrator of *Persepolis*, believes that “In graphic novels, the images help tell the story. ‘Images are a way of writing,’ says Satrapi. ‘When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw it seems a shame to choose one. I think it’s better to do both.’” (Campbell, “Picture This: Inside the Graphic Novel”, 20) Alissa Torres, author of *American Widow*, writes in the graphic novel form because she believes writing about her husband’s death during 9/11 was not enough. She needed to be able to show the images that bombarded her every day. “Both Spiegelman and Torres use the graphic novel format to help shape narratives giving them linearity) separate various narrative strands (both begin in medias res) and use flashbacks, and untangle emotions. These traits are characteristic of many other graphic novels as well.” (Martin, “Graphic Novels or Novels Graphics”, 171)

Many authors believe the graphic novel form is a more effective way of discussing the oppression, genocide, and war than just writing a prose novel. They capture the reader’s attention and allow them to see what the author wants them to see and pay attention to what they believe is important. The images seen in Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* are a perfect example of this. “Graphic novels can emphasize certain aspects of reality that conventional prose sometimes cannot. In *Palestine*, the background drawings – the immediate setting in which Sacco finds himself – convey much information...As Sacco stated at a talk he gave in 2007, the author of conventional prose can occasionally write that ‘there is mud everywhere’ but cannot do so in every paragraph. Seeing its overwhelming presence throughout the novel’s pages, however, can powerfully convey to readers

the crumbling infrastructure, economic underdevelopment, and general desperation characterizing life in the West Bank and Gaza.” (Juneau, “Narratives in Pencil”, 174) You can see this in Figure 2. Through his pictures, Sacco is able to show the reader how bad Palestine really is, forcing the reader to take notice. The text in graphic novels requires the reader to put forth a certain amount of attention, while the images add the sensory aspect and submerge the reader in a visual world.

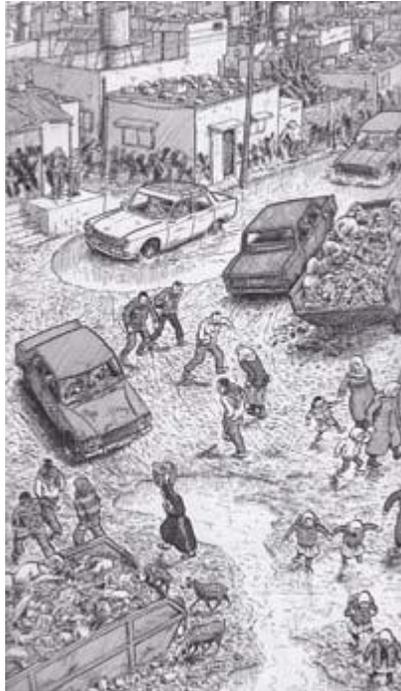


Figure 2

Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability is one of the newest graphic novels, first published in January 2011. This book features art by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. After Natarajan asked them to be the illustrators for the book, they refused to confine their art into boxes. They believed art should flow and not be restricted to small-boxed spaces. This eliminated the sequential art that is commonly seen in this form and when they made this decision, they created something new. The artists have also added color to their drawings, which is unusual for this form. They do employ some of the common characteristics within this genre, such as animal symbolism, multilayered narrative, and biographical elements. Most importantly, they added more of India’s culture into the novel. Instead of conforming to the usually graphic novel characteristics, the Vyam’s made their book stand out from the rest. The Gond artists believe that when you look at a good image it brings good luck, so they decorate their houses and the floors with these images. By

utilizing this style to illustrate *Bhimayana*, the artists surround the book with their cultural beliefs and motifs. This gives the reader some insight into the lives of the people living in India and their values.

Graphic novels feature not only textual modes but also visual modes. Textual modes also called “verbal art” unfolds with time as the reader reads the words on the page, while the visual mode (pictorial art) unfolds “through its use of space” (Kukkonen, “Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology”, 36-37). The audience takes in everything at once with one image. This mode consists of novels and prose, while visual modes would include films, photography, paintings, etc. Graphic novels combine these two modes. Comic theory suggests that one mode does more for the text than the other does, but in actuality, the text needs both to form an accurate, fully comprehensible, story. The pictures concentrate on displaying a wide variety of information in one moment, but can only portray visible actions; the accompanying text shows elements that the pictures cannot portray, such as thoughts and speech. Karin Kukkonen says, “As a multimodal medium, comics make use of all their modes dynamically when unfolding a story to us” (Kukkonen, “Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology”, 35). This is what makes the graphic novel so appealing to the reader. With the combination of the visual and textual modes, the reader connects to the story on a more personal level and the story come to life.

Many people believe that graphic novels are easy to read and are for people who cannot focus on prose novels. This is completely wrong. Graphic novels may be able to hold the attention of those who usually cannot become engrossed in prose novels, but this is probably do to the fact that graphic novels are visual and the images guide the reader through the story as opposed to reading left to right and following the words. Images have the ability to present more information than just words can, and in a smaller space. Graphic novels are actually more complex because they force our brains to move in the space between images and word. In *Bhimayana*, on page 54, seen in figure 3, there is a picture of the Dalits and the Hindus standing around a pool of water shaped as a fish. It looks as though they are having a tug-o-war with each other over the fish. We know that this fish represents water for the community, but because they are untouchables, the Dalits cannot use this water source. So just from looking at the picture you can see that the Dalits are fighting to obtain access to the water source, with Ambedkar’s guidance. Dugabai and Subhash create a figure representing Ambedkar with glasses at the head of the fish. On the opposing page, page 55, there is an entire page backing up this assumption. It is a news article describing the events on March

19, 1927 when the Dalits fought for the right to make contact with the Chavadar Tank. The information the picture gives us in one image takes an entire page of writing. This allows graphic novels to speak to visual learners and auditory learners as well as literate and illiterate.



Figure 3

The graphic novel includes text to narrate the story the novelists are telling by describing the pictures presented and incorporate conversations. Authors do this by using literary devices. The audience reads the rest of the story through the images. The artists apply the image to create feelings, emotions, while delivering information about the story to the reader. The artists do this by exercising different artistic devices, such as color theory, line theory, and backgrounds. As the reader turns from page to page, they experience visually striking graphics. Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics* is the authority on this subject.

To critics it may seem as though the graphic novel leaves little to the imagination, but different people can interpret all art in a different way. The art in *Bhimayana* allows this more than other texts in the past. Durgabai and Subhash base their illustrations in *Bhimayana* on a cultural art form, the *digna*, rather than the sequential art seen in most graphic novels. *Bhimayana* features the image of pointing fingers throughout the narrative. For some readers these pointing fingers could be

pointing at the people who are participating in the discrimination of Ambedkar, pointing them out and showing them what they are doing, while to another reader the pointing fingers are discriminating fingers pointing at the untouchables. There are things in pictures that some people pick up while other people do not. Many people are not going to notice all the layers of symbolism featured in *Bhimayana*, such as the peacock featured on page 79, shown in figure 4. Some people may just see it as a peacock, while others will understand it symbolizes the happiness of the Chalisgaon when they meet Ambedkar. (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 102)

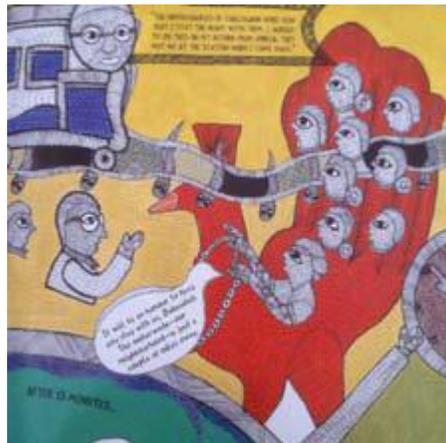


Figure 4

Bhimayana employs both color and black and white. Every image of a person featured in this novel is in black and white. This is because regardless of the caste, race, or profession society should view all people as the same. Every color, background, shape, and line holds meaning in a graphic novel. These cues allow the reader to draw in information about the subject the authors and artists are trying to discuss. Without these minor differences the reader would not be able to understand the full meaning of the novel.

The effect color has on a reader is profound. An artist decision to incorporate color in his or her graphic novel can be due to many things. Commerce could affect this, or it could be because color adds or takes away something from the story being. Artists have always seen color as something powerful and major in fine art. Some artists spent their lives studying color and believed that it had physical and emotional effects on people. The application of color in graphic novels and comic books has not had so much luck. In superhero comics, artists used the four-color scale along with black ink for line work. The colors were flat and color intensity was restricted to 100%,

50%, and 20%. With colors, artists objectified their subjects and readers became more aware of the subjects physical form than the figures drawn in black and white. Colors are something that graphic novels could start using more effectively. Colors express mood, while tones and modeling could add depth. Color is a sensation. However, when put with the old shape-sensitive line drawings in comics, these colors seem out of place. Black and white and color comics can have completely different effects on the reading experience of a comic. In black and white, pictures communicate the subjects behind the art more openly; the meaning of the novel goes beyond the form, and “art approaches language”. In comics with flat colors, like superhero comics, the” forms themselves take on more significance”. (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 192) Graphic novelists can transform their books into a more invigorating environment of sensations (ambiance) with more expressive colors. (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 192) Color does the same thing for images that the application of line and background and text does. It adds to the story as a whole. It gives the reader more information to take in from a picture and portrays emotion, mood, and feelings that would otherwise not be there if it the writers wrote it in a different form.

Durgabai and Subhash Vyam incorporate color dramatically in their drawings. They draw the people in black and white, while artists highlight much of the background with vibrant colors. This draws the eye towards the background, forcing the reader to focus on what they are displaying in color in some images. The artists usually draw animals in this type of image. They include these animals to signify the emotions of the human characters, such as peacock in figure 4. Another example of this is on page 66, seen in figure 5. Ambedkar is describing his first week of work. He compares himself to “an ox in the oil-press, walking in circles and going nowhere” (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 66). The illustrators draw Ambedkar and the oxen in black and white, showing their connection to one another, while highlighting the circle they are all walking in and their footprints in color. In other images, the background is one flat color with a black and white figure featured in the middle, this frames the figure and the reader focuses on the actions of this figure. The flat color works as a background for the text; this highlights important news clippings and stories about a caste system still in practice.



Figure 5

Most graphic novels employ black and white drawings as opposed to color. This could simply be because it cost less money to print in black and white, but it could also be the preference of the author. Bhimayana uses color because the art stems from the Gond art tradition. *Maus* would not be the same story if it were published in vibrant colors. The story is about a dark subject, the holocaust, so it is only fitting that it features dark pictures. Artists that choose to draw the images in their books in black and white depend on line theory.

There are many different graphic artists and they all have their own drawing style, each of which fits the novels they are drawing for. The drawings seen in *Dick Tracy* by Chester Gould, the audience sees the images as grim and deadly because of the bold line, obtuse angles and the heavy black, while Carl Barks' images of *Uncle Scrooge* reveal the opposite. He depicts a whimsical feeling of childhood and innocence by using gentle curves and open lines. By using different lines and styles, the artists are portraying a feeling they wish to invoke in the reader. The emotion they are creating is imperative when it comes to stories about social issues. Joe Sacco's thick dark lines in *Palestine*, observed in figure 6, carry a feeling of discomfort for the reader. This discomfort is felt everywhere in Palestine because of the war. The illustrations are the only ways authors can express these feelings to the reader and have the reader keep that feeling though out the novel. Every line has the potential to hold meaning in a graphic novel, depending on its direction, the shape it forms, or the characteristics of the line. Scholars consider a straight horizontal line passive and timeless,

while a perpendicular line is proud and strong, and the slanted line can mean dynamic and changing. A shape with sharp jagged lines is unwelcoming and severe; a rounded curved shape is warm and gentle, while a straight-boxed shape becomes rational and conservative. A scratchy line is savage and deadly, viewers see a blotted, splotchy line as weak and unstable, and a straight line with no gaps represents honest and direct. (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 125)



Figure 6

The line work seen in *Bhimayana* comes from Digna patterns. Nearly every line seen in this novel comes from India's Gond art culture. Everything is connected and represented with nature and animals. Durgabai and Subhash apply the Digna patterns to their images to decorate the background and connect the images to one another. The Digna is an art form created by villagers in India to decorate their houses. Digna tribes believe that looking at these images bring luck into their homes and the people who live in them.

The background of an image conveys emotion within a graphic novel. Even if there is little or no way of telling the internal state of the character by looking at the them, a certain background will usually affect the way the reader experiences their state of mind. These feelings will not be associated with the reader, but rather with the character, they are identifying. If artist chooses to use the background, it is usually associated with the characters inner thoughts, emotions, and not something the viewer can see on his face. (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 132) too much McCloud, introduce him as the leading authority and then see if you can include all his quotes but pepper the essay with other authorities. In *Bhimayana*, the artist draw images of animals to convey

characters emotions, a lion represents something intimidating, while the dancing peacock is a sign of happiness.

One of the easiest and next most effective ways of conveying emotion is with words. Both cartoonist and comic writers struggle with the ability to create sound in a strictly visual medium. To help overcome this obstacle they employ words, whether it is in a word bubble or written in a narrative box. With text, they incorporate literary devices. To add sound to the word “crash” the artist will typically add some of the line techniques I pointed out earlier. They might, for instance, write it with a jagged line in all caps with an exclamation point and the shape of the letters may be sharp and jagged. Authors bring words into play for thoughts and speech. Words have the ability to describe the invisible and to add feeling to an image that is otherwise completely neutral. The Vyam’s include word bubbles in *Bhimayana* to represent different things. Durgabai and Subhash employ the word bubbles that are in the shape of birds, seen in figure 7, only for characters that are victims of caste. These characters are soft spoken and loveable. They are “men and women who speak like birds” (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 100). The Vyam’s draw the thought bubbles, shown in figure 8, with eyes leading to the bubble and surrounded by a digna pattern. The eyes represent the mind’s eye, they carry words “that cannot be heard but can be perceived” (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 100). The bubbles that represent characters who the Hindu religion benefits with the caste system and love it are made up of circles that overlap each other and slowly get bigger leading up to a clouded bubble, observed in figure 9. These are words that “contain poison, whose touch is venomous”. (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 101) Nevertheless, words cannot do everything. They “lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures, relying instead on a gradual cumulative effect.” (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 135) The application of these images gives meaning that the text lacks. It characterizes the people in the book. These word bubbles and thought bubbles resemble that literary novelist call stream of consciousness. Authors of graphic novels incorporate many of the literary devices seen in literary novels into their novels.

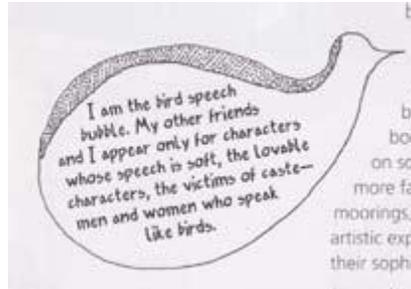


Figure 7

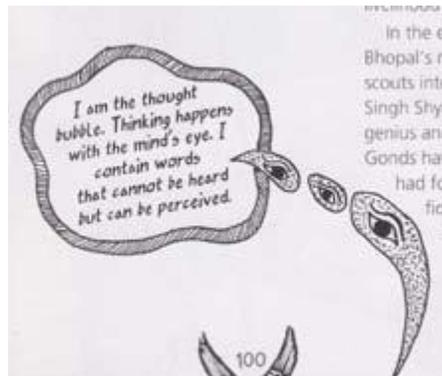


Figure 8

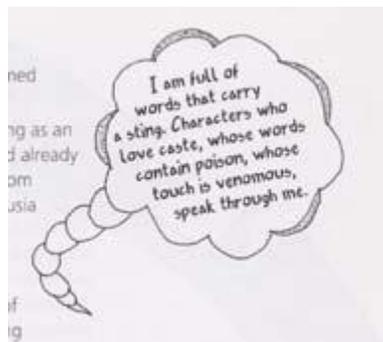


Figure 9

Authors incorporate literary devices in their text to create an interesting and sophisticated story line. They feature the sequencing of events that authors incorporate in their literary novels. This includes rising action, the climax or turning point, falling action, and the resolution or denouncement. Natarajan introduces Bhim Ambedkar in the beginning of her book and tells the story of how badly his peers treated as a child, which directly contributed to his becoming an untouchable revolutionist later in life. The climax is the turning point of the novel; Ambedkar

begins the revolution and build up a group of untouchable to help fight those who are oppressing the lower castes. Because of this first demonstration, Ambedkar begins a fight for the lower castes against the upper caste system. The denouncement is not a resolution; the untouchables are still experiencing oppression today. The end of the book points out that the caste system they are fighting against is not a system set up by society, but is justified by their legal system making this graphic novel a story about “India’s hidden apartheid” (Manivannan, “Book Review”, 1). The news clipping and articles that Durgabai and Subhash collected and included in the book show the reader that this system of oppression is still in practice today.

Hindu religion, a primary religion in India, believes untouchables to be diseased or polluted. Higher Castes consider and treat them as the lowest form of life; they are subordinate to animals. They do not allow them to drink public water or bath in public baths. If someone from the upper castes catches them doing this, they usually suffer a beating sometimes resulting in death. The images and text in the book *Bhimayana* tell the story of Ambedkar, an untouchable and a revolutionist. The book takes us through the problems he faced in childhood and still in adulthood, after he graduated from Columbia University and having Sayaji Rao (raja of Baroda State) sponsors his education. Graphic novels are not only stories they incorporate literary and visual devices that allow for a wide variety of artistic expression. This combination connects the reader to the subject on a personal level by making them come face to face with the social and political issues still suffocating the people around us. Many of the graphic novels in the past have stuck to the basic graphic novel structure, while some added photography and other minor changes. *Bhimayana* changes this structure almost completely. By adding space and color, this book gives the untouchables something that they never had. The Vyam’s give their characters room to breathe, they flow through the pages of this book, and their story is told. By breaking down the traditional form of the graphic novel, the artists have drawn more attention to their book and the subjects within it. The readers of this book do not look at it as a graphic novel; it’s a series of drawings that reveal a story. It draws in a more artistic viewer.