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The Graphic Novel, Narrative Of Conflict And Marginalisation : Reading Parismita Singh's Hotel At The End Of The World

Sonali Rajkhowa

Department of English ,Gauhati University

Abstract:

The contemporary graphic novel has nearly assumed the proportions of a movement. This paper seeks to analyse the graphic mode as a politically sharper and formally more effective mode over traditional approaches to story- telling. In India contemporary versions of the graphic novel address issues such as culture, history, mythology conflict to name a few. In Parismita Singh's The Hotel at the End of the World fantasy blends with social reality. Conflict exists at various levels: external conflict, internal conflict and the metaphorical conflict between the mainland and the periphery. Infact, the very title The Hotel at the End of the World is evocative of being relegated to the periphery. The metaphor of the peripheral forms the backdrop of all the tales. The graphic form here succeeds in projecting the sense of alienation much more effectively than traditional forms of narrative. The stark and simple panels, devoid of ostentation, are evocative of the frugal lifestyle of the characters and emphatically announce tropes of underdevelopment and the marginal. Also the local and the immediate is often subsumed by the universal human pre-occupation. The graphic form incorporates the experience of war and conflict in a way that is alien to traditional narrative forms. My paper will attempt to establish the graphic as a narrative form that addresses the issues and implications of conflict and explores the history of marginalisation in which the region is steeped.

KEYWORDS:

Conflict Narrative, Marginalisation.

INTRODUCTION

It is largely assumed that all media are created equal but some media nevertheless remain more equal than others. The spectacular upgrading of comics – first ignored by academics yet eventually embraced though not as comics per se but as 'graphic novels'– illustrates, however that hierarchies are never fixed. The thrust of this paper would be to advance the graphic narrative as a serious form of fiction as well as a timely intervention into the traditional mode of story-telling. It will also seek to establish Parismita Singh's The Hotel at the End of the World (2009) as a work from the margins about the marginal and in a genre that is attempting to break away from the margins and come into a status of its own.

The reasons for these changes and differences exceed the medium of the graphic novel itself and include the advent of what certain scholars refer to as the visual turn in contemporary culture, as well as the increasing familiarity with and interest in hybridized media. Media hybridization is a term used to describe a type of media convergence whereby a new mode emerges containing the elements of combined media. Hybridity could involve the blurring of traditional distinct boundaries between artistic media and could also mean cross-breeding art with other disciplines such as literature, pop-culture and philosophy. Hybridized media expands the possibilities for experimentation and innovation in contemporary art.

We are constantly surrounded by visual stimuli including movies, television and have learned to

associate images with story telling, to follow and understand a story visually rather than textually. Visual clues provide the framework for interpretation.

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. (Said iii)

Thus we see why graphic novels have become increasingly popular over the last ten years or so. The term graphic novel was first popularized by Will Eisner to distinguish his book A Contract with God (1974) from collections of newspaper comic strips. "It is in every sense a singular form of reading". (Eisner 1996:5) He described graphic novels as consisting of sequential series of illustrations which, when viewed in order tell a story.

One broad dictionary definition of the graphic novel is "a fictional story that is presented in comic strip format and presented as a book". The origins of the art form itself are open to interpretation. Cave paintings may have told stories along with hieroglyphics and artists and artisans beginning in the Middle Ages produced tapestries and illuminated manuscripts that told or helped to tell narratives. The first western artist who interlocked lengthy writing with specific images was most likely William Blake. Blake created several books in which the pictures and the story line are inseparable such as Marriage of Heaven and Hell. It was published as printed sheets from etched plates containing prose poetry and illustration.
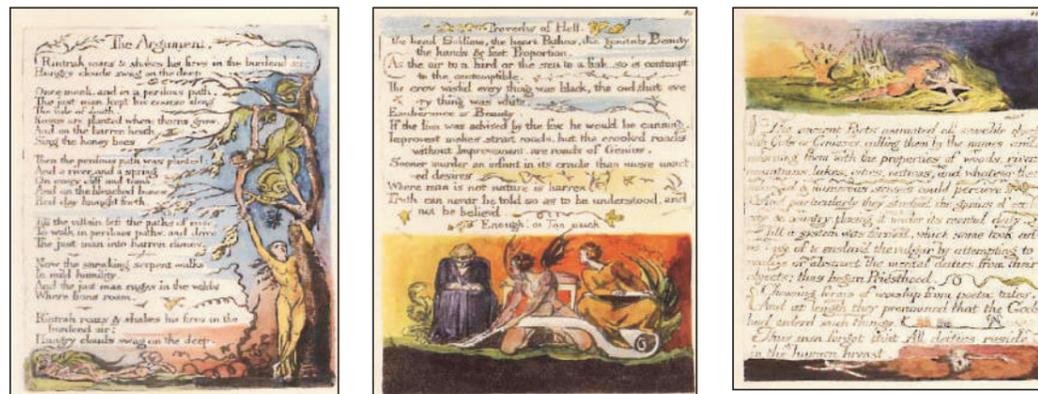

Figure 1: William Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Plates- 2,10 and 1

A whole slew of books have proved that graphic novels could be as satisfying and even as literary in their way as a regular novel. Titles have developed and explored new subjects that have encompassed social issues such as homelessness, child abuse, domestic violence and even environmental damage. Persepolis (2007) by Marjane Satrapi, a brilliant book about growing up in post–revolutionary Iran has become an international hit and an Oscar nominated movie. Joe Kuberts' harrowing story Fax from Sarajevo (1996) deals with a family's battle to escape during the war in Yugoslavia. Aside from the graphical story photographs of the real protagonists are included as well as information about the photographer who died during the war at the age of 24. This provides an immediacy with the story by depicting real action with illustrations. Joe Sacco demonstrates the versatility and potency of this supposedly juvenile medium through Palestine (2001) which sets the benchmark for the new, uncharted genre of graphic reportage.

The way graphic novels tell their stories with integrated words and pictures – looks different from traditional novels, poetry, plays and picture books but the stories they tell have the same hearts. Art Spiegelman's path-breaking memoir Maus (1986) won him the Pulitzer prize. Bone (1991) by Jeff Smith is a fantastical adventure with a monstrous villain and endearing heroes. American Born Chinese (2006) by Gene Luen Yang is a coming-of-age novel, Fun Home (2006) by Alison Bechdel is a powerful memoir. Because graphic novels are told as a series of panels, reading graphic novels also forces readers to think and become actively involved each time they move between one panel and the next. The main thing to remember when talking about graphic novels is that they are as much about character and plot as books are. The same things are interesting but while we may refer to particular passages while analyzing a traditional text here we refer to particular panels. There's just a slightly different vocabulary for talking about them. In

a graphic narrative the pictures provide an entry point to the enjoyment and understanding of it but this is not experienced while reading a text only narrative.

Figure 2: Parismita

Singh's Hotel at

the End of the

World. p. 51
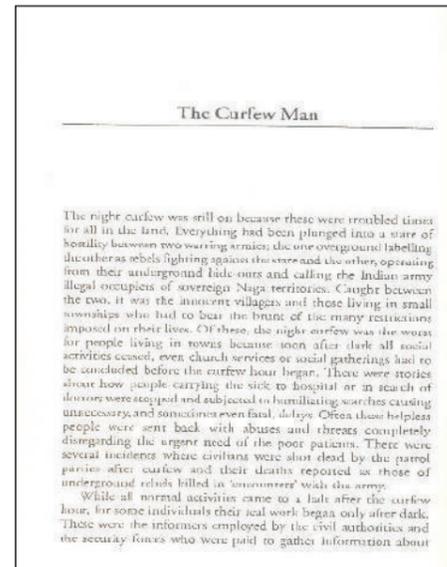
Figure 3: Temsula

Ao's These Hills

Called Home. p.34

Graphic novels have the potential to call English out of its habits and into fresh examination of certain structuring assumptions of the discipline, for example the putative differences between words and pictures or between writing and drawing or between literature and popular culture. By the same token, graphic novels have the potential to bring scholars from other disciplines into dialogue with English.

The reason why graphic novels can be perfect is because it is a union of graphic and written storytelling so it is able to draw on the tools of both film and literature as well as its own set of tools where narrative time is easy to manipulate. Processing the images and the text of a graphic novel together creates a unique kind of literacy and is in no way less than traditional reading.

Despite the important differences among its participating disciplines, the study of graphic novels constitutes a field of shared activity. Comics scholars from disparate fields do share a sense that they have something in common. Indeed, the study of graphic novels constitutes a distinct genre not so much because of shared formal convention but because it shares a common object of study. The definition of genre, a seminal re-codification proposed by Carolyn R. Miller (1984) and elaborated by genre theorists since, defines a genre not by what it is but by what it tries to do, which is to say that social function and purpose are paramount. From this point of view it is the social and historical circumstances of genre that define what is important about the said genre. Through the genre of the graphic novel Joe Sacco approaches the subject of the Bosnian War with his story, Safe Area Goradze: The War in Eastern Bosnia: 1992-1995 (2000) By approaching subjects like this from this medium it may allow more difficult subjects to be broached without diminishing their significance. They can be more accessible to readers who may have already been exposed to the subject through more traditional fictional stories. With graphic novels and certainly caricatures the threshold of what we would allow ourselves to say is extended.

Despite their disciplinary differences, comic scholars around the world share what is widely perceived to be a common set of circumstances. These circumstances include comics' improving yet still disputed or at least still unsure intellectual status, the growth of cultural studies and interdisciplinary work

which have provided a supportive context; and a desire of scholars scattered across disciplines to recognize and commune with each other. In addition to this perceived situation most scholars of graphic novels would probably go so far as to agree that they share common purposes, among them the legitimization of graphic novels as an object of study, the development of resources for further research and the exchange of ideas relevant to specific areas or projects. Finally, these perceived circumstances and purposes have led to rhetorical responses that can be typified as attempts to position graphic novels and their study vis–a–vis new or uncertain or multiple audiences and elated and/ or bemused recognitions of the field's new and sudden respectability

As an intervention that serves to connect the private with the public and the secular with the recurrent the discourse of graphic novels clearly constitutes a genre.

Moreover this genre provides not simply patterns or formulas or strategies for achieving pragmatic ends. It also serves to teach us what ends we may have. Beyond mere rhetoric the genre helps us organize and make sense of the situation we are in. Parismita Singh's The Hotel at the End of the World (2009) marks her foray into this genre and is a serious interrogation of the forms of fictional narrative and seeks to establish that the peculiar historical reality of conflict and marginalization has led her to the graphic form. In The Hotel at the End of the World various stories are woven together to form the main narrative. This is a hotel located somewhere in the densely vegetated hills of the peripheral northeastern part of the country. One cannot be sure which state the hotel is located in and the author deliberately leaves it ambivalent to underscore the local and immediate significance as well as its universal representation. This conflict narrative occupies a peculiar time and space. A couple of the stories discuss the geo-politics and the very real history of conflict of the region, with one character lamenting that the land is full of soldiers and freedom fighters/terrorists as well as the spirits of the dead ones.'-soldier spirits…this place is full of them. You see them everywhere…'(Singh 73). In one of the most poignant panels the spirit of the lost Japanese soldier from the Second World War reveals that he " has fought and fought through whole ages, though in his zeal it seemed to him mere moments"(Singh 90). He has spent ages trying to figure out what happened to his comrades and how he can get back home.
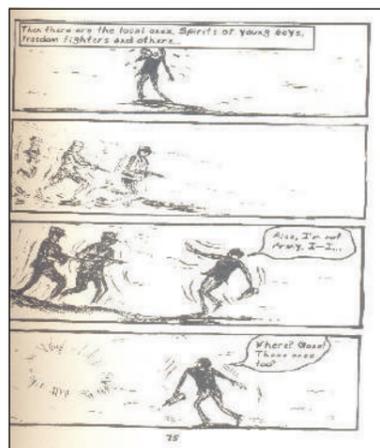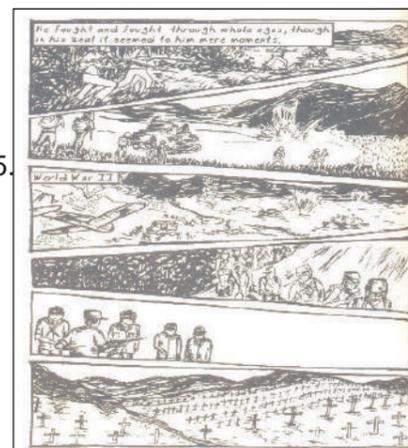

Fig 4.   Fig 5.

Figures 4 and 5 The Hotel at the End of the World. pages 75 and 90.

Marginalisation is the social process of becoming or being made marginal especially as a group within the larger society. It has been more than fifty years since India has been playing around with different paradigms in the North East such as cultural paradigm, security paradigm, join the mainstream paradigm, politics paradigm, economic package paradigm and so on. The Post-Independence era has been a period of confusion in the North East. The region's "lack of development and the failure to forge ahead while other regions of the country scripted their success stories" (Kalita 103) resonates loud and clear throughout Singh's work. Because of negligence and marginalisation people have been and are confused about their identity which resulted in so many peoples' movements and struggles. Continuous marginalization has brought about more distrust and apathy. The problem of insurgency related conflict in North East India has defied solution for the past sixty years. The transition from a tribal polity to a parliamentary democracy left the communities without their political foothold within their own territories. The accession to the Indian

state and having the plains people as their new political masters bred discontent in these communities and left them with the "sense of always being on the outside, far away from the centres of power" (Kalita 103). The resultant insurgence for self-determination was dealt by the state through military means with an overdose of integrationist policies.

Conflicts in the Northeast have been the result of a dissatisfaction with the ruling mindset at the centre- with the centre's inadequate understanding of centre-periphery relationships; with limp and shortsighted policies most commonly perceived as 'exploitation' of the northeastern states for their rich natural resources of tea, oil, and timber; and the 'indifference' to its problems with intra-state and international borders (Dutta 126)

Narrativising about a region which is at the back of beyond, The Hotel at the End of the World can be read as a " 'narrative of neglect', encapsulating aspirations, dejections, despair, frustrations and anger" (Dutta 127) of the marginalized peoples. With its inherent concerns about the centre/periphery dichotomy the work highlights the "considerable disjuncture between the subnational public spheres and the pan-Indian public spheres." (Baruah 2) To underscore the difference of the peripheral North East from the mainland, Parismita Singh gives her characters names like Pema and Kuja which distinctively belong to this region.

Pema, the owner of the hotel, reiterates time and again that it is a place devoid of the basic human necessities. "Waiting-waiting for the bandh to be over, for the roads to be made, for the buses to come." (Singh 35) Kona and Kuja perennially complain about the unavailability of mobile networks as well as the nonexistent roads which force the duo to take refuge at the hotel. The stark and simple panels, devoid of ostentation, are evocative of the frugal lifestyle of the characters. The regional historiography and its marginalization finds focus in almost all the panels of The Hotel at the End of the World. "What else to do in this nowhere to go place?" (Singh 71) The chronic insurgency is a product of this marginalization. The violent struggle launched by the insurgents is an effort to challenge their relegation to the periphery and is very ably reflected in Singh's work.

While New Delhi expects the magic bullet of development to eventually come to its rescue, for the moment, in a region that is peripheral to the national imaginary the cost of letting low-intensity conflicts proliferate and fester are seen as affordable. (Baruah 3)

The Hotel at the End of the World is a captivating assemblage of stories. It can be said of the work that "there is no single overarching narrative which carries all its components, rather it is an amalgamation of little narratives that feed into it" (Dutta 131).

Moreover, in this work, the echoes of 'us and them', 'Northeast and the rest of India', and accusations of exploitation, ignorance, indifference about faulty implementation of policies, and perhaps most importantly, condescension- all components of the neglect narrative- are heard. (Dutta 134)

There is also the medium and its exceptional capacity to spatialize time. Yet this pictorial space is no less powerful, for its textual absence unmasks the claims of the text as so much hypocrisy a rhetorical logic of reversal typical of the comic strip. However, a meta-level reading is also possible if we take the entire page to be a kind of super-panel, encompassing one continuously unfolding story happening at once and within the same meta-space. On this meta-level, the scene exudes a vertical division rather than a tiered and horizontal set of panel-to-panel relationships. Reading against the grain is, in fact, encouraged by the graphic novel's construction, as panels can be seen in their synchronic totality in relation to one another after a reader satisfies his or her urge to follow the story. And the following panel induces such a reading.

Figure 6: The Hotel at the End of the World. p. 42.

A comparison of the panels from four different graphic narratives will fundamentally assert the fungibility of image repertoires, capitalizing on their semantic manipulability.


Fig 7.
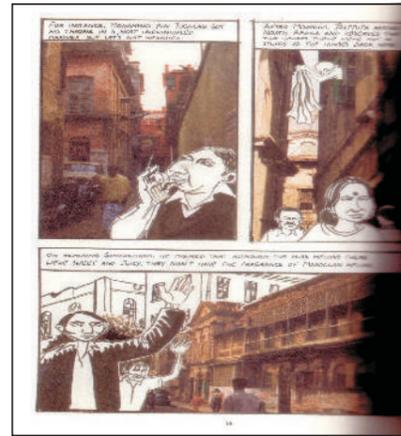
Fig 8.
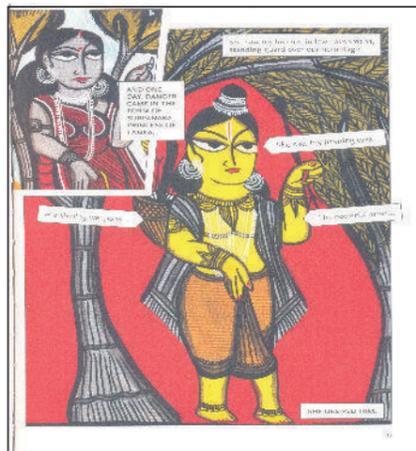
Fig 9.
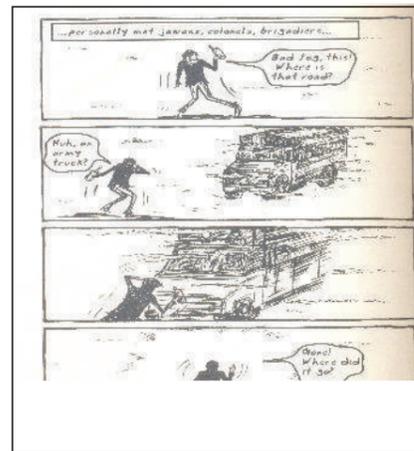
Fig 10.

Fig 7: Palestine. p.194; fig 8: The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers .p.86; fig 9: Sita's Ramayana p.25 ; Fig 10 The Hotel at the End of the World: p.74.

The unique juxtaposition of images invariably leads to a multidimensionality of meanings. The words and illustrations of all the four panels are integral to each other. In Joe Sacco's Palestine the schizophrenic clutter is a deliberate device for reflecting reality prompting Edward Said to remark in the introduction to the work that:

"With the exception of one or two novelists and poets, no one has ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco. Certainly his images are more graphic than anything you can either read or see on television." (Said iii)

In Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's Sita's Ramayana the Patua panels are at their ornate best, revealing the richness of the culture and traditions of the times in which the story is set. But in The Barn Owls Wondrous Capers (2007) Sarnath Banerjee slightly deviates from the norm in that colour photographs are clearly embedded and combined into some of his brilliant graphic panels. Only an artist of superb skill like Parismita Singh can convey the poignant emotions, her stylistic, flat patterned, spare, iconographic