

## **BHIMAYANA AS AN EXPRESSION OF MARGINAL ART FORM**

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**Received: 20 Jun 2022**

**Accepted: 22 Jun 2022**

**Published: 24 Jun 2022**

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper enumerates the process of dismantling a canonical art form by a sub-altern talent with reference to Bhimayana (Vyamel al, 2011). The canonical European tradition of graphic novel has the foundation of sequential narrative form. In negotiating with this form, Bhimayana constructs its own grammatical infrastructure. It also reveals how the Indian graphic novel has embraced this talent from the margin. The unique grammatical form of the narrative of Bhimayana captures an equally unique and specific experience, that of, 'untouchability' A metaphorical comic infrastructure is presented and this paper illustrates how this art form requires intensive exploration for appreciating the intricate relation between the experience presented and the nature of the fluid form of the graphic novel.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Graphic Novel, Gond Art, Digna, Untouchability.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability (Vyamel al, 2011) changes the characteristics that are typically associated with the Graphic novel. Srividya Natarajan, the write and Durgabai, and Subhash Vyam unravel Ambedkar's life story and teaching through a traditional Indian art form called Pardhangond art, The Gond are a tribal residing in Madhya Pradesh (Nayar, 2011). Within the Gond community, Pardhans shoulder the responsibility of carrying forward their art and culture. Gond art focuses on the visual form of art and painting as an indigenous treasure. Gond art can be both mural as well as abstract geometrical design and conceptual sketches. As it is drawn on special occasions, it gets largely erased annually and then be created again.

### **SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY**

A graphic novel attempts to combine images and text to actively engage the readers. Bhimayana employs the traditional Pardhan Gond art. This tradition of Indian art is replete with symbolism and metaphor (Chandra, 2015). Every image is loaded with layers of meaning. Colour plays a vital role in this. Black and white colour symbolizes hopelessness, cruelty, and use of colour symbolizes hope and reconciliation. Page 46 and 47 presents a glimpse of atrocities on Dalits in black and white. But page 48 and 49 presents a colourful description of Ambedkar's speech during Mahad Satyagraha. When water is declined, it is portrayed as colourless as in page 50. But in page 54, the fish shaped pond is full of green water. Thus symbolic use of colour imagery emphasizes the pathetic plight of the untouchables. In Book 2, Shelter, the train in which Ambedkar travels to Baroda has coaches of multiple colours. This suggests the multiple histories and perspectives of India, all ultimately moving in the same direction.

The speech and thought bubbles are also used symbolically. Bird shaped speech bubbles are for loveable characters whose speech is harmless and soft. Scorpion tail shaped speech bubbles are for words that carry a sting, whose words contain poison and cause pain.

The imagery of fish recurs throughout the narrative as a symbol of longing for equality. Thirst is symbolized as fish. As Ambedkar's thirst grows, the size of the fish increases. The image of the water body in the shape of a fish with Ambedkar's face as its head appears just after the episode of the Mahad Satyagraha. Its symbolic implication of Ambedkar's growing presence is obvious here. The image of the pointed finger also recurs throughout the text. It indicates exclusion and blatant caste targets. The presentation of this image in Page 20 and 21 of *Bhimayana* symbolizes repetitive emphasis on discrimination.

The layout of the images on the pages is also symbolic. In page 20 and 21, the child Bhim is depicted at the corners of all the four panels. This symbolizes his marginal space in Indian caste hierarchy. The train journey to Baroda is depicted in curved loops. This is indicative of the train of thought running through Ambedkar's head as he thinks over non-availability of accommodation. Sharp arrows represent the Hindu and Christian friends' response to Ambedkar when he requests them for shelter (Kadam, 1991). The image of the tree in page 92 with multiple branches and multiple faces symbolize the mass connect of Ambedkar as a revolutionary and visionary. The fort in Daulatabad takes the shape of a lion symbolizing the hate of the local Muslim people for the untouchables. The happiness of the people of Chalisgaon who receives Ambedkar is presented as a dancing peacock. Thus abundance of symbolic use of imagery remains the most vital feature of *Bhimayana*.

## **THE GOND ART FORM**

*Bhimayana* presents a different form of narrative where the story and pictures flow through the pages. The usual rigid boxes of graphic novels are used here. Thus characters are not confined within the limits of sequential boxes. This idea of 'open spaces as free and liberating' is the hallmark of Gond art. It finds a refreshing and unique expression in *Bhimayana*. Page 24 and 25 of the book describes how society imposes different sets of rules for the untouchables – for drinking water or for getting their hair trimmed. Society allows animals more freedom than they give the untouchables. The images in these two pages present everything to audience at one go. A wide variety of information is displayed in a single moment. The Digna pattern of Pardhan Gond art provides the thrust for such presentation.

Durgabai and Subhash Vyam draw on digna art as a guideline for creating structure without boxing in the characters. Pardhan Gond art originates from the digna. The digna was originally used to design patterns on walls and floors of Gond homes. The same pattern is used in *Bhimayana* to carve divisions on pages. The book is interspersed with tubular shapes. They form divisions on pages. They also become pathways and streets, vehicles moving along these streets, along with animals and birds. Page 30 and 31 capture Dr Ambedkar's train journey in the digna form. The train is presented in the form of a snake. This art form also presents two dimensional images. Thus in an urban setting, animals, birds and humans appear in a linear landscape without horizon. Page 76 presents an example of this.

*Bhimayana* uses three distinct kinds of speech bubbles inspired by the Gond art. The bird shaped speech bubbles convey the soft innocent speech of the characters. The characters are victims of caste prejudice. The sting shaped speech bubbles carry sharp venomous words of characters that uphold caste distinction. In page 11 of the book, one of the characters is given the sting shaped ones and the other character is given bird shaped speech bubbles. The thought bubbles

signify perception which is not expressed. In page 19, little Bhim Rao Ambedkar thinks that barbers will not touch his hair since he is a Mahar. Thus Gond art allows Bhimayana to use images to signify emotions and events.

## CONTEXT, NARRATIVE AND VISUAL ART

The foreword to Bhimayana has been written by John Berger. At the beginning one urban youth, may be a girl, argues that caste oppression no longer exists. But the other girl, wearing spectacle, counters this argument by presenting newspaper reports from 2006, and 2011. This youth then mentions about Dr Ambedkar to show how people belonging to Mahar caste was oppressed earlier. Ambedkar was born in 1891 (Oza, 2011). His parents were Bimabai and Ramji Sakpal, who worked as a subedar. People of Mahar caste were untouchables like Paraiyars and Malas in South India. Ambedkar's own experience showed how much the untouchables were inhumanely treated. The youth, who is against the quota system, says that Ambedkar's experience does not have any relevance in the present times. The other girl then refers to newspaper reports of May 2008. The news describes how a Dalit man is murdered in the same Satara district of Maharashtra for digging a well on his property. The youth says that the village people are still old fashioned and therefore do this. The girl wearing spectacle says that the same kind of incidents happen in cities of India.

Water has historically been a medium of exclusion for Dalits in India. The cover for the 'water' section in Bhimayana shows a boy with an 'untouchable' hand and fish aiming at a well. This well is paced in the distant sky. This image initiates the theme of water or deprivation of water that runs through the book. In a school in Satara in Maharashtra, in 1901, Ambedkar was asked to sit away from his classmates, he is not given drinking water by the peon/clerk. Society will not also allow him to touch the tap. The caste hierarchy gives untouchables lower status than the animals and birds. Animals and birds are allowed to have water from the village pond, but untouchables are prohibited. Ambedkar's father is employed at Goregaon, for supervising the construction of a water tank. But Ambedkar cannot get water at school to drink. On the way to Goregaon, Ambedkar and his cousins are asked to drink water from a stinking pond. They are asked to introduce themselves as Muslims only to get water from the tollman. 'The boys have food, but they cannot eat it because no one would give them water.' The untouchables are not allowed to fulfil an elemental human feeling of thirst. The fish imagery suggests how people's survival is put in danger by caste oppression.

## CONCLUSIONS

The title Bhimayana suggests a narration of Bhim's life, just as the Ramayana narrates the life of Rama. Bhimayana is based on the text, Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes. These notes appear in a segment entitled 'Waiting for a Visa.' The book presents various episodes in the life of Dr Ambedkar. The Water segment presents his experience as a child. The kind of caste oppression he faced in school, in his village, in Masur and while travelling to Goregaon. The Shelter and Travel segments highlight the experience of a well-educated Ambedkar. It describes the making of a torchbearer for a community. The Gond art form becomes the vehicle for highlighting the oppression as well as for exploding the canonical art form of visual story telling.

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