



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TRAUMA AND RESISTANCE BY JUXTAPOSING GRAPHIC NOVELS *MAUS* AND *BHIMAYANA*

Asmita Debnath, Kavya Purushothaman

Post Graduate Student, Assistant Professor

Department of English Language and Literature

Amrita School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce

Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

Abstract: Graphic novels have emerged as competent tools for documenting trauma and resistance, through unique ways of depicting marginalized histories. This paper simultaneously examines Art Spiegelman's novel *Maus* and Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand's *Bhimayana* as acts of resistance literature, exploring how they use visual storytelling to represent oppression, memory, and inherited trauma. *Bhimayana* uses the Tribal Pardhan Gond art form to highlight caste-based discrimination of the Untouchables in India. Whereas, *Maus* employs documentary-style realism to narrate the Holocaust's lasting impact on an individual. Through a comparative analysis of their artistic styles, this study argues that *Maus* and *Bhimayana* not only document historical injustices but also pose as counter-narratives that resist erasure and demand social awareness. By bridging trauma studies and visual culture, this paper contributes to the increasing discourse on marginalized voices in literature and the political significance of graphic storytelling.

Keywords: Visual narratives, Trauma, Resistance, Memory, Oppression, Counter Narratives

1. Introduction

Throughout history, marginalized communities have struggled to have their voices heard, their traumas acknowledged, and their histories represented. Traditional historical narratives have often cleverly excluded or misrepresented these voices, or even distorted their experiences according to the mainstream narratives, making alternative ways of storytelling essential for reclaiming their rightful positions in literature. Graphic novels like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Bhimayana* by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand are powerful instances of resistance literature that document systemic oppression and collective trauma through their visual storytelling techniques. The former uses documentary-like realism to depict Holocaust trauma and how it becomes a second-generation possession, while the latter uses the Tribal Gond art style to represent the persistent caste discrimination of the Untouchables in India.

This paper explores how graphic novels *Maus* and *Bhimayana* utilize visual and narrative strategies to depict systemic oppression, personal and collective memory, trauma, and resistance, through trauma theories by Cathy Caruth and Paul Ricoeur. By analyzing these two texts, which came from two different parts of the world, this paper tries to show how these works function as acts of resistance and offer a strong voice to marginalized groups.

1. Objectives

The objective of this paper is to investigate the ways in which graphic novels serve as tools of resistance by depicting trauma, memory, and systemic oppression through a comparative study of *Maus* and *Bhimayana*. This paper aims to analyze how both these novels use non-conventional art styles to showcase marginalized voices and experiences. Through the lens of memory studies and trauma theories, this paper seeks to develop a greater insight into mainstream cultures as well as mainstream narratives that overshadow the downtrodden individuals or communities. Drawing from the theories of Paul Ricoeur and Cathy Caruth, this paper intends to explore and analyze how art can be used to express resistance. Moreover, this research hopes to shed light on the real-world issues of caste discrimination, denial of basic necessities to human beings, negligence to survivor tales, and unintentional distribution of trauma to successive generations. By presenting together the similarities and differences among these two novels, this paper aims to show how narratives from two distinct parts of the world with different linguistic practices, come under the same category of uplifting marginalized voices.

2. Hypothesis

This paper hypothesizes that the works: *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Bhimayana* by S. Natarajan and S. Anand, through their unique combination of textual storytelling and visual narration serve as influential instruments of resistance and continuous marginalization. By analyzing these two novels side by side, this study expects to demonstrate that their varied artistic pattern and storytelling structures not only showcase personal and collective trauma but also challenge dominant historical discourses. Furthermore, with the application of trauma theories by Cathy Caruth and theories on memory and narrative by Paul Ricoeur, this paper seeks to highlight how narratives shape memory, identity, and social consciousness.

3. Research Methodology

This paper primarily utilizes the methods of qualitative, analytical, and comparative research, giving prominence to the literary analysis of the selected texts. Drawing from the concepts of visual storytelling, this paper employs different theories of memory, narration, and trauma to investigate the varied art styles and marginalized communities from history as shown in the works of *Maus* and *Bhimayana*. A combined close reading of the texts, with the application of Trauma theory and theories on memory and narration is used to pinpoint how mainstream society and literature obliterate “the other.”

The selected texts, *Maus* and *Bhimayana* are the primary sources for this paper. At a glance, these two works can be highly classified under the name of “comic books” which comes with the tag of being “made for children.” However, upon close interpretation, that tag can be removed and changed to graphic novels while also being seen as dominant narratives to overthrow dominance. These works are analyzed to unveil recurrent themes of social injustice, communal oppression, individual experience, succession of trauma, and resistance. Paul Ricoeur’s theory of memory and narrative is employed to scrutinize how memory plays a great role in building history and individual identity. Furthermore, trauma studies theorized by Cathy Caruth, which deeply resonate with the internal traumatized voices of the silenced and the marginalized are employed to highlight how trauma can be unconsciously passed down to the next generation and how testimony can help in the psychological healing of survivor oppression. Through the integration of these theoretical perspectives, the paper investigates how both Vladek and Ambedkar, or more aptly the Jew community and the Untouchables, are dehumanized by the powerful group in the society. This method of close reading is utilized to highlight narrative structure, themes, and visual storytelling methods in analyzing both the primary texts.

4. Review of Literature

Scholar Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is an ongoing, fragmented experience that disrupts linear history, making testimony essential to reconstruct silenced narratives. Her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995) are essential in understanding how trauma is inherited across generations and how testimony is a good method to heal psychological trauma. Hillary Chute in ‘The Art of Bearing Witness: On Visual Narratives, Comics Form, and Trauma’ argues that graphic novels function as acts of witnessing, using the interplay between text and image to document historical oppression (Gewertz). The perspective aligns with *Bhimayana*, which employs indigenous Gond art to reclaim erased Dalit histories.

While *Maus* has been extensively studied as a Holocaust narrative, fewer comparative analyses explore it parallelly with *Bhimayana*. This paper expands on existing research by integrating trauma theory, memory studies, and visual storytelling to argue that both texts resist historical erasure through illustration. This comparative analysis contributes to the broader discourse on how marginalized voices reclaim agency in literature.

5. Analysis

Bhimayana, illustrated by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, and written by S. Natarajan and S. Anand; and *Maus*, written and illustrated by Art Spiegelman, are both heart-wrenching graphic novels that blend art and language together to paint stories of trauma and suffering. While one talks about ongoing, continuous struggle, the other shows the devastations of the past. “Bhimayana” meaning “Bhim’s journey” was coined by Subhash Vyam one day when Durgabai Vyam said how similar it was to *Ramayana* (Natarajan and Anand 104). This graphic novel delves into the Dalit life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, and the struggles of the community as a whole, even in present India. On the other hand, *Maus* talks about the Shoah, or the Holocaust, and how the author’s father survived those catastrophic times. Situated in two different parts of the world, they both talk about the marginalized classes of society and how pain is similar everywhere.

5.1. Visual Storytelling and Art Style

Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam joined their hands together to work on *Bhimayana*. When they began their work, they were persistent in not using traditional Western comic aesthetics. They did not want to enclose their characters inside some boxes, instead, they wanted them to be free. Hence, they used the Pardhan Gond tribal art style to give birth to *Bhimayana* (Natarajan and Anand 101). This choice of art not only made this novel unique but also stood beside Ambedkar’s resistance against the caste system, by itself resisting against traditional comic art forms. The fluid and organic shapes in the novel create a free flow of thought and does not restrict it to small panels. Art Spiegelman’s use of strict panel structure, and occasional changes in panel-size, contributed to the emotional impact of the characters. Besides this, the minimalist black-and-white drawings reflect the bleakness of the Holocaust. The sad, dark, traumatic, claustrophobic effect is felt by the reader, as one is gripped by the story of Vladek Spiegelman’s survival.

Bhimayana offers rich symbolism through fishes, birds, animals, and trees which signify movement, surveillance, and oppression. Water scarcity becomes a recurring motif in the novel, signifying the strong and prevalent caste discrimination. In *Maus*, the choice of anthropomorphism raises questions about power, identity, and hierarchy. The Jews as mice and the Nazis as cat uses natural hierarchy or dominance structure in animal societies to depict the predator and its prey. While *Bhimayana* uses a fluid page layout, offering a sense of continuous struggle, *Maus* uses strict panel structure to exhibit entrapment.

5.2. Use of Visual Metaphor and Symbolism

Art Spiegelman’s use of anthropomorphic characters posits a strong visual metaphor for racial hierarchy. This art technique dehumanizes the victims and perpetrators and brings down their identity to mere rigid and oppressive categories. The same was used by George Orwell’s famous novel *Animal Farm* (1945) to satirize human society and its political systems. “Yet, the goal of anthropomorphism is not only to entertain and teach children but it is also used to handle controversial topics. Writers often use this technique as an effective device to introduce and deal with political and social satires.” (Ali 68) This technique also helped to easily show how Vladek had to disguise himself as a Polish person, by wearing a pig mask, an alteration in identity which was much necessary for him to survive (Spiegelman 136).

But in Vyam’s *Bhimayana*, she uses Indigenous symbolism of animals, birds, water, and nature, instead of anthropomorphism, to depict power structure and oppression. If went unnoticed earlier, once the reader reaches the end of the story (Natarajan and Anand 100), they find how even the speech bubbles help identify the oppressor and the oppressed voices. The Dalit community and even the soft-spoken men and women are given the bird-shaped bubble, who are the victims of caste or generally lovable people. Whereas the higher-caste people, or those who love caste, are given the scorpion-shaped bubbles. This clear discrimination of the speech bubbles, which reveals the voice of a person, advocates verbal violence. Even water is used as a motif in this novel. The continuous denial of water to the Dalits, even after countless resistance, portrays the caste hierarchies that are embedded in real life.

5.3. Representation of Time and Memory

To better understand how both these novels explore historical trauma and resistance, Paul Ricoeur's theory of Memory and Narrative can be used. Ricoeur's works *Memory, History and Forgetting* (2004) and *Time and Narrative* (1984-88) talk about the role of narrative and how it shapes personal as well as collective memory and argues how our identities are shaped through stories we tell about ourselves and others around us. A core concept in his understanding of narratives is the concept of emplotment (mimesis) which denotes to the procedure of bringing together varying events and experiences into a coherent, meaningful form, which in turn transforms a series of incidents into a single narrative structure (Arnoud et al. 67). Spiegelman uses this to weave together his father's past memories with their present scenario, and showcases how memory is always mediated and reconstructed. *Bhimayana*, on the other hand, with its non-linear narrative, disrupts the linear storytelling pattern and emphasizes in the oral and communal nature of Dalit history. This oral tradition is shown in the novel by the narrator who is narrating the story of Ambedkar, orally, to her friend. The whole novel is a testimony to the resistance of mainstream narrative techniques with its non-linearity and oral method of narration.

Both these novels can also be connected on the basis of how they both transform personal oral history into a collective ordeal. Vladek's personal experiences of the Holocaust can be reread as a tale of any other survivor alike. Similarly, Ambedkar's experiences of being an untouchable can be seen as the experience of the whole Dalit community. They both depict the interconnectedness among personal and collective memory and how it shapes identities, societal understanding, and bonding.

5.4. The Role of Art Style in Constructing Resistance

Both *Maus* and *Bhimayana* uphold marginalized voices and exhibit their resistance against the mainstream through their art styles. Unlike the vibrant and colorful *Marvel* comics, the monochromatic tone, rough pencil sketches, and simple drawings of *Maus* evoke stark, unembellished, and raw memories of Vladek's factual recounting of the past. The expressionless faces of the mice shift the readers' focus from sympathizing with any particular character to empathizing with the Jews as a whole. Spiegelman's artistry has brought to the world the horrors of the Holocaust, not just through his father's story, but also through his illustrations.

The documentary-like realism is an authentic representation of Holocaust trauma, memory, and testimonial truth. Art Spiegelman's interview-like segments, using the tape recorder, and Vladek's Polish-inflected English resemble a survivor's tale and not just any fictionalized account. The horrific illustrations of the tortures inflicted upon a community, irrespective of their age, make readers feel the fear once felt by them. In this way, *Maus* resists to the concept of forgetting by employing a documentary approach to storytelling.

Bhimayana also poses resistance against the mainstream media through the use of the Pardhan Gond art style. The use of such a style was a political move in reclaiming marginalized voices. The vibrant colours and non-western aesthetics function as a form of artistic resistance. The novel's refusal to conform to dominant Western graphic novel styles compliments the resistance shown by Ambedkar and the Dalit community towards the oppressors. The very first noticeable difference in style is the lack of sequential panels. All the characters are present throughout the page. As mentioned by the Vyams, "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 and Anand 100). As mentioned in the last chapter of the book, it was a defining moment for them where they wanted to defy the conventional grammar of graphic books.

5.5. Trauma as Personal vs Collective Struggle

Cathy Caruth is a scholar in trauma studies, who focuses mainly on Holocaust narratives and poststructuralist theories of memory. In her works *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (1995), Caruth argues that trauma is not just an event of the past, but something that continues to haunt the present. She defines trauma as an event that does not fully unfold during the moment it occurs (Kaur 3). Rather, the experiences are relieved by the traumatized person in dreams, flashbacks, and compulsive repetition, often without conscious awareness. This can be seen vividly in *Maus* when Vladek is constantly seen repeating behaviours from Auschwitz, he is hypervigilant, fears loss, and tries to save every bit of food not letting anything go to waste. And this continues to happen

in the present times when he is no longer in danger. Caruth also emphasizes on the significance of storytelling in trauma recovery, which is a way to process traumatic experiences. However, trauma narratives are often fragmented and non-linear. Art's interviews with his father shows that memory is not a straightforward recollection, and Vladek often forgets the stories, or contradicts himself, or even refuses to talk at times.

This trauma of Vladek is passed down to his son Art, which is known as the Second-Generation trauma or the intergenerational trauma, where the survivor's burden is passed down. Even though Art did not face the Holocaust directly, he inherited his traumatic experiences. This is a key element of intergenerational trauma where the children of survivors often inherit the emotional and psychological consequences of it without experiencing the original event. Art always felt guilty for not suffering like his parents. He once said, "I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!" (Spiegelman 2002). This sentence itself shows how deeply he was affected by everything. Moreover, even though he felt frustrated by Vladek's emotional unavailability, he struggled to understand his behaviours. His father's trauma always created a kind of psychological distance between them both.

Unlike *Maus* which deals with a singular historical genocide, *Bhimayana* portrays caste-based trauma as an ongoing systemic oppression that remains alive across generations. The trauma in *Bhimayana* is not limited to physical violence but expands to social humiliation, exclusion, and institutional discrimination. Ambedkar's early experiences of being denied water, being segregated from others, and getting hurled with insults all the time represent the century-long structural trauma faced by Dalits. The denial of water to Ambedkar becomes a powerful symbol of caste-based dehumanization in literature. The continuation of that caste violence into the present times, which is shown through the newspaper articles about the modern-day oppression of the Dalits, highlights the intergenerational nature of this trauma.

Unlike Vladek who exhibits hypervigilance and survivor's guilt, Ambedkar as a child internalizes caste prejudice before resisting it. This shows how Dalits are conditioned to accept discrimination as their birthright or as natural, which leads to a psychological cycle of oppression. Even after Ambedkar returns to India as a highly educated and highly qualified individual, he still fears being discriminated for his caste. *Bhimayana* frames trauma as a source of empowerment. Unlike Holocaust trauma, which is marked by post-war alienation, Dalit trauma is often transformed into activism and resistance. Ambedkar's fight for social justice and renewal of rights pose as a great instance for this.

6. Conclusion

Maus and *Bhimayana* are powerful examples of how graphic novels function as resistance literature through their form and structuring. Through their distinct visual narrative techniques, they document histories of oppression from the Holocaust as well as in the Dalit community; while also questioning how trauma is represented and remembered. They both challenge conventional historical documentation by foregrounding personal testimony and alternative visual storytelling respectively. While Art Spiegelman in his graphic novel *Maus* employs documentary-like realism to capture the fragmented memory and trauma of the Holocaust, the Vyams in *Bhimayana* use the tribal Gond art style to reclaim Dalit histories which had earlier been erased from mainstream narratives. In doing so, these novels align with Paul Ricoeur's view of memory as ethically mediated, and Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as an ongoing experience. Their visual and narrative choices reflect the difficulty in representing trauma while ensuring that marginalized voices are neither forgotten nor erased. They also remind readers how history is not only recorded in official archives but is also borne by the scarred individuals who lived through those experiences. Resistance is not just an act of defiance but a way of remembering. As Bhimrao Ambedkar aptly said, "For a successful revolution, it is not enough that there is discontent. What is required is a profound and thorough conviction of the justice, necessity, and importance of political and social rights." *Maus* and *Bhimayana* exemplify this conviction by ensuring that histories of trauma are not merely remembered but successfully transformed into catalysts for awareness, resistance, and justice.

7. References

Ali, Dlnya Abdalla Mohammed. “Anthropomorphism in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Mark Twain’s *A Dog’s Tale*.” *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 2016, pp. 68-72. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20160405.12

Arnoud, Justine. et al. « Observing to Coproduce a Collective Narrative: Emplotment of Multiple Parallel Stories ». *M@n@gement*, 2020/3 Vol. 23, 2020. p.66-78. CAIRN.INFO, shs.cairn.info/journal-management-2020-3-page-66?lang=en.

Gewertz, Ken. “Chute on Graphic Narratives — They’re Not Just Comic Books Anymore.” *Harvard Gazette*, 6 Dec. 2007, news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/12/chute-on-graphic-narratives-theyre-not-just-comic-books-anymore.

Kaur, Pushpneet. *Cathy Caruth’s Trauma Theory and Contemporary Indian Fiction: A Study*. Synopsis, Dayalbagh Educational Institute, 2023. Supervised by Prof. V. Premlata.

Natarajan, Srividya, and S. Anand. *Bhimayana: Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*. Illustrated by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, Navayana Publishing, 2011.

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Penguin Books, 2003.

