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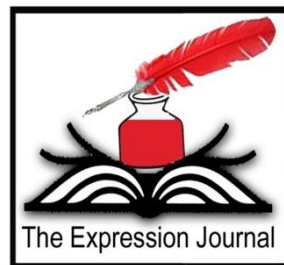
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**SOCIO-HISTORICAL VISION IN GRAPHIC FORM: A CRITIQUE OF MALIK SAJAD'S
MUNNU: A BOY FROM KASHMIR AND VARUD GUPTA AND AYUSHI RASTOGI'S *CHHOTU:
A TALE OF PARTITION AND LOVE***

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Abstract

With the emergence of profuse literary genres and formats, readers' reading experience has changed drastically. In the present era, graphic novels, with their visualization and narration side-by-side, have become a matter of obsession worldwide. The genre provides equal scope for both readers and writers to exercise their interpretation and imagination. Although it has not a long history, graphic novels in India have created a separate world through their various themes. The presentation of socio-historical issues is one theme through which many graphic novelists in India have expressed themselves. Two such Indian graphic novels, which have presented the contemporary socio-historical problems of the country in a new and complex way, are Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015) and Varud Gupta and Ayushi Rastogi's *Chhotu: A Tale of Partition and Love* (2019). Whereas Sajad's novel explores the diurnal violence and strife in the Indian occupied portion of Kashmir, Gupta and Rastogi's novel reimagines the Partition of 1947 and its aftermath of violence. My writing will be a critique of these two novels, focusing mainly on how these graphic novels have allowed us to interpret the specific socio-historical issue in a new way.

Keywords

Indian Graphic Novels, Societal Issue, Historical Vision, Violence, Partition.

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SOCIO-HISTORICAL VISION IN GRAPHIC FORM: A CRITIQUE OF MALIK SAJAD'S *MUNNU: A BOY FROM KASHMIR* AND VARUD GUPTA AND AYUSHI RASTOGI'S *CHHOTU: A TALE OF PARTITION AND LOVE*

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Like any other genre of literature, graphic novels have never been far behind in capturing the thought-provoking societal issue. Like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), numerous Indian graphic novelists have used the medium to delineate such societal issues, which could not have been possible in any other format. One such Indian graphic novel, which teaches us that life is not the same for everyone in this country, is Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015). Based on Sajad's own life, this 348 pages graphic novel narrates the story of seven-year-old boy Munnu, growing up amidst the social and political conflict of Kashmir. The work is a coming of age story of Munnu, and the way Sajad has balanced Munnu's story and the daily strife and conflict of Kashmir is meritorious. Munnu's childhood is different from the life of children of the other part of the country. His school remains closed most of the time, his neighbours are often tortured and killed, he struggles to make Kashmir safe, but amidst all these, Munnu becomes a successful artist cum cartoonist through which he makes the world realize how ticklish it is to live in Kashmir.

Munnu was born in a family of artists, and his inherent talent for art suggests that he is destined to be an artist. However, his journey of becoming an artist was not easy, especially in a place like Kashmir. His father always wished that Munnu would become a doctor because "doctors never struggle for business and they are well respected." On the other hand, there is minimal scope for an artist in Kashmir as, his father remarks, "tourists don't come here now" (10). The fact is that Munnu's father has raised his children well, and his inner-self respects Munnu's decision to be an artist. Such creative profession would bar Munnu and his siblings from joining the army men in Pakistan's portion of Kashmir, as many of their neighbour friends have been doing for years. A child is often predisposed by what he sees around him, and in Munnu's case, he is witnessing army men with guns on their hands from his birth. So it is no surprise that one of his earliest drawings in school is AK-47, a typical gun, often carried by

military men. Although his early drawings were coarse and immature, he has learnt to crave complex art like the Kashmiri shrine from chalk, a statue of Buddha, and many more with time. Finally, his first cartoon was published in a newspaper at thirteen. His cartoon acted as a message for the Kashmiris about how they were deprived of several necessities. Thus, his first published cartoon spread the purport of how the Kashmiris had to spend their lives without proper electricity.

The number of necessities and privileges the Kashmiris are denied are numerous and cannot be listed. So Munnu's first cartoon suggests how they are denied electricity although, as the novelist has pointed out, "Kashmir generates electricity for North India" (153). Education is considered one of the fundamental rights or necessities in our country, but not for the Kashmiris. As we witness in the novel, Munnu's school remains closed for most of the years, due to which he has to change his school constantly. Even a proper medical facility sometimes becomes hard to get; in one of the most eye-opening scenes in the novel, we notice how Munnu struggled to reach the hospital with his sick mother. He had to hold the scooter's handle in one hand and the MRI scan in another, lest the army men misunderstood them as outsiders during a curfew. Constant crackdown and curfew make the life of the people adamant here, and normalcy gets disrupted often. As one of Munnu's elder brothers points out in the novel how life had differed from their time to Munnu's, "when I was their age, I'd play football all day long, eat many eggs and go to the cinema. They haven't even seen a movie in the cinema" (14)! Even in one scene of the novel, Sajad points out that Munnu's father could not sell his carved blocks to the furniture manufacturers because all the shops were closed due to curfew.

Throughout the novel, we go through numerous crackdowns, a process in which the army would raid every house and would summon "every man or tall boy from the neighbourhood to the identification parade" (12). Then they would be frisked, and any person suspected of having any connection with militants would be arrested. This entire process takes an entire day to complete, and during such process, Munnu's mother is seen praying for the life of her husband and her sons. During one such crackdown, Mustafa, one of Munnu's close neighbours, was misunderstood by the army as a military man and was killed brutally. After shooting him in the face, the army men dragged him through the face until there was no skin left in his face. Indeed such a way of killing is not only horrific but inhumane also. The only consolation for a person like Mustafa is that they receive a proper burial under the mulberry tree, "where the decedent of the prophet Muhammad was buried" (36).

The army men in Srinagar find different ways of killing people to benefit their own. When Munnu becomes a journalist with the name of Sajad, he conducts several interviews of such fathers and mothers whose sons were killed in fake gun battles by the army men. As Sajad begins interviews, he realizes the number of such father and mothers are numerous. Many of them are still waiting, hoping that one day their sons will return, and in this process have become, as the novelist describes, "a statue of ashes" or "a bag of bones" (229, 232). Sajad realizes there is no point in conducting such interview as they need "compassion", not "question"; such interview is like "rubbing salt in their wounds" (229). Corruption, greed and immorality run supreme among the army men in the novel as sometimes they kill an innocent person to get their promotion. In one such incident in the novel, we come to know that the army men killed an innocent person like Rehman and then spread the news that a dangerous foreign terrorist was killed. In return, they received the bravery award, honour and cash reward from the government. However, when Rehman's true identity was discovered later, his

father was offered some cash, and his widow wife was offered a cleaner job in a local school with an honorarium of only six hundred rupees per month. Indeed no amount is sufficient for the loss of a son, husband or father as emotion cannot be replaced by money. So Sajad laments in the novel, "God and the historians were certainly cruel for not adding a few pages of happy ending, to Kashmir's story" (214).

Sajad is wise enough to expose in the novel that Kashmiris lost their lives not only in the hands of the army men, but the internal religious conflict was also equally consequential. There was a time when few fundamentalists demanded a separate, independent Kashmir, and, in the process, they ruthlessly murdered many sacred Hindus and Muslims. As a venerable artist, Sajad met Paisley, a researcher from the USA, with whom he visited many museums in Kashmir. As an artist, the novelist points out the poor condition of art and how art is disrespected in the novel. It is humorous and pathetic to note that people are drying their underwear on valuable statues in a museum. In another museum, they noticed that Buddha's statue was used to support the kerosene stove. Using many arts as examples from the museums, the novelist narrates the tortures the people had to face here in the past. For example, through the art of the Dogra Dictators, Sajad tells us that once these dictators used to wipe their asses with pashmina shawls and how poor Kashmiri enslaved people later used those shawls. Gender discrimination and lack of courtesy and gentle behaviour were lacking among the people of Kashmir. Paisley was barred from entering a specific portion of a shrine because she was a woman. She also received sexual and derogatory remarks from many people on the streets, which is not negotiable, especially in a country where guests are treated as God.

Sajad and Paisley's love story ended before it grown-up thoroughly, when she lost his phone, followed by an argument. Being an outsider, she could never understand how difficult it would be for him to face the police after this loss. Now "she found other shoulders to cry on" (292), and a broken Munnu is ready to "embrace the inevitable process of aging" (346). Regarding the art of the novel, Sajad commented, "My pictures don't look pretty because they don't tell a pretty story" however, the art of the novel must be praised as they are commendable and require much effort from the novelist. The characters in this novel are humanoids; they are drawn as Hangul, the red stag deer, which is also the national animal of Kashmir. The fact is that Hangul is an endangered species in Kashmir, and with such comparison, the novelist points out that the Kashmiris are also now an endangered species. By the end of the novel, Kashmir does not hold the same interest in Munnu as in the beginning. There is nothing more regretting than the fact that Kashmir is now carrying a negative image for him, which would pull him to "graveyards, sorrow and morbidity" (344).

Graphic novels, with visualization and entertaining panels, provoke the readers to look into the historical events in a radical way. Indian graphic novelists have always been fond of the history and historical events of the country and often tend to reimagine them in their graphic novels. In fact, the very first Indian graphic novel, Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), depicts a historical event like the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Sixteen years after Sen's novel, Vishwajyoti Ghosh came up with another riveting historical Indian graphic novel in the form of *Delhi Calm* (2010). Ghosh's novel narrates the events and happenings from the Emergency period of India in 1975. Apart from these two graphic novels, one such novel which looked back to prominent historical events is Varud Gupta and Ayushi Rastogi's *Chhotu: A Tale of Partition and Love* (2019). As the subtitle indicates, the novel is centred upon the Partition of 1947 along with the love story of our hero Chhotu. The novel is one of the most read and

admired graphic novels in the country for its presentation of, as Gyan Prakash has pointed out, “a poignant understanding of a time when fear, bigotry, political machinations and violence overtook everyday life” (Coverpage).

Regarding the relation between historical events and graphic novels, Spencer Clark wrote, as summarized by P.K. Nayar, “that history gets humanized in graphic novels when we see the impact events have on the lives of people and their agency” (14). From Chhotu’s love story to Partition’s violent aftermath, every event gets ‘humanized’ in Gupta and Rastogi’s novel. As a young and gullible lover, Chhotu could never understand the significance of India’s freedom; in fact, he never tried to understand it. Brought up by his foster father, Bapu, who was also a parantha seller in Chandni Chowk, Chhotu tried to win Heer’s love by offering her aloo-parantha (potato stuffed parantha) as “there’s nothing like a parantha to soothe your soul” (5). This ordinary yet significant food item did the trick for Chhotu as Heer felt in his love and spent some lovely time together. However, violence, riot, and communal clash followed by the Partition resulted in mass migration not long after. Before our hero could relish his love fully, Heer left Chandni Chowk as the place was not safe for a Muslim like her. Chhotu understood the only way Heer could come back to Chandni Chowk was to make the place safe, and the rest of the novel followed Chhotu’s valiant attempt to fulfill his mission.

At every stage of his life, Chhotu learns a lesson and realizes that life is a constant learning process. During the initial days of Partition, there was a considerable shortage of aloo (potato) in Chandni Chowk, and Chhotu soon found out that Chumpak and Chameli, two golgappa sellers stored aloo in a temple. However, a British police officer misunderstood Chhotu as the man behind all such illegal storage and put him in prison. In prison, Chhotu met Bandhu, from whom he learned the real meaning of freedom that Indians were “free... but broken” (42), and there was no point to blame the British for such continuous violence. Inspired by Bandhu’s philosophy, Chhotu joined his Teetar Gang, “the finest revolutionaries of Chandni Chowk” (59), to wipe out all the injustices. However, very soon, Chhotu apprehends that there is no unity in such a gang, and when a dangerous situation arises, everyone can act selfishly. He once mistakenly shot Chumpak while the latter was hiding the chhole in a temple. When massive fire and clash broke out between Hindus and Muslims after this act, his gang members put the entire blame upon him. Chhotu ran from the place but could not run from guilt and regret as thousands of people lost their lives in this violence. So he utters with guilt, “I ran from the people I hurt. I hid from the suffering I had caused. I tried to escape from the mistakes I had made. But there’s only so much you can run from” (80).

Surely the novelists have portrayed our hero strong enough to make a significant resurgence from his mistake, from his guilt and regret. While his foster father, Bapu, always used to advise him that “head down, happy life” (15), Chhotu and his friend Pandey believe that even “the smallest things can make a difference” (126). Pandey knows very well how vital Chhotu’s role is in making Chandni Chowk safe and always encourages him. So he says, “So you can’t keep your head down. No matter how hard it seems, you have to stand back up. We have to keep trying. Not for yourself, but for others. For Chandni Chowk, and for India” (125). Chhotu, with the help of Pandey, made Shere confess all his crimes in public, which eventually led to the end of his supremacy in Chandni Chowk. There is no doubt that Chhotu is successful in his mission of making Chandni Chowk safe, but he has failed to make Heer comeback to the place. At the end of the novel, he receives a letter from Heer, implying that she is not in Pakistan but in Kashmir. Thus his sacrifice resulted in the welfare of people, though not for

himself. There are numerous Chhotus in our society whose sacrifice has consistently been underestimated; this novel is a tribute to them. So at the very beginning of the novel, the novelists write, “Chhotus form a very undervalued backbone of India. They work with us, take care of us and feed us. And we, due to their considered replaceable nature, have reduced their existence to the nickname of ‘little one.’ They are everywhere. Yet seemingly invisible. And thus nowhere” (Introduction).

The novel dissects how a criminal like Shere becomes popular and continue to harm society and its people. The fact is that a person like Shere, as discernable in this novel, controls the media. Through his spokesperson and the host of All India FM, Bol Gappa, Shere preaches fear about the violence in the name of news. Shere believes that “there was no greater publicist than fear” (116) and constant violence in Chandni Chowk would provide him to rule the place; as he says, “...in the wake of chaos, as Chandni Chowk continues to turn on itself, lies great opportunity” (67). As the events of the novel unfold, it is revealed that Shere was the mastermind behind all the illegal storage of aloo and chhole. He was also the murderer of Chhotu’s parents when the latter was very young. It is surprising that when Chhotu cunningly made Shere confess his crimes in a puppet show, the public was too shocked to punish Shere. Shere truly understood that people are like “sheep waiting for the slaughter” or they are “too consumed with the rat-race to bother about the truth” (134). Although people eventually took revenge on Shere at the end of the novel, the writers point out people’s ineptitude to act instantly against such criminals.

The novel is as praiseworthy for its events as its design and drawings of characters. Like Art Spiegelman’s famous graphic novel *Maus* (1980), the characters in this novel are anthropomorphic as they are drawn in animal form. So Chhotu is drawn as a monkey, symbolizing his energetic nature and cunningness; Shere is depicted as a lion, suggesting his fierce character; Bapu as the Hindu God Ganesha, symbolizing his virtuous and innocent nature. Regarding such depiction, Gupta commented, “it was important for us to show that Chandni Chowk was very much a mixing and melding of people from all walks of life...and thus Chandni Chowk became our little animal kingdom” (qtd. in Lochan). The novel also carries some form of entertainment through its inclusion of Bollywood flavour. Titles of the chapters like ‘Oonchi Hai Building’, ‘Jab TakRahegaAloo’ and so on at once remind us of famous Bollywood films of the 1990s with which the writers are very much familiar. The main reason for such added Bollywood flavour is, as pointed out by Gupta, “Bollywood is without a doubt the most relatable storytelling medium in India and it became only natural to use that old school Bollywood room-com feel like a vehicle for this story” (qtd. in Lochan). Even in the present era, the novel’s significance lies in the fact that the violence it depicts is still relevant in our society, even after so many years of freedom and Partition. So at the very end of the novel, they write, “1947 lives on today. A cycle of fear, waiting for you, no matter how small, to break” (163).

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