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ANALYSING SOCIETAL ISSUES IN INDIAN GRAPHIC NOVEL: A CRITIQUE OF MALIK SAJAD'S *MUNNU*

Dr. Satrughna Singh

Associate Professor

Department of English

Raiganj University, Raiganj University, West Bengal

Email: kingsatrughna001@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the present era, when time has become a valuable asset for everyone, an emerging literary genre like the graphic novel has become the centre of attraction among readers worldwide. A graphic novel, like comics, uses images and words to tell a story most entertainingly. One of the fundamental aspects of Indian graphic novel is its diversity and variety of themes. Like traditional literary genres, the fundamental theme of Indian graphic novels is the analysis of various societal issues. However, with the graphic novel, such critique and analysis of important contemporary social issues become more eye-opening for readers. This is perhaps the main reason behind graphic novels' popularity in India in the present era. One such novel that is very popular currently is Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*. The novel was published in 2015 and captures the daily conflict in Kashmir most realistically. It is a coming-of-age story of Sajad himself behind the portrayal of Munnu. This paper analyses Sajad's depiction of the struggle of the Kashmiris daily and how the novel attempts to mend such a horrific situation in Kashmir.

Keywords

Autobiography, Diurnal Strife, Indian Graphic Novel, Kashmir, Societal Issues, Visual Medium, Indian Graphic Novel, Malik Sajad, *Munnu*.

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In the present era, when time has become a valuable asset for everyone, an emerging literary genre like the graphic novel has become the centre of attraction among readers worldwide. A graphic novel, like comics, uses images and words to tell a story most entertainingly. Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith describe the graphic novel as “longer than the typical comic book and most often self-contained, rather than continuing, stories” (4). Unlike comics, the graphic novel is a serious medium and often acts as a medium of what Marianne Hirsch termed “visual-verbal literacy” (1212). Since the publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986, 1991), one of the most popular graphic novels worldwide, the genre has only seen an uprising in the number of readers. Like many other countries, in India, the genre has captured the readers’ attention and has become a matter of obsession for many readers. In India, it all started with Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories*, the first graphic novel in the country, published in 1994. However, the genre was first popularised in the country by Sarnath Banerjee, who is often considered the father figure of Indian graphic novels. Banerjee, with his novels like *Corridor* (2004), *The Harappa Files* (2011) and *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2016) first made the readers fall in love with this medium. His novels usually deal with urban people and their diurnal lives and ponder important societal aspects.

One of the fundamental aspects of Indian graphic novel is its diversity and variety of themes. So, as mentioned earlier, a major graphic novelist like Sarnath Banerjee has exploited urban life to the fullest in his novels. On the other hand, there are few graphic novels which deal with historical themes and events like the protest around the Narmada Dam project (Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories*), the partition of India (Varud Gupta and Ayushi Rastogi’s *Chhotu: A Tale of Partition and Love*), the Emergency of 1975 (Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s *Delhi Calm*). Women, their

sufferings in traditional Indian patriarchal society and their attempts to uplift themselves have also become part and parcel of Indian graphic novels since the beginning. Some important novels in this regard are Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), Jagannathan Sriram's *Mai: A Graphic Novel* (2018), and the Priya Book series, which was inspired by the brutal rape on a bus in Delhi in 2012. The genre in India has evolved so much that there are graphic anthologies like *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back* (2015), edited by Priya Kuriyan, Larissa Bertonasco, Ludmilla Bartscht and Nicole Marie Burton. There is also *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013), curated by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, which is also an important addition to this field.

However, like so many traditional genres, the most important theme of Indian graphic novels is an exploration of various contemporary societal issues. One novel which stands apart in this aspect is Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* (2015). *Munnu* is a coming-of-age novel based on the life of Sajad himself and his journey of becoming an artist behind the name of Munnu in this novel. Behind the depiction of his life, the novelist narrates the hard life of the Kashmiri people and how they suffer daily in one of the most conflict-ridden states of India, Kashmir. Set in Kashmir in the 1990s, the novelist's genius lies in depicting the diurnal conflict and how the people of Kashmir often get killed by army men. At the very beginning of the novel, Sajad sets a morbid atmosphere as we find the mention of many mothers whose son has become martyrs.

Although Munnu was born into a family of artists, his journey to becoming an artist was far from easy. It is Kashmir of 1990 when constant curfew disrupts the normal life of the people here. In the initial part of the novel, when Munnu expresses his desire to become an artist, his father forbids him to do so. Papa (Munnu's father) mentions that tourists hardly visit here in Kashmir now, and no one is there to buy any art. Papa instructs him to become a doctor as "doctors never struggle for business, and they are well respected" (10). In this way, at the very early stage of his life, Munnu cum Sajad faced difficulty in fulfilling his dream. However, Munnu is a strong boy who cannot be discouraged as easily as Papa expected. Thus, Munnu has been helping his father with his artefacts from the earliest part of his life. While still in school, he could draw an AK-47 to perfection. With this drawing, he soon became a child celebrity in his school, as many children requested him to draw AK-47s in their bags, erasers etc. The news about his ability of such a drawing soon reached one of the teachers of his school, who asked Munnu to draw placards for the school's programme. So from childhood, Munnu tasted a certain type of success as an artist.

Kashmiris are denied many basic things of life, and the first upon which the novelist has pondered here is education. Education in Kashmir is often hampered due to constant curfews, conflict and political turmoil. At the novel's beginning, when the army men arrest the principal of Munnu's school for suspicious links with the military, the school teachers urge the students to protest. As the army men released teargas, numerous students, including Munnu, fainted. Munnu was rescued, and his school was shifted to a new building. However, the normal classes were possible only for students of higher grades, not for those of lower grades like

Munnu. It is also noticeable that schools in Kashmir are frequently relocated to new places, which certainly acts as a barrier to education. On one occasion in the novel, Munnu's school is relocated to a building surrounded by bushes. Another negative aspect of education that the novelist has criticised in this novel is the hard punishment of students. Schools in Kashmir are more a place for punishment than for education. During his early stage, Munnu was once admitted to Darasgah, a private education institution. Students there received many cruel punishments like flogging, and sometimes they were hung by their hair until hair tore out from their scalp. Here when Munnu once wrote a love letter to a girl named Saima, he was beaten so brutally that he fainted. Again, in another school named Crescent School, students are punished if they do not follow strict yet insignificant rules and codes. Once, Munnu was beaten severely by the headmaster for his inappropriate haircut, and Munnu was admitted to the hospital for that. Thus, the novelist mockingly points out that teachers learn cruel punishments from "the army" (118). In this way, at the very early stage of their life, students are taught inhumanity by the teachers rather than humanity.

Life in Kashmir is uncertain due to frequent crackdowns, as depicted by the novelist here. During such a crackdown, the army would raid every house and force thousands of people to gather, where they would be frisked for hours. Anyone having a suspicious link with the militants is brutally killed. During one such crackdown, one of Munnu's close relatives, Mustafa, was killed cruelly, although Mustafa claimed he was a mechanic, not a militant. The inhumanity and savage nature of army men are perceived in how they kill a person like Mustafa and handle their dead bodies. The novelist describes that Mustafa's body was "dragged through the streets of Batamaloo until there was no skin left" (38) on his face. Such a crackdown affects the lives of children here in Kashmir as they are devoid of entertainment. Thus, Munnu's father recounts his childhood experience of playing football and watching a movie in the cinema hall; he immediately regrets how children like Munnu "haven't seen a movie in the cinema" (14). However, Munnu is still in a better position than many children of his age because he does not interact with the militants. Most of the boys of Munnu's age are used as "human shields in gun battles" (14) and, in this process, lose their precious lives here in Kashmir at a very early age.

As the story progresses, the novelist narrates Munnu's journey to becoming a successful cartoonist for many prominent newspapers in Kashmir. Whereas in the first part of the novel, Sajad has focused on a break in education in Kashmir, now he is concerned about some other necessities from which the Kashmiris are deprived. Thus, Munnu's first cartoon, published in the newspaper *Alsafa*, exposes the harsh reality of how Kashmiris are deprived of electricity although as the novelist writes, "Kashmir generates electricity for North India" (153). In another of his cartoons, Munnu regrets that whereas the rest of the country celebrates New Year in a grand style and expects something new to happen, for the people of Kashmir, there is nothing new even with the advent of a new year. Their miseries and struggles will remain the same, and there is no point in celebrating New Year. Every year, when India's Independence Day approaches, curfews and strict

restrictions are imposed all over Kashmir. Despite such strict security, there is a report of a grenade blast in Munnu's city. This provokes the young cartoonist to draw a cartoon of army men on crutches to imply their inability to maintain security in the city. However, due to this cartoon, Munnu was harassed a lot, suggesting that freedom of thought and expression in Kashmir is a mere myth. The problem with Munnu and his cartoons is that he is so young a cartoonist that many believe he is being used as a mere mouthpiece of some person of the higher post.

While interviewing those parents who have lost their sons in the hands of the army, Munnu realises there are numerous such bereaved parents in his city. During one such interview, he meets an old woman who has been waiting for her son for years and has now become a mere "statue of ashes" (229). Kashmiri youths lost their lives not only at the hands of the army but at the hands of the police also, especially in fake gun battles. Munnu's interview with Rehman's father exposes such a horrible reality and asserts that the lives of the Kashmiris are very much vulnerable at the hands of police or army men. Rehman's friend, Farooq, lured him into a government job and took all of Rehman's savings. However, instead of giving him a job, the police shot Rehman dead in a lonely place and later spread the news that a terrorist was killed. While the corrupt police officer earned medals and huge cash rewards for his fake bravery, Rehman's wife was given a mere cleaner job in a school at 600 rupees per month. However, Munnu is wise enough to realise that his interviews with bereaved parents, wives or children are only useful for his novel. These are of no use to the interviewees as these lonely persons need compassion, not questions.

In a few parts of India, the Kashmiris are considered as terrorists with no humanity at all; Delhi (New Delhi), the capital of India, is one such place. Thus, Sajad here recounts his one such experience through the story of Munnu. Because of Munnu's popularity as an artist, he was invited by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust to display his art at the Habitat Centre in Delhi. His installation art got huge popularity there, and he was praised highly by artists from all over the country. However, everything was going well for Munnu until there were several blasts in Delhi; Munnu was in a cafe then. Immediately everyone in the cafe looked at him suspiciously, and the cafe owner started questioning him about his identity. Eventually, he was handed over to the police, who mercilessly dragged him through thousands of people as if he were the most dangerous terrorist in the world. Despite his attempt to convince the police that he was an artist, the police wrote several false reports against him. While earlier his art was highly praised, now it is seen as "Anti-India" (306). When he smashed his art in anger and frustration, the police left him. Through such narration, Sajad is here urging the people of India not to treat Kashmiri as a terrorist but rather treat them as mere human beings.

The 2010s was perhaps the worst phase in the life of every Kashmiri due to frequent curfews and strict restrictions imposed by the police and the army. The time was so hard that, as described in the novel, people toiled hard to get even medical treatment. Thus when Munnu's mother was suffering from illness in the spring of 2010s, the whole family was concerned about how to consult a doctor. A

few panels on pages 323-324 depict Munnu holding the M.R.I. report of his mother in one hand, and the handle of his bike in the other. The joy of recovery of Munnu's mother was soon replaced by regret, as many youths were killed then. As Sajad puts in the novel, around 100 youths were killed and more than 2000 injured at the army's hand during the protest in the 2010s. The excuses for such mass killings by the military's top officials are hilarious and, at the same time, condemning. As the novelist points one such excuse of a military person is, "Our strategy is to shoot at the legs to disperse the protestors. The trouble is, kids are short, so our bullets hit their heads" (331). The brutal way in which the youths were killed at that time is also eye-opening; Sajad describes one such brutal killing in these words, "The army caught the 9-year-old boy breaking the law. They inserted a bamboo stick into his mouth, and rained down kicks and blows with jackboots and gun butts until he became just another statistic" (332).

As a grown-up artist in the 2010s, Munnu is now determined that the world should know the daily struggle of the people of Kashmir. In his first graphic novel *Kashmiri Intifada*, meaning Kashmiri Revolution, he captures all the daily sufferings and mass killings of youths. The most vital aspect of this novel is his depiction of the Kashmiri people as Hangul, the red stag deer. Such depiction implies that, like the Hanguls, the Kashmiri people have also become endangered. His novel once became popular worldwide, and he is invited to a conversation over dinner where leaders from major countries will be present. Munnu brilliantly raises various issues of Kashmir, like the need for peace, loss of art and human rights and seeks solutions for such problems from the leaders of various countries. However, to his surprise, they are the least interested in the problems of Kashmir and are more interested in eating food. At this moment, Munnu realises the world is not yet ready to embrace the Kashmiris with open arms and Munnu, as an artist, perhaps has failed in his attempt to solve the issues of Kashmir.

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