



## Promoting Ecological Literacy Through Graphic Novels: Orijit Sen's *The RIVER Of STORIES* And The Danger Of Ecocide .

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**Introduction** : The genre of the Graphic novels has had a long struggle for acceptance as literature and the battle is still not over. Often dismissed as comics for adults even the practitioners of the form are sceptical about its nomenclature. Pramod Nayar in *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, history and critique* talks about the confusion that surrounds the term Graphic novel. Alan Moore the writer of *Watchmen* believes that graphic novel is a marketing term and sceptically called it an 'expensive comic book' whereas Douglas Wolk differentiates between comics and Graphic novel in the binding. Nayar himself prefers the term graphic narrative and although he uses the term graphic novel in the title of his book he uses graphic narrative throughout the book itself. Graphic novels are narrative work in which sequential art is used to convey the story. The art form might be in an experimental design or in a traditional comics forms. It can include non fiction work or thematically linked stories. Graphic novels have always addressed issues that are very pertinent inspite of having an impression of adolescent literature. Hillary Chute writes about the relevance of graphic narrative:

“Graphic narrative has echoed and expanded on the formal inventions of fiction, from modernist social and aesthetic attitudes and practices to the postmodern shift toward the democracy of popular forms. In the graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproductibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention”(Nayar 6)

**Objective** : The objective of this paper is to explore the social relevance of graphic novels and its importance as an emerging literary genre that has immense possibility in examining critical and sensitive issues and the possibility of offering politically and socially conscious statements

**Research Problem/Hypotheses:** Graphic novels are often treated with scepticism and the gravity and relevance of this genre has always been questioned. This paper proposes to establish the graphic novel as a socially and intellectually significant genre that can contribute towards inscribing of new histories with new perspectives.

**Analysis:** Walter Benjamin in the essay “The Author as Producer” talks about the role of authors and the relation between artistic production and politics. He raises the question regarding the autonomy of a writer and differentiates between the bourgeois author and the progressive author. A progressive author addresses the class struggle and speaks for the proletariat. Walter Benjamin uses the term

‘tendency’ or ‘commitment’ and this tendency would be beneficial to the proletariat. He says that there is a relationship between commitment or tendency and quality. A politically correct work also possess a correct literary tendency. According to Benjamin any work has to be inserted into the ‘context of living relations’ and this is in turn is influenced by production relations. He also raises the question regarding the position of a work within the production relations of the time or the literary technique that is adopted. Another important thesis pronounced by Walter Benjamin in this essay is the melting down of forms:

“... we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance”(Benjamin 89). Benjamin speaks of music and photography as forms which can be considered as the new moulds to shape new forms and the class struggle is an important determinant of this meltdown. However he criticises New Objectivity for its failure to be a means of production. Commitment is not enough if it is not employed in a useful manner. The genre of the Graphic novel is the product of the progressive writer and addresses the trauma and turmoil of the bourgeois and has been the platform to bring forth alternate histories and socially relevant but contentious issues. David Carrier in *The Aesthetics of Comics* tells about the social relevance of comics which can be extended to the genre of Graphic novels as well. Carrier remarks that “ Comics tell something about the social role of even those who have until recently had a relatively marginal place as creators and intended consumers of this art. Contemporary comics tell us about ourselves; comic strips from earlier times are tools for the social historian”(Carrier 84). Thus comics/graphic novels cannot be brushed aside as something irrelevant or not mature enough for serious reading. In the context of Postmodern art the shift in focus has been a remarkable one and such changes are the indicators of the beginning and end of an epoch. Leo Steingberg in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth –Century Art* has explained how there has been a radical shift in interpretation of a work of art: “... the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture”( Carrier 89). Infact Carrier sees this shift as one that has been directed from high art to comics and the direction of analysis has changed from the distant world of the artist to that of the readers to the images. However it was felt that there has been no growth in the the techniques used in writing of comics. The history of comics can be read as “... stories of a succession of personalities who have used this medium in individual ways”( Carrier 109). This stagnation has been removed by the innovative practice of the Graphic novel. Some critics regard it as an updated version of the comics, highly innovative and complex, even Carrier refers to graphic novelists as “important artists changing the essence of the medium”. The Graphic novel has been defined as “... not the literary fiction’s half –wit cousin, but more accurately, the mutant sister who can do everything fiction can, and, just as often, more.”( Dave Eggers n.p).

Graphic novels in India have always addressed issues that are serious and has grave concerns regarding ancient and contemporary Indian society. The first Graphic novel in India is *the River of Stories* written and illustrated by Orijit Sen and published by Kalpavriksh in 1994. The novel deals with many issues that are often relegated to the margins in the name of progress and development and the overall theme is ecocide or the destruction of entire habitats rather than just individual organisms or species. The Graphic novel is based on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The novel is divided into three sections The Spring The River and The Sea. Besides this there is the Prolouge and the Epilouge. The Prolouge sets the novel in the contemporary political situation where socialism is a dirty word and India is making rapid progress becoming “bigger, faster and better everyday”(Sen 6). The writer then takes us to the source of the river and the story of the adivasi with claims that “If there were no rivers, perhaps there would have been no human society”. The first section The Spring tells the story of Kujum Chantu, the universe which is narrated by Malgu Gayan and the creation myth among the adivasis is presented to the readers. In this creation myth the animals ,plants and human beings live in perfect harmony but this pristine and well balanced environment was disturbed by the intervention of

the modern and progressive world. This is presented by the story of Relku, an adivasi woman who was displaced by the changing circumstances of her native village. Relku's Story is the story of the subaltern who never finds a voice and is effectively and quietly displaced from their habitat. Relku narrates the tale to Vishnu the tale of development and government schemes. The adivasis were mocked at for their way of dressing and their simple lifestyle and poor Relku, then a little child was terrified out of her wits. The construction of the pucca road which has been compared to a "big snake from whose belly emerged the caravans and motors of traders from the bazaar" (Sen 19). The rest of the story presents the manner in which the land and the forests of the adivasis was taken over by the 'outsiders' who accused the adivasis of being uncooperative and resentful while their homes were being destroyed. The traders lured the weak willed adivasis with liquor and the ones who resisted were beaten up by the police and their homes were burnt. The first section presents the untold story of the adivasi migrant labourers who throng the city after being displaced in the name of civilization and progress.

The second section The River talks about the construction of Reva Sagar Hydroelectric Project and the widespread protest against it. Vishnu goes to Ballanpur to write a report for the newspaper "The Voice". The writer brings in the name of Sundar Lal Bahuguna who spoke about the destruction of the ecosystem and the concern of the adivasis. The question of resettlement of the displaced people is also raised who are cheated out of their abodes by the government. The legend of Relukabadi is also presented which led to the birth of Ganga or Rewa and Jamna or Vijali. The issue of how the outsiders came and ousted the adivasis and exploited them and the stigma of backwardness which is stuck to them is also presented.

In the third Section The Sea the report prepared by Vishnu is included and the reactions of the people regarding the report.. The report "REWASAGAR DAM: Monument Of Progress Or Wall Of Despair?" deals with the protests of the Adivasis against "destructive' development' projects". In the report the question of 'national interest' is raised which is supposedly thwarted by the protesters and activists. However important questions such as the break down of the community life of the tribals after relocation is never answered by the government. The government ignores the deforestation, soil erosion, underground seepage, waterlogging, increase in salinity and loss of fertility of agricultural lands in the race for development. In the words of one of the activists Maya Phule social justice and ecological sustainability should go hand in hand. This is the clarion call of the ecofeminists and social ecologists and is the cornerstone of ecocriticism. The reaction of the general public after the publication of the report is noteworthy. While the report draws support from the academia and a select few, majority are sceptical about it calling it regressive and even branding the activists as terrorists.

In the epilogue we have one of the torchbearers of civilisation and a representative of the government making an attempt to teach the adivasi about a better life but is laughingly told by the adivasi that " ..Oh I see!- But THAT, my Friend.. is just what I was doing anyway, till you came along on that noisy bird of yours!" (Sen 58), thus exposing the vacuity of progress and development.

**Conclusion:** The first Graphic novel in India thus raises a plethora of crucial issues ranging from identity, imperialism, progress but the most pertinent one is of course the environment. However the question may be raised that other forms have also addressed the issue of environment and how those Graphic novel present them in a different manner? Pramod Nayar talks about the manner in which the novel was able to present the changing topography in just one page by inserting multiple panels. He says:

" Old worlds and new, old ways of life and the new, older stories and newer histories are all inscribed into the map here, to show us that every land has multiple temporalities embedded in it...The siting of tribal lives, modernized technology, media and folklore in the same frame ensures that we see

a social conflict, and a contest over not just the land but over the stories of this land-and this is the critical literacy demanded of us by the form”( Nayar 112).

Indian Graphic novels thus offers us a fresh perspective on myths, history and politics and its manner of representation. Since the medium has the dual advantage of words and images and at the same time is presented in such a succinct manner that it is capable of attracting a substantial readership and addressing a number of crucial contemporary issues. Just as Walter Benjamin praises Brecht and his epic theatre for exposing the present and for experimenting with man, similarly Graphic novels too shows the correct tendency and commitment by speaking for the proletariat.

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