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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Recasting Dalit Experience through Graphic Biography: A Critical Analysis of *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*

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### Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, a graphic biography on the experiences of caste discrimination and resistance that Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar recorded in his autobiographical illustrations, and CNN hailed this book as being among the top five political comic books. Unlike other biographies, which often address those enthusiastic about Dr Ambedkar and his anti-caste struggle. The *Bhimayana* Provides critical insight into the

negligence and caste-ridden mind of the Indian psyche towards the architect of the Indian constitution. This graphic biography also provides a dint to educate non-Dalit who seems to ignore the contributions and drudgeries of Dr Ambedkar.

**Keywords:** Caste, Untouchability, Dalit Experience, Graphic narratives, Caste system

Debates on the caste system and Dr Ambedkar as a powerful Dalit Intellectual are burgeoning in various political and literary discourses. This paper aims to provide critical insight into the Graphic biography, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, published in 2011. This seems a political document to problematize the concerns of the caste experience of Dalits in India. Dr Ambedkar is a highly educated urban youth. Although he contributed immensely to divergent areas of India, his anti-caste struggles are the most important among them. This work is a unique piece of biography, which provides some information about the experience of Ambedkar, which other conventional biographies did not take up. There are various opinions regarding the literary genre of *Bhimayana*. Nandini Chandra, in her review, observes that “while the publishers shy away from calling it a graphic novel, and stick to the universal category 'graphic book', the overarching frame in which it is slotted, marked, and reviewed is that of the graphic novel” (1). Nayar, on the other hand, observes that “the graphic novel as a medium is apposite for capturing the horrors of political oppression and the decay of democracy” (Postcolonial 131). Graphic literary pieces are often considered to be long comic narratives for a mature audience, with severe literary themes and sophisticated artwork. However, Graphic Biography is another term that can be used to place the text generally. It also helps readers to comprehend concept easily through images. Directly, the book shows a textual–visual narrative of the untouchability experienced by Ambedkar in his personal life. However, the “central character is not Ambedkar alone but also the degrading grind of Dalit life among the 60 million in Ambedkar’s time” (Desai n. Pag.). This book reconnoitres social and political voices intersect with the visual signification, and it gives an overall impression that it has an objective to teach people, including non-Dalit, who often ignore the outstanding contribution of Ambedkar to India. Socio-religious engagements in India backed the liberation of the Dalits from the yoke of oppressive forces

Bhimrao Ambedkar was an ever-green icon who craved to get justice and equality. “Dr B.R Ambedkar also strongly stood for the eradication of exploitation and the equal status in the society” (MK 2). He was an object of harsh criticism and political carelessness, notwithstanding his lifelong endeavour to reform the social condition of Indian society caught by the rigid caste system. This work explores the general public's ignorance about Ambedkar and his anti-caste struggle. The agony and suffering represented by Dalit writers and critics are not only talking about an individual but the marginalized section of society. The word 'Dalit' derives from a Sanskrit word, which means 'suppressed' or 'crushed. On the other hand, the Oxford dictionary defines 'Dalit; as a member of the Caste that is considered the lowest and has the fewest advantages. They were restricted to access to prestigious jobs; as a result, they

had to cope with menial occupations like leather work, butchering, and lower-grade work. Moreover, they were also to use public wells, schools and rivers. It is reported on many historical occasions about the restrictions of Dalits from entering temples. However, socio-religious renaissance movements in India advocated for the liberation of the Dalits from oppressive forces. DR B.R Ambedkar also firmly stood for eradicating exploitation and equal societal status. In Dalit literature, a Dalit expresses his anger and resentment of Dalits against social inequality. Limbale, a famous Dalit literary critic and writer, observes that:

To start with, there will have to be a definite explanation of the word 'Dalit' in Dalit Literature. Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm labours, workers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included (30)

Dalit works have created their unique aesthetics among the mainstream Indian Writing in English literature. All of these critiques the social snobbery and preoccupied reservation on the downtrodden sections of society. Dalit literature often touches upon caste oppression, the question of identity, poverty, untouchability and inevitable revolution. Dalit literature also questions canonical literature, which they call; Hindu literature. Dalit literature ultimately aims to uproot caste oppression by denying the Varna order of Hindu belief. Dalit literature often draws attention to the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, humiliation, poverty, etc., experienced by Dalits.

Dalit literature is not mere fiction. It is part of the more significant move to bring about changes. Dalit writings are based on real-life incidents. Some critics believe that people like Prem Chand and Mulk Raj Anand project the Dalit life as it is; instead, they represent Dalits as hapless and mischievous who cannot take their own decisions and action. One such example is Bakha in *Untouchable*, who concedes to Gandhi's pacifism rather than going for revolution. Post-independent events and fundamental transformation changed the life of people. The democratic form of government and different welfare schemes helped ordinary people understand the country's rights and laws. However, over time, new movements in post-independence emerged against rampant corruption, poverty, and unemployment, atrocities against ethnic and religious minorities. Unfortunately, the spirit of education spread among people has not helped society to change the narrow-mindedness towards weaker sections of society. Widespread discourse on resistance literature intensified a sort of consciousness of liberation in Dalit's quest for dignity and social justice. Dalit authors and activists refuse to abide by the established tradition as they think they do not belong. At the same time, they firmly hold that the tradition of Budha, Phule, Kabeer and Ambedkar was an inevitable part of their tradition. It showed resistant tradition against established tradition and the hegemonic nature of the established tradition. Dr B.R Ambedkar fought against the segregated attitudes of upper-class Hindus both in India and abroad. Dr BR Ambedkar's thoughts helped Dalits comprehend their distress and fundamental human rights. The Politics of collectiveness is visible in most Dalit writings. It is a collective social voice for equality, liberty, fraternity, and

justice. Their consciousness to free Dalits from the intensified bitter experience and expression of their anguish is a kind of revolt. Another important political aspect of Dalit writings is their language and narrative style. They reject the upper-class language; they always lash out at the so-called standard language, validated by upper-class people, because they think this is a language of oppression and subjugation.

Moreover, the standard language lacks many unique cultural vocabularies of Dalit lives. Dalit writers do not bank upon Hindu sacred literature's existing symbols and metaphors. Instead, they construct new myths; using the Hindu scripture's symbol would be a deconstructed myth or symbol with a new meaning. Dr Ambedker's view on literature is also important to be highlighted. He asserts that writers should take inspiration from the experience of ordinary people. "Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of the village is removed "Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of the village is removed. Do not forget that in our country, the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know their pain and sorrow intimately, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives" (qtd in Limabale 50).

All illustrations of *Bhimayana* follow the style of the traditional Gond Paintings, with two-dimensional flat figures defying everyday anatomical perspectives. It encompasses digna patterns and nature imagery. A strong passion for the environment is generated in art by incorporating flora and fauna. The Gonda folklore is a platform where "Imagination and tradition combine to create a world where gods, bird, animals and man live in harmony" (Prakashn. Pag.). *Bhimayana* succeeds by contributing to the visual literacy and graphic genre and takes the task of recasting the subjugation of the marginalized.

*Bhimayana* established a new method for modern writers, artists and academicians to follow. This book highlights many acts of denial of fundamental rights by including snapshots of original newspaper reports. The text attempt to foreground these situations. The shifting of the narrative discourse between past and present imparts a certain amount of contemporariness to the text. The events in the life of Ambedkar, the use of two travels from the present-day generation, and the conversational mode in which the discussion on Ambedkar's life is initiated give a unique quality to the book, which is rarely traced in other biographies of Ambedkar. The woman character in *Bhimayana* could be seen as a politically conscious choice. The young educated woman traveller impedes seeing the dominant caste predispositions in the social sphere. She teaches the man who tries to confront the problem of unemployment.

The first glance, the book gives an impression that it is a children's book with coloured pictures. However, by the course of reading, readers can realise that it is a serious deliberation on important burning issues in India. The leading characters are waiting for a bus; the discourse occurs between a young woman and a male traveller. The man is in search of a job. He complains about Caste-based reservations in India as he thinks that prevents him from getting a job. The woman narrates to him about the bitter experience and struggle of Ambedkar, who was born and brought up in a Dalit family. The gentleman disagreed with the lady at the end of the conversation; still, he wishes to know more about him and his actions. The process of adopting a graphic narrative model to deliver serious problems in society is innovative and

adorable. *Bhimayana* employs this technique to articulate caste atrocities and oppressions. Nayar argues that “Bhimayana makes caste-based oppression and its history visible by steering clear of standard modes of documenting oppression and shifting it into the demotic, or populist, register, even within/among the elite readership for Indian writing in English” (The Indian 141). The non-Dalit traveller in the *Bhimayana* made an anti-reservation comment at the novel’s beginning. “Super qualified. Stuck in a dead-end job. That is my life...I blame these damn job quotas on backward and scheduled Castes. It is not fair” (Vyam 11). *Bhimayana* proclaims through the character of a lady traveller that “caste is not fair” and moves on substantiating the claim with the support of solid evidence from news reports of caste atrocities (11). This graphic novel acquires an ideological outlook and popular inducement. It stays impressive in its creative reflection and politically oriented textual depictions.

The section “Travel” in *Bhimayana* deals with the experiences of Ambedkar related to his journey, mainly in India, where he had to encounter the evil of the caste system. The pleasure of a journey as a Dalit is often replaced by the apprehension of being caught by the upper caste. One example was when Ambedkar visited Doulatabad Fort in Aurangabad in 1934; he was “welcomed” by Muslims with abusive words on him though it was the month of Holy Ramzan (Vyam 86). Another example says that child Bhimrao was denied water from the school for being untouchable in 1901. Anand ruminates the creation of *Bhimayana* as a small effort to disclose the offensive and chilling silence regarding caste and to make the story of Ambedkar widely known. (113) Contemporary India continues with caste practices in gross and subtle forms.

Newspaper reports on everyday caste atrocities constitute the space in *Bhimayana*. For example, while a page discusses caste atrocities, the adjacent page displays snapshots of newspaper accounts of caste-based violence. The intricacy of dealing with issues of Caste cannot be neglected. *Bhimayana* portrayed the issue. Also, the notion of every day has become a severe matter of discussion and relevance in contemporary cultural studies. Through the themes and incidents, *Bhimayana* links two crucial issues -Caste and the everyday experience of both Ambedkar in the past and Dalits in the present. The three themes *Bhimayana* is built around are water, shelter and travel project, and how Caste becomes an inseparable unit of everyday experience. *Bhimayana* exposes the graphic dissonance by projecting the unheard self of a national leader, which is rooted in the purely personal experiences of bitterness in the name of Caste. The book's emphasis on the most personal component of an individual represents the incidents and struggles of the lower strata of society.

This study sought to investigate how *Bhimayana*, the pinnacle of the anti-caste campaign, makes a laudable effort to shatter Ambedkar's offensive silence and ignorance. It is noticed that *Bhimayana* stands as a counter project with the artistic objective of discovering a compatible organic art form to depict a Dalit intellectual and the historical objective of recasting Ambedkar in the political context of caste violence. By reading history and the present in parallel, *Bhimayana* helps the reader become cognizant of this awful reality. Dr Ambedkar's fight aimed to liberate all societies, not just one. It offers a fresh historical perspective that reads both the past and the present simultaneously. The work like *Bhimayana*

is an artistic innovation to throw a positive light on the mission and struggle of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. This graphic work has met that objective through the innovative portrayal of stories from Ambedkar's life experience.

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