

Unpacking caste politics through the multimodal communicative landscape of *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*

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Abstract

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability by Srividya Natarajan and S.Anand reveals the bitter truth of casteism as prevalent in Indian society. Through the use of graphic novel format and reviving the traditional Gond art form, the text not only verbalizes the experience of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a major activist who battled against the various modes of oppression and aggression faced by the Dalit community, but also opens up the untouchable's experiences of existence for the naïve readers. This essay shows how *Bhimayana* uses a multimodal structure to create a post colonial literacy about caste and caste based marginalizations.

Key Words: Ambedkar , Caste, Dalits, Gondh, Multimodality, Untouchables

1. Introduction

Indian caste system, rather than being "a remnant of pre-modern hierarchal purity pollution formation specific to Hindu religion" (Satyanarayan and Tharu, 2011, p. 9), is a palpable vector of oppression in contemporary India. The social scenario is littered with Casteism, an exclusionist policy meted out to half of its population by the twice born brokers of salvation or the Brahmins. Obsessed with belief in purity and pollution, the Brahminical society, from time immemorial, have been divisive, in that it accorded a status of 'other'-ness to half of its own race, setting them apart through various casteist methods and subjecting them to unimaginable humiliations. Yet Hindu society has been uncannily silent about these caste-subalterns or the untouchables, as they were termed in popular and official rhetoric of representation. Finally with the emergence of Ambedkar on the social and political scenario, the silenced mouths opened by themselves; the Mahars and Chamars were heard reproaching the Brahmin elites of their inhumanity. A new generation came on the social and literary scene, which challenged the issue of Casteism with unbelievable force. Yet to un-clutter society of its pollution-purity complex (Velssasery, p.8), is a long drawn process, and the text in context of this essay *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, is not only a graphic representation of the life of B.R.Ambedkar, a key player in the unification and mobilization of the Dalits, but creates a critical literacy about caste through its multimodal semiotic strategies, making us meta-aware to the positions not just within the text but also to situations without.

2. Theoretical Framework

Bhimayana maps the conversion of the Dalit's submission into resentment, resentment into resistance, and resistance into representation, with analyzing the translation, as also the translability, of each of these states of being into others, with scrutinizing the reception of such representations in the arena of Indian caste politics. To do so, the text adopts a multiple, fluid structure and engages in extensive metaphorization of multiple registers to make a personal story the representation of a historical condition, that of caste based discrimination. Before plunging into an interpretation of the text, we need to have a clear idea of the grammar of visual design to decode the social meanings of signs that are embedded in the text.

Bhimayana belongs to the popular tradition of Indian comics. In the backdrop of Indrajal Comics, Raj Comics or Amar Chitra Katha, with cartoon characters like Mandrake, Phantom, Super commando Dhruv or Bankelal already in market, the format was easily recognizable to the English speaking Indian youth. But *Bhimayana* went a step ahead, in that it was not only an indigenous comic book, but a graphic novel in the multimodal format representing serious issues at hand. Lila Christensen aptly suggests that "in contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often nonfiction, full-length, sequential art novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war with intelligence and humor" (2006, p. 227). *Bhimayana* brings about a revolutionary change in the form of the graphic novel as well as the genre of biography. As it is extremely difficult and potentially problematic to talk about the multimodal structure of the text without making explicit the theoretical and methodological stance, the essay will now move on to introduce multimodality as it is understood and practiced in recent times.

Multimodality is a complex network where semiotic modes combine as cultural and social resources for meaning-making. Jewitt, Bezemer & O'Halloran suggest the concept of semiotic transformation or transduction involved in the complex network of meaning and its interpretation across different modes. For example, the transformation of a novel to a movie script involves mediations/ translations as articulating meaning across two different modes always requires interpretation. Additionally, there is an emotional involvement on the part of the sign-maker in the use of semiotic resources across differing social contexts - "As in all sign making there is the question of the availability of resources. The sign makers' interest leads to their choice of resources, seen as apt in the social context of sign production" (Jewitt *et al*, 2016, p. 68).

In the combination of modes inter-textuality, inter-discursivity and re-semiotization are major players. Texts build on other texts and discursive units to produce meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen define multimodal texts as "any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic mode" (1996, p.183). Mode, as defined by Kress is a culturally and socially produced resource for representation (2005, p.6); making it clear that mode is not only form governed but context specific dependant on the inter-textual and inter-discursive nature of signification. Idema identified two key points that make a multimodal analysis agenda prominent: the first one is "the de-centering of language" towards meaning making, and the second is the breakdown of boundaries between verbal and non-verbal modes of meaning-making, encouraging a semiotic practice in all its richness and complexity (2003, p. 33).

3. Mashup of History and Theory: Analysis of *Bhimayana* as a Multimodal artifact

Srividya Natarajan and S.Anand's *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, illustrated by Durgabhai and Subhash Vyam, is a graphic novel that bring about a revolutionary change in

perspective as it negotiates an already existent interlocular field to link personal experiences with socio-historical and institutional power relations. In a semiotic, multimodal approach to representation, creativity is prioritized and sign-making is recognized as a complex process of design in which individuals are seen not as users of a stable system but as remakers and transformers of "sets of representational resources...in a situation where multiplicity of representational modes are brought into textual compositions" (Kress 2000, p.160). *Bhimayana's* creative appeal lies in the fact that it breaks down the routine linearity of the graphic novel form. Instead of panels, we have dignas, the traditional Gondh art form. The sign-makers's interest, as proposed by Kress (2000, p.156), is always personal and yet social, shaped by their cognitive and affective processes. Narrating Ambedkar's story in the very post modern graphic novel format and yet inking it with traditional Gond art, provides a sense of contemporaneity to one of the oldest forms of oppression - Casteism. Freitag rightly observes that "The new is dealt with through a deliberate choice of the antique" (2003, p.367). The ancient-antique yet new format is suggestive of the fact that to create critical literacy about caste and to make its oppressive framework hyper-visible we need to tap into the demotic or populist register. For Bhabha, performative practices destabilize the stereotypical representational mode on which the nation depends and which miss "the zone of occult instability where the people dwell" (1995, p.303). The performative in *Bhimayana* is the "intrusion of multiple registers within the overarching demotic register of the graphic novel that disrupts the youth's continuum of ignorance as well as our own" (Nayar, 2011, p.24).

The form of the text plays a significant role in drawing a young's reader's attention to the text, yet at the same time making him aware of the social structures from within which he is doing the text, that is, reading becomes a performative act as far as *Bhimayana* is concerned.



Fig. 1 (Pg. 11) : Reproduced with permission from the Publisher

The narrative begins with 'One Day in the recent past, a bus stop in an Indian City...'(Natarajan et al, 2011, p.11)ⁱ, with two friends sitting on a bench, having a magico-realistic frame, personified as a woman with its roof drawn as long hair and arms spread as if inviting one to sit (fig.1). The illustration shows an upper caste youth complaining about the quota policy of the Indian Government. From his/her urban aristocratic background, caste is no more a fundamental player in modern India, and caste based reservations only impede national interest. The youth's speeches remind us of the post Mandal Commission debate that marks an important juncture in Indian politics. The anti-reservationist approach of the urban youth is countered by the other girl, who reminds us that casteism is still a nightmarish reality, not only a part of India's

hoary past but also of its troubled present. Referring to recent issues validates her point and proves the other youth's perspective to be naive and ill-informed. If we take a look at figure 1, we will observe two points: first, the peculiar representation of the bus stop as a woman inviting people to sit and talk underneath its shade, hinting at the fact that caste issue needs to be discussed and holistically understood, and the bus stop in that context is no more a place but a space: a communicative environment, encouraging the exchange of ideas between people; and secondly, the activist girl in favor of caste based reservations is wearing specs, as opposed to the urban youth's un-spectacled eyes. My interpretation of the image is that the girl is commenting on the real situation with the lens of the critique, as her views are complemented with real facts: newspaper articles (p.13). The juxtaposition of the literary with the prosaic reality of the news snippets, creates a critical literacy about casteism, based on fusing of two different linguistic registers, producing a grammar of visual design to unpack social meanings of signs structured through social usages. The interaction also provides a cue to Ambedkar, who is instantly identified by the urban youth as "The guy in all those statues?" (p.14). The very tone of the questions shows how hollow Indian society's approach have been towards caste based oppressions, where the key revolutionary is only represented through certain statues planted insensibly across the Nation or through passing references in history books, without ever trying to make the greater Indian population aware about the vectors of caste based oppressions. But the reference to already recognizable statues opens up an 'interlocular field', where the real life statues and the Gond art representation of Ambedkar's life merge with the news snippets to create a whole new visual space representing the contesting site of caste politics.

With Book One 'Water', we embark on Ambedkar's biography and to his experiences of untouchability, which gets continued in the succeeding books - 'Shelter' and 'Travel'. These three chapters largely focus on the discursive construction of Ambedkar's identity as a representative of a particular minority group (pp.48-49), achieved through means of language and more importantly through the symbolic Gond representation, which acts as a major semiotic system of meaning creation within the text. In the text Ambedkar is discursively constructed by defining or representing who he is, what are his interests and what was/is his position within a society in relation to other people. The visual representation becomes shorthand for a particular set of contextual and historical knowledge about Ambedkar, at times becoming even more important than the speech balloons. This representation is ideally suited to create a caste based critical literacy, where space is limited but complex opinions are expressed about certain people, community or historical incidents. By transducing or resemiotizing key aspects of Ambedkar's life struggle in the visual mode, a new kind of narrative frame gets created that goes beyond the limited sequential or temporal unfolding of written history or biography. *Bhimayana* functions like a hypertext, with multiple entry points. These entry points are of course pre-selected based on the specific ideology that is being evoked about Ambedkar. For example representations in pages eighteen, nineteen and twenty of the text, depicts Ambedkar's childhood experiences of untouchability and his isolation from the mainstream society on account of the same. These images instantaneously remind us of the issue at hand, displaying them as salient events relevant to the current topic. The text is loaded with discourses across various semiotic modes, depicting Ambedkar's ability to lead the Dalits. As Idema (2003) asks, which aspects of human experience are foregrounded by representing something in one mode rather than the other? Real progress towards answering this question, in context of *Bhimayana*, can be made by taking a multimodal approach that is grounded in the castist history of the text, as explicated in the historical backdrop of this essay. The multimodal orientation allows critical insight into the mechanisms

used to link textual representations to broader societal discourses and ultimately lead to a better understanding of how certain discourses become and remain dominant.



Fig. 2 (Pg 18) : Reproduced with permission from the Publisher

Multimodality has a much longer history in literacy studies, dating back to the time when conventional literacy theories and learning were being displaced by semiotic and socio-cultural theories (Dyson, 1982; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; John-Steiner, 1985). Suzanne Langer's idea of "discursive" (sequential) and "presentational" (simultaneous) forms of meaning (1942); Werner and Kaplan's concept of "symbol-weaving" (Dyson 1982) and Suhor's notion of "transmediation" (1984), are of particular importance as far as interpretation of *Bhimayana* is concerned. In the text, meanings are woven through multiple modes of representation, combining "in quite remarkably dynamic relationships" (New London Group, 1996, p. 78). The multiple modes combine to transform an individual's story to represent the collective, who in turn are not identifiable individuals, rather types in non-realist mode of representation. We can identify identical faces of Harijans listening to Ambedkar (p. 48-49) and identical faces representing the upper castes (pp.50-51). Even the speech and thought balloons are designed to function as metaphors: bird speech balloons for the downtrodden (p.100); and those carrying a sting for those brokers of caste (p.101). With change in outlook the shape of the balloons even undergo transformation. The frustrated urban youth, unaware of the still pervading evils of casteism, when undergoes a change in perspective gets his/her thought balloons transformed in the shape of birds, signifying a change in approach and attitude. As young Bheem pleads for water: "Sir, may I drink some water?" (p.19), his thirst gets embodied in the form of a fish. The triadic relationship between thirst, water and fish is a recurrent motif in the text (p.21), with arms extending in a pleading image, suggestive of a social plea to be heard, and accorded basic human rights. The water pump, in the shape of an elephant's forehead, seems to show signs of dismay at the denial of water (p.21). As this image is made to operate across social and historical contexts, we are made to remember that Ambedkar sought for the Harijans the right to participate in Ganapati festival, represented with an elephant's head. Figures in page twenty-three, shows a herd of animals drinking from the pond, reminding us of the evils of casteism that placed a Harijan at a lower level than even animals. India is united, where Parsis, Muslims, Christians and Hindus all join hands in their uniform ill-treatment and manhandling of the Dalits - "a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is an untouchable to a Parsi, and also to a Christian"(p.71). We move across the linguistic register of prose to that of rhyming verse - " He'd rather not ride, He'd lose his pride/ He's is charging us double for causing him trouble" (p.37), signifying the clash of registers between poetic-humanistic aspirations and the ruthlessly prosaic nature of caste based aggressions. Birds and animal images are used to signify human emotions and needs. Mobility and aspirations get represented through birds, where young Ambedkar's "heart is a bird in a

cloudless sky (p.31). At a later point in the narrative, Natarajan's portrayal of Ambedkar representing himself as "an ox in the oil-press, walking in circles and going nowhere..."(p.66), is evocative of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) introducing us to the absurdity of existence, where despite the meaninglessness we continue our search for meaning; in the context of *Bhimayana* all the more suggestive, reminding us of the absurdity of caste segregations that have kept the Dalits in their disempowered state for generations, and yet Ambedkar's continued plea for activism in the hope that situations will improve somewhere down the line. Machines are even more feeling than the unfeeling upper caste Hindus as represented through a crying harvester machine over Satara lynching of a Dalit daring to dig his own well in 2008 (p.46). Likewise we have examples of cheerful train compartments and benign looking buses. The text offers an extraordinary contrast between cruel upper caste humans and humane non-humans. Figures in pages forty-eight and forty nine, show Ambedkar's words as droplets of water, showering forth, reviving the waste land of castist India with the freshness of a dream of equality.

As the narrative draws to a close, the entire visual vocabulary takes the shape of a human chain, signifying the hope for community living (pp. 90 - 91), moving beyond petty divisive policies and politics. The visual depiction also provides a frame to the historical debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the issue of untouchability. The human chain dispels the initial sense of isolation and metamorphosizes in an enormous verbal and visual emotional appeal of inclusionist policies.

All narration within the text draws upon the historical events of Ambedkar's life and the present socio-political reality, as represented through the news snippets. The images of mangled body parts are evocative of a social order based on divisive policies and exclusionist agendas. Likewise, the extraordinary 'pointing-fingers' (p. 13, 20, 21, 47, 68) that to in groups, indicate a collective and uniform hatred towards the Dalits, who in turn speak like birds. The pointing fingers are a part of sign making, where these images not only stand for mere objects, but tell us something about the meaning of the relationship between those images and their social and historical implications.

4. Conclusion

Bhimayana has a poly-vocal structure, in the sense it operates at a level above the sentence. Inter-discursive relations are created as genres, situations, registers, social and community practices are fused in the text. The genesis of this text lies in personal experiences of identity and representation. *Bhimayana* makes use of a new typeface 'Bhim' after Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, making the subject of biography fuse into the very language of cultural production. Bhim's story *Bhimayana* echoes Ram's story *Ramayana*, forcing us to acknowledge that there are many silenced narratives of exploitation that are a part of the historical uncanny. *Bhimayana*'s multimodal format shows us how to redesign school literacy so that young learners can grasp the broad repertoire of literacy knowledge and practices they require for developing as glocal citizens of the future. The traditional Gond art fused in the Graphic mode points towards the evolving communicative locale of "new times" (Luke 1995) rather than restricting ourselves to the "formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rulegoverned forms of language" (New London Group, 1996, p. 61). The text offers a multimodal cue complex, where multiple sign systems juxtapose to create a post colonial literacy about caste. The challenge was to find an open art form that will harbor the vision of a castless and open society, to which the Gond art did apt justice.

Endnote

ⁱ Henceforth only page number given while referring to *Bhimayana*

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