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Humanising History through Graphic Narratives: Exploring Stories of Home and Displacement from the North-East of India

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Abstract

Literature from the North-East has responded to national, global and local issues, including questions on immigration and ethnic violence. They have resisted the colonial framework of representation and have invoked a sense of “cultural and ethnic particularity” (Sarma, 2013). This literature has adopted a multilingual register to respond to 1) patriarchal and 2) ethnonationalist discourses that have a forced and overbearing presence in the everyday lives of people and their stories. These writings evoke an ethno-critical approach that “engages otherness and difference in such a way as to provoke an interrogation of and a challenge” to our familiar realms of experience and is “consistent with a recognition and legitimation of heterogeneity” (Sarma, 2013). Select stories from *First Hand* (Volume II, 2018) – *The Lonely Courtyard* (2018), *My Name is Jahanara* (2018), and *A Market Story* (2019) by Kumdo Yumnam provide the heterogeneity that is characteristic of the works of literature emerging from the North-East, thereby resisting the homogeneity often indicative of the term ‘North-East’. The analysis will explore how the selected texts negotiate textuality and visuality in a specific manner to present an archive of everyday life that humanises history.

Keywords: *Humanising Narratives, Graphic Novels of North-East.*

Graphic Narratives

The Indian graphic novel is a relatively new literary form compared to its counterparts in the world (Debroy, 2011). However, it has made a significant impact in the world of Indian Writing in English. The graphic novel is a medium that includes a range of semiotic systems— iconic, symbolic and indexicals (Nayar, 2016). Given its form that negotiates textuality and visuality in a distinct manner, it can tackle subtle issues such as expressions and identities of varied kinds. It adapts itself to the emerging, contemporary concerns while retaining its lineage to its humble yet politically assertive beginnings in articulating questions of power, migration, gender, colonial onslaughts and nationhood (Giddens & Evans, 2013). Contrary to popular notions, the emergence of the comic culture in India drew inspiration from the comic culture of the West starting out as “reproductions or translated versions of comic strips such as Tarzan, Phantom, and Mandrake” (Debroy, 2011). However, *Amar Chitra Katha* transformed the reach and impact of Indian graphic narratives significantly. Further, Indian graphical novels witnessed a change in their critical engagement when narratives by Sarnath Banerjee, Orijit Sen, Amrita Patil, Appupen, and Viswajyoti Ghosh, to name a few, reached a diverse audience. The narratives catered to a range of social, cultural and political issues of nationalism, partition, gender, non-binary articulations of experience, the retelling of myths, and feminist readings of fables and fairytales.

We use the term graphic narrative in accordance with Chute (2008) and Nayar (2016). Chute claims that graphic narrative, as a term, is more apt to refer to narratives that have “reproducibility” and “mass circulation” as well as a “rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention” (p.462). She further argues that graphic narratives are able to create

their own historicity even as they work to destabilize standard narratives of history. Particularly, there is a significant yet diverse body of nonfiction graphic work that engages with the subject either in extremis or facing brutal experience. (2008, p. 92)

Nayar (2009) argues that “graphic narrative is a ‘medium’ within which we have ‘genres’ like graphic fiction, graphic reportage and graphic memoirs” (Nayar, 2009, p. 58) and this medium “is more inclusive and representative of an essentially hybrid genre” and “is largely an offshoot of the country’s economic liberalization and its discontents” (Krätli, 2018). Inspired by political cartoons and journalistic narratives, this form, historically, has been always considered a political enterprise. Sankar and Changmai (2019) argue:

The graphic novel as we define it is not merely a novel by other means, despite its use of the book-length elaboration of plot and character typical of the novel; it is also an assertion of the form’s proclivity for political engagement. To a certain extent, therefore, the invention of the graphic novel in the work of artists like Will Eisner and Spiegelman is the rediscovery of the medium’s potential for extended performances that overcome the spatio-temporal limits of the political cartoon but remain overtly political and/or satirical, and non-fictional or (more commonly) partially fictive. (p. 113)

Political commentary in graphic narratives of the world and of India

Graphic narratives use diverse story-telling strategies and insist “on tackling more social commentary and cultural critique of the nation’s lacunae of flaws” (Nayar, 2016, p. 8). Madan (2018) asserts that the Indian graphic novel is “a cultural form; it champions the Indian graphic narrative as “a new representational mode that re-invigorates the canon” of Indian writing in English because of its multivalent representational strategies, and its insistence on offering a cultural critique of the Indian nation (7–8)” (p. 259). Graphic narratives across the world have challenged canonical historical representations and presented a critique of the ideas of nation and citizenship (Speigelman, 1991; Sacco, 2012; Nayar 2016).

Employing mimetic and diegetic narrative styles, the narratives foreground “the silent actors” (Nayar, 2016 b). By highlighting the silences, the positioning of the texts in association with the images, and other allied strategies, the novels reflect a distinct semiotic strategy (Madan, 2017). Unlike photographs, visual narratives in graphic novels allow “personal recall and sentimental narratives” (Nayar, 2016 a, p.22) which allows the readers to locate the alternate histories (alternate, in this case, refers to the visualising of a history that is avoided, or omitted or forgotten in the canonical writings). Nayar claims that contemporary history is visualised through these everyday used mediums such as graphic narratives and presents to us a ‘visual turn’ in recording, in particular, historical horrors like genocide, ethnocide, war, and collective trauma. The narratives allow local contexts, issues, and experiences to be presented in an accessible and recognisable format, thereby opening them for a world readership. It builds critical literacy by letting the readers

“see popular forms and their demotic registers as enabling the culturalisation of the public sphere, opening it up to concerns, debates and campaigns about rights, historical wrongs and emancipator possibilities” (Nayar, 2016, p. 198).

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), articulates the experiences and material conditions of the tribal population in the aftermath of the construction of a dam which is bound to have dire environmental implications, Viswajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* revisits the narratives from India's emergency 1975-77 (2010), Malik Sajad's autobiographical narrative *Munnu* (2015) presents the fractured sense of being and growing up in Kashmir's political turmoil (Mitra, 2019), and Appupen's narratives in *Legends of Halahala* satirises the modern society in the cusp of capitalism and raises arguments against environmental degradation, urban degradation and sexual violence (Mondal & Banerjee, 2021). These publications are significant as they created and transformed how graphic narratives present critical notions of nationality in the context of India (Debroy, 2011; Nayar, 2016).

While there is a plethora of writing that is 'emerging' from the North-East, graphic novels or graphic subculture in the region is limited and is in its formative stage. Particularly, since publications by women writers in this genre from the region are quite limited, it becomes important to address the thematic focus and form of the available ones. The article through the analysis of the three selected narratives responds to this lacuna. *The Lonely Courtyard* and *My Name is Jahanara* by Amrapali Basumatary from *First Hand (Volume II)* (2018) and *A Market Story* (2019) by Kumdo Yumnam are analysed to bring forth the narratives, their textuality and visuality to explore how they represent the experiences of people from diverse ethnic communities from the North-East and enable writing of history/ies through the personal recounting of the impact of events on their personal lives.

Writing the North-East

The North-East of India offers perspectives of postcolonial experiences that challenge the depiction of a homogeneous nation-state. It deserves attention as a region that brings forth and questions the ideas of nationhood, citizenship and democracy, especially due to its critical history of colonial and postcolonial existence and its location as a region between South, Southeast and East Asia (Matta, 2017). North-East became a frontier sharing its borders with not one but multiple nations and due to the arbitrary severance of connection with the rest of the land and other trade routes it became a standalone entity and an excuse for policing and control. The nomenclature of the region contributed to the artificial superimposition of homogeneity which in reality was and is a region of 'a multi-ethnic mosaic' (Sarma, 2013, p. 37). The mainstream discourses validated by the army, by the nation and by the larger majoritarian imagination promoted the sense of alienation and homogeneous representation through narratives that fuelled 'racialisation' and increased profiling (Baruah, 2005, p. 166). Representationally, the region, therefore, was pushed towards the very margins of the national imagination with a mythic homogeneity that functioned as an artificial cohesive device. Typical discourses resting on secondary sources either conformed to such imagination and if at all they resisted the hegemonic forces of articulation, they did so quite superficially.

The scholarship from the North-East can, must and has challenged this “androcentric discursive regime” (Matta, 2017, p.200). The absence of writers from the North-East in mainstream literary discussions or panels, classrooms and everyday discourse does indeed continue an obliterating tendency. This remains a matter of concern because the North-East has a long tradition of writing and scholarship nationally and internationally, the writings have received critical acclaim and “has been accompanied by the appreciation of a progressively growing readership”(Matta, 2017, p. 200). In recent years, however, increased attention to the specific forms of production of literature from the North-East indicates five significant issues. The writings from this polyglot region are aiming at presenting an alternative to the ahistorical and touristic perceptions often circulated across mainstream media. The writings aim to debunk the perception of North-East, on one hand, as an exotic utopia and on the other, as the imagination of a dystopic land marred with guerrilla warfare (Matta, 2017). Secondly, the writings resist the colonial framework of representation and invoke a sense of “cultural and ethnic particularity” (Sarma, 2013). They speak of survival, and resistance and offer moments of crafting identities (through their narrators, protagonists, and characters). Hence, the writings evoke an ethno-critical approach which “engages otherness and difference in such a way as to provoke an interrogation of and a challenge” to our familiar realms of experience and is “consistent with a recognition and legitimation of heterogeneity” (Krupat, 1992, p. 3). Thirdly, through their works of literature, they have responded to national, global and local issues, including questions on immigration and ethnic violence. Additionally, “in particular, the novels that have been published in the last few years bear witness to the effort of creating an alternative archive of memories of cultural history that takes the form of polyphonic narratives, or ‘narratives of communities’” (Sarma, 2013, p. 41). Fifthly, while Manjeet Baruah asserts that in recent decades, ‘one can see an emerging and growing genre of “political” literature based precisely on the issue of the frontier’ (2013, p. 30), “novels by north-eastern authors, far from dealing only with the idea of the North-East as a conflict zone, appear more concerned with discourses that range from the question of identity formation in the borderlands to the performance of indigeneity as ‘frontier people’ (2013, p. 40), from the question of the language to the reconceptualization of the mantra ‘the personal is political’” (Matta, 2017).

The present paper analyses three graphic narratives: *The Lonely Courtyard* and *My Name is Jahanara* by Amrapali Basumatary and *A Market Story* by Kumdo Yumnam. Using the framework of ‘humanising history’ (Nayar, 2016), the form and intent of the narratives will be explored.

A Market Story, The Lonely Courtyard and My Name is Jahanara

A Market Story narrates the life of a married Meitei woman and her everyday experiences where she is negotiating her identity, here, a particular tribal identity, Meitei vis-a-vis an ‘other’. It is a short graphic narrative included in the anthology, *Crafting the World - writings from Manipur* (2019), edited and compiled by Thingnam Anjulika Samom. This anthology includes writings by 27 women from Manipur—a visual artist and 26 writers to represent the idea of the Manipuri woman, “to share the experiences of being a woman in a patriarchal order, and to tell us about the conditions, trials, tribulations and jubilation of their lives” (Samom, 2019). While some of them regularly write in Meiteilon (Manipuri), for this anthology, they present their narratives in English.

The other two narratives chosen for analysis are from *First Hand Volume II* (2018). This is an anthology of graphic narratives about conflict and resistance in India and is edited by Vidyun Sabhaney. The second volume focuses on narratives of exclusion and was published by Yoda Press in collaboration with the Centre for Equity Studies based on the 2015 edition of the Indian Exclusion Report (Kirpal, 2018). The themes included in this volume range from narratives of single women in India, the Muzaffarnagar riots, ethnic violence in Bodoland, experiences of the Jarwa tribe in the Andamans and the chronicles of the lives of Devadasis. Vidyun also points out that this anthology is a polyphonic exercise as it brought forth work by authors who have worked closely with “images, graphic narratives and research-based comics (such as Priya Kuriyan, Bhagwati Prasad, Shohei Emura, Mohit Kant Misra, Anupam Arunachalam, Vipin Yadav and myself) and those who have a long history with the subject matter (Neha Dixit, Amrapali Basumatary and Challapalli Swaroopa Rani)” (Kirpal, 2018). He asserts that the narratives by Basumatary are based on research and documentary evidence and reflect the conflict in Bodoland and the role of the State, and its impact on people.

The first narrative, *The Lonely Courtyard* (2018) is based on field research in 2006. This was part of a project on women affected by the Bodo-Santhali riots of the 1990s. *My Name is Jahanara* is however a fictional account. The narratives are real and are based on the actual interviews whereas the names of people and places are fictional. The account is of a Muslim woman during the 2012 Bodo-Muslim riot. It is argued to be a displacement comparable to the Partition in 1947. Jahanara recounts the experiences of Bengali speaking Muslim women as part of the author-researcher’s interviews in the aftermath of the riots through various organisations. Albeit academic in design, using oral histories and interviews, the author visited Santhali relief camps operating in Gossaigaon sub-division in 2006. Women from both communities were spoken to. Particular emphasis was placed on the narratives of elderly women who were witnesses. A short encounter with the women in the midst of their daily work brings forth the fissures, material conditions and significance of stories that ‘must’ be recounted to remember what happened and what lives on in their memories, albeit trailing.

My Name is Jahanara (2018) by Amrapali Basumatary narrates the experience of a Muslim woman during the 2012 Bodo-Muslim riot. Through Jahanara, the text brings forth questions of citizenship when the villages inhabited by the Muslims were attacked by Bodos and Muslims from these areas had to relocate and survive with meagre resources. Jahanara talks about her experience of the day of horror, the struggles in the aftermath and the continued threats to relocate to Bangladesh on account of not having documents to prove citizenship.

Humanising archives

Apart from cultivating narrative empathy, by “sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition” (Keen, 2006; quoted in Mondal & Banerjee, 2021, p. 2), these three narratives humanise archives through their “attention to a textualization of historical processes and a visual schema by which we might locate the individual participant or spectator’s ‘view’ of this history as it unfolds” (Nayar, 2016 a, p. 14). Lander had argued that the narratives bring together public and private events (for example, in Satrapi’s Persepolis) and “tend to revel in the minute personal details of everyday life, which

receive their due respect because of their personal or symbolic weight within the lives of the characters and the narrative that is being constructed' (p. 117). These narratives foreground the speech of the witnesses and remain silent in specific contexts; they include personal narrations, recollections and aspirations. They, however, do not overtly satirise (see Mondal & Banerjee, 2021). Instead, they present a representation of history that brings forth personal details and experiences, thereby, allowing the readers to envision the social and individual dimensions of representing histories.

A Market Story narrates the experience of a married Meitei *Mou* who goes to the *keithe* to buy groceries and is confronted by the women shopkeepers regarding her identity. The questions raised by the women in the marketplace seem to stem from the protagonist's appearance and behaviour. They persistently enquire about her ethnic identity. Her 'being' challenges their expected schemas. Mundane inquiries about the price of vegetables quickly escalate to assertions made about her ethnic identity owing to her choice of food, attire and how she cares for her child. Throughout their transactional encounter, the questions become more personal and intimate. Kundo does not add panels as commentaries, instead, focuses mostly on the conversational exchanges, providing us with the indices (using speech bubbles that demonstrate the speaker) to understand the interrogator and responder. We remain a witness to this encounter. Seemingly trivial as a theme that provides a way to encounter different perspectives in a marketplace, the narrative goes beyond and brings forth everyday contestations of ethnic identity, community membership and othering. In the assertions, persistently made by the shopkeeper (p. 183-185), the protagonist is asked repeatedly, "Are you Meitei", "So, you are a Christian", and "Meitei?", "We thought that you were a Kabui or some other..."

Instead of focusing on the inter-ethnic conflicts at a macro level, the narrative positions the contestations through the everyday lives of people. It presents an alternative narrative of inter-ethnic encounters. Secondly, Kundo demonstrates how women negotiate contested community membership. This is in contrast to how "the violence of men's worlds, where mostly male protagonists struggle to find a new balance amidst the chaotic turmoil of global conflicts, counternational insurgencies, and interethnic fights...overlook a more gendered dimension of history" (Matta, 2013, p. 212). Matta (2013) notes that literature from Nagaland are reclaiming neglected stories of Naga women who negotiate traditional values and their individual aspirations that operate on two ends of a spectrum. She asserts, "caught between different kinds of expectations, indigenous women often find themselves in an identity crisis" (Matta, 2013, p. 212). The statement, however, resonates with stories from Manipur as well. This narrative also presents a moment of critical literacy by foregrounding the inter-ethnic identities of the North-East and resisting the imposition of a mythic sense of homogeneity.

Historical events are often narrated at a macro level ignoring the 'mundane' everyday events by omitting the representation of the diversity of individual experiences. Articulating the representational forms of humanising history, Nayar (2016 a) asserts,

The graphic novel's representation of humanization demands both, its attention to a textualization of historical processes and a visual schema by which we might locate the individual participant or spectator's 'view' of this history as it unfolds. If the textual dimension delivers one aspect of the story, the expressions of characters and their location

in the panels nudge us to paying attention to how individuals perceive and receive events as these happen. (p.14)

In *A Market Story*, the image panels provide close-up shots of people and objects that would have been relegated to the background. Close-up shots, instead of wider panels, magnify objects, expressions and events visually and weave them into the visual narrative.

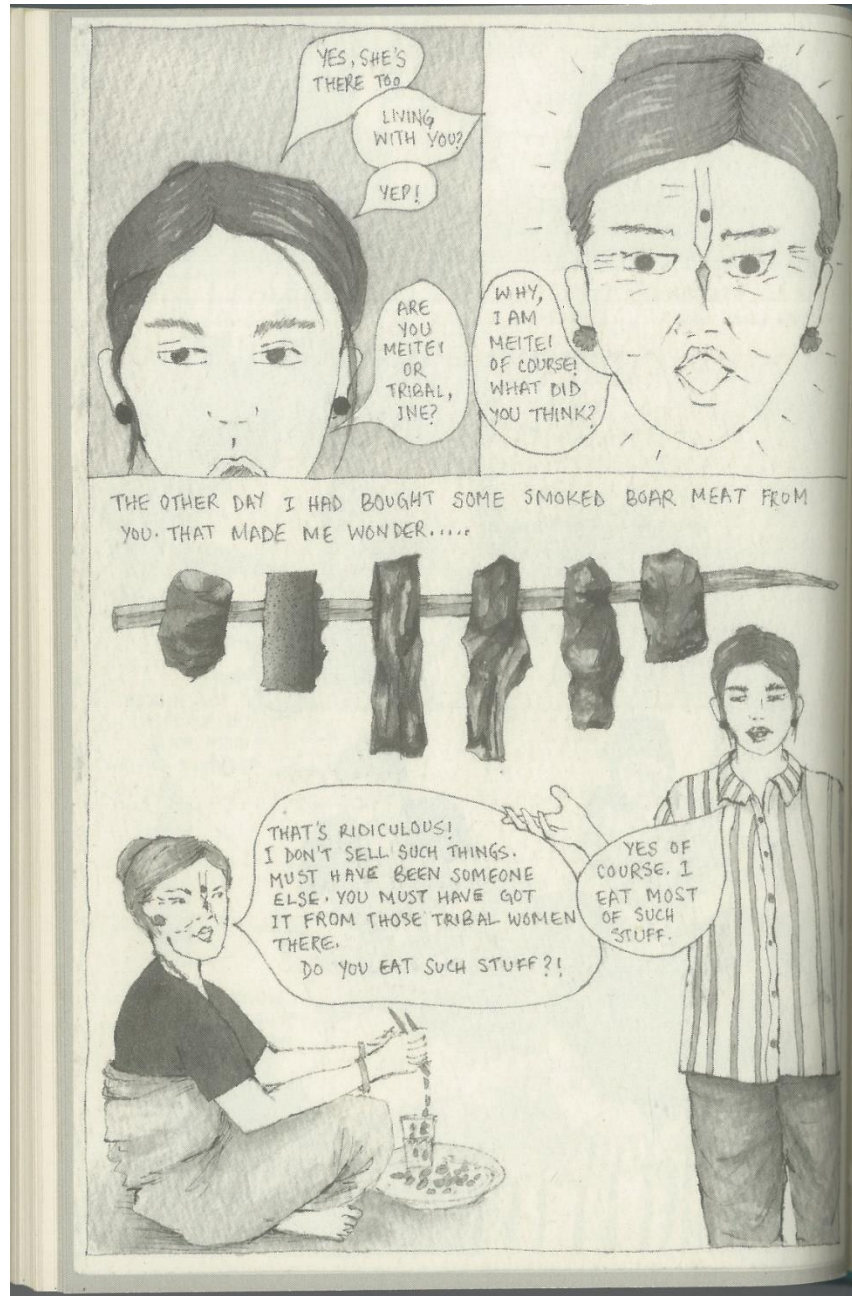


Figure 1 Panel from *A Market Story*, Kundo Yumnam, 2019, p. 188

Visually, representation of expressions are significant in narrating historical events and their impact on individual lives. Expressions inform "that history had witnesses who responded in different ways to the events, whose emotions writ large on their faces should convey to us the

scope and nature of the events and thus alert us to the subjects of that history, the social and individual dimensions of the larger historical process" (Nayar, 2016, p. 14). This humanises the archives or history. During one of the verbal exchanges (Figure 1) between Kundo and the woman shopkeeper of Nupi Keithel (women market), Kundo asks the seller, "Are you Meitei or tribal, Ine?". The latter remarks, "Why, I am Meitei of course! What did you think?" (p.88). This is presented visually through a closeup of two faces. The face on the top right of the panel has the shopkeeper's face with lines drawn around her face indicative of surprise and indignance, visibly reflecting a poise against Kundo's statement. She is a Meitei of course. She cannot be asked to confirm her ethnic identity. The multisemiotic visuality, therefore, presents the contestation both textually and visually.

The panel below (Figure 2) presents another visual register: the difference in the attires of Kundo and the shopkeeper. The latter wears an attire commonly worn by Meitei women whereas Kundo wears a shirt and a pair of trousers. Kundo's shoes are presented in closeup. The shopkeeper's presumptions are based on a problematic and unilinear semiotic register that connects performatives such as attires with religious and ethnic labelling.

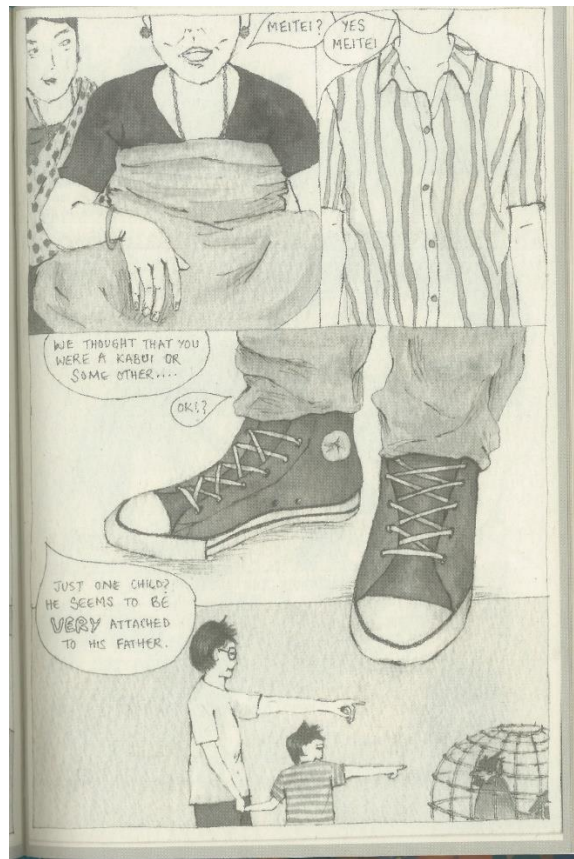


Figure 2 Panel from *A Market Story*, Kundo Yumnam, 2019, p. 185

While the text of graphic narratives moves the plot and the images provide the details of objects, events, emotions and expressions, the visuality of the text, specifically in terms of lettering, indicates "graphic voice" (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 227). In this text, small fonts, hand-lettered and mostly speech bubbles are used to retain the foregrounding of personal encounters

and emphasis has been marked by larger fonts, capital letters and repeated punctuation marks. For example, the shopkeeper enquires, "Just one child? He seems to be VERY attached to his father" (Yumnam, 2019, p. 185) when she observes that Kundo's child was being engaged by the father. In another encounter, when Kundo states that she might have bought boar meat from her, the shopkeeper vehemently disagrees and says she doesn't "sell such things", expressing her shock and disbelief and asks Kundo whether she eats "Beef too?!!"

Kundo uses an important visual metaphor as well. The closeup panel of the meat cutting board is presented along with the currency notes along with other images of vegetables in the lower-left panels. The right panel includes Kundo with her back towards us. Kundo shares our vision here, she is also looking on, both as a participant and as a witness, possibly reflecting on the contestations of her identity.



Figure 3 Panel from *A Market Story*, Kundo Yumnam, p. 189

It is a marketplace and a place of transaction where materials are weighed, transacted and consumed. This marketplace however becomes the site of a conflict—the knife put inside the wooden bark typically used for cutting meat, — simultaneously reflects the grotesque and the othering. The bean seeds scattered through the right side of the page challenge the presence of beef, iconised through the cutting board. The page layout (Figure 3) brings forth food as a visual

idiom to articulate community membership and the excluded. To be a true Meitei, the seller is to speak about, consume and sell specific food. To eat meat, especially pork and beef, is a marker of defiance and hence relegates the consumers to the position of an 'other'.

In these moments, the textuality and visuality of the narrative intersect deeply. The communities, individuals, their being and their coexistence remind us of the assertion made earlier about the heterogeneity of communities who coexist, in volatile conditions, poised for a contestation at any moment, yet occupying the same marketplace. While *A Market Story* reflects the narratives of the contestations of belonging, *A Lonely Courtyard* and *My Name is Jahanara* recounts a traumatic history of displacement. Inhabiting two spectrums of the conflict, beyond the narrations of public and official history, we encounter stories of Birola and Thwisri who are in conversation with each other in *A Lonely Courtyard* and Jahanara in *My Name is Jahanara*. Amrapali mentions at the beginning of the narrative that the stories are narrated in Korajhar and adjoining areas. She points out that one important reason for the selection of the region is because the region is inhabited by people from a mixed demographic profile who differ in terms of linguistic, ethnic and religious affiliations and has witnessed large-scale violence since the 1990s. She mentions that fictionalising of the narratives has been done to protect the real identities of the people and "to create an emotional, political and humanitarian connect with people who are some of the most marginalised and oppressed communities in the country" (Basumatary, 2018, p. 183).

The Lonely Courtyard is a visual idiom. It is about personal, geographical and political alienation. Its liminal space indicates both belonging and not belonging to a place of settlement. The emptiness, interior-exteriority, and expanse are reflected in the narrative through the textual and visual elements. This narrative brings forth the conversations in an afternoon in a seemingly calm village, where, everyday life is both familiar and yet distant. The narrative begins with the text in an open panel that merges with the images of the page. The pages provide a glimpse of a topographic and panoramic view of the village with texts in open panels floating through the page. Andrei Molotiu, as a strategy for reading abstract comics, invokes the term "'iconostasis': the perception of the layout of a comics page as a unified composition; perception which prompts us not so much to scan the comic from panel to panel in the accepted direction of reading but to take it at a glance, the way we take in an abstract painting" (Nayar, 2016 a). Nayar (2016 a), elaborating on humanising archives and public histories, claims that "more than the literary texts on traumatic events such as the Partition or complicated histories of colonial India, the graphic novel helps us see through the macro-stories and locate the individual anguish, distress and sadness" (p. 46). Birola, a respondent in the narrative asserts,

We are refugees here. The villagers call us that. They call this village where we live a colony. Our homes stand on the land of a person from the village. We do not know how long we will be allowed to live here. We haven't built anything solid. It is not our home., not our land. We have already shifted so many locations in this same village. They keep moving us from here and there. The landowners fear we will settle down here and usurp their land. (Basumatary, 2018, *The Lonely Courtyard*, p. 188)

This substantiates the feeling of alienation, discomfort and a yearning for return which is rendered impossible because of the sheer destruction of the village, spatially, in imagination and culturally by the riots. These narratives also focus on the differential experience of the woman. A woman

recounts how she as a 25-year-old fled the village and tried to survive along with her other friends, elders whereas the men of the villages stayed back only to follow suit soon after. The alienation that the state forces on is also pertinent in the patriarchal order. *The Lonely Courtyards* have the men relax, rest and prepare for work whereas the women return from work and return to work again after recounting their trials and tribulations and a moment of self-reflection of who they are and where they belong.

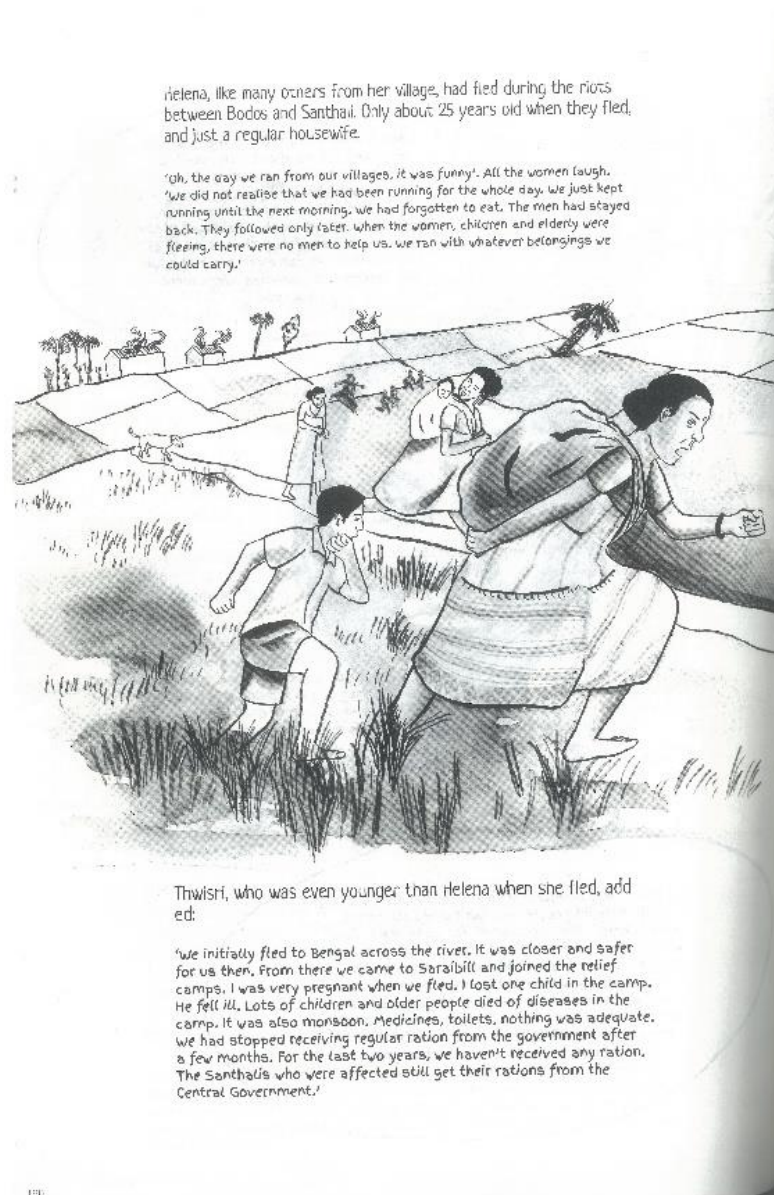


Figure 4 Panel from *A Lonely Courtyard*, A Basumatary, 2018, p. 190

Thwisri (Figure 4), recounts how the riots happened when she was pregnant and lost her child in the relief camp, witnessed largescale deaths due to diseases that spread in the absence of proper sanitation, terrible living conditions in the temporary settlements, and lack of basic amenities, including ration and hygienic toilets. These personal recollections reframe the events in a different manner than an impersonal, public record of memory.

The courtyard provides a space for recollection, and becomes a witness to intangible micro-histories, personal narratives and memories; it exists as an entry and exit point to their temporary 'homes' forever retaining the anxiety of 'homelessness'. The lack of spatial belonging is being overcome by social belonging and these women, working together in farmlands, create new friendships on the basis of the shared histories of struggle, the trauma of losing homes, and in certain cases, even family members to the riots. It is in these moments of recollection, that the protagonists cease to be strangers but rather become neighbours, allies, and companions—a relationship built on the idea of togetherness. It is these temporary spaces that must be reinvented by them as 'home', both socially and spatially to not only overcome their feeling of alienation but also to comfort themselves from the disturbing yet persistent reminders of the othering.

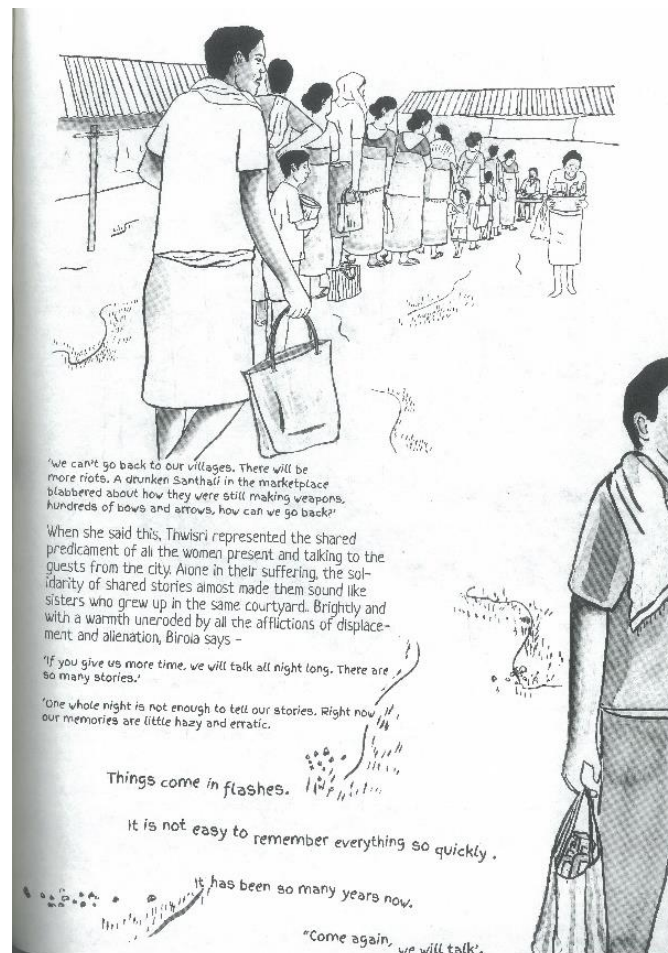


Figure 5 Panel from *A Lonely Courtyard*, A Basumatary, 2018, p.191

The last page (Figure 5) does not have separate panels. It is a splash panel, with an image in the centre in grayscale. With the courtyard in the centre, the imagery feels like a photograph with inverted colours, wherein the source of light and darkness are reversed. The dark, monsoon clouds hover around the courtyard. The blackness of the background permeates the greyish undertones of the page. It works as a frame for the lives, experiences, anxiety, volatility and anguish of the inhabitants of the place. The courtyard stands as a symbol of persistence, etched with trauma, nevertheless, standing testimony to survival and stories.

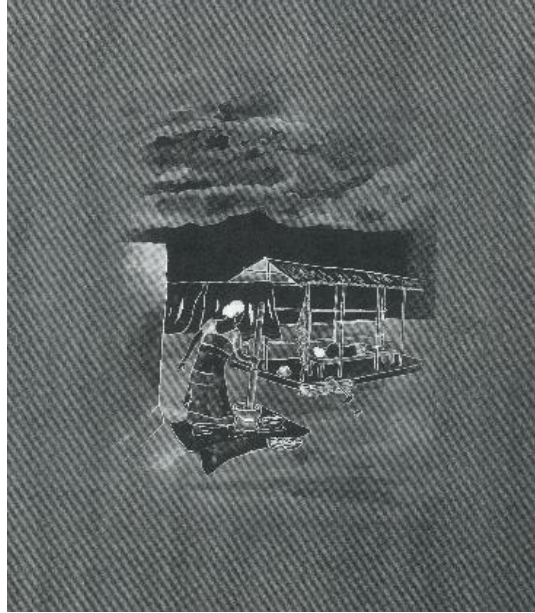


Figure 6 Panel from *A Lonely Courtyard*, A Basumatary, 2018, p.193

Incidentally, the strategy is repeated in *My Name is Jahanara*. The family stands with a background (Figure 6) that is pitch black, located in the centre wherein the rest of the frame is engulfed in bleeding grayscale. Her family's future is entrapped in the darkness, the inversion of the source of light indicating the faint possibilities of a stable life. The images if analysed further reflects another interpretation—it seems that the foggy frame that is allowing temporary visual access to the people could engulf them in time.

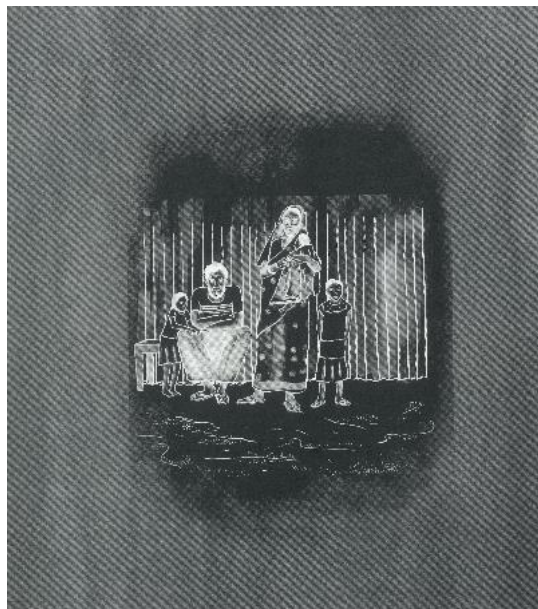


Figure 7 Panel from *My Name is Jahanara* by A Basumatary, 2018, p. 206

My Name is Jahanara is an assertive story. Clark argued that history is humanised in graphic narratives when they reflect the implications of historical events on people and their lives, reflecting changes in their agencies and experiences (Nayar, 2016 a, p. 14). The narrative is

presented in the form of a recounting of a Muslim woman about her experience of the Bodo-Muslim riot, 2012. Drawn from first-hand narratives of Bengali-speaking Muslim women, Jahanara represents the voices of women who witnessed the violence, largescale destruction, and a complete change in their lives in the aftermath of the riots. She begins her narrative by introducing us to her family and then providing us with directions to reach her 'home'. She says, "our house is one of those with tin walls and broken fences. But before the trouble it was not like this. It was like the other homes that you see" (Basumatary, 2018, p. 194). This allows the readers to note how 'homes' have become markers of history, few abandoned, as witnessed in *The Lonely Courtyard*, few existing in an uncanny relationship with others as witnessed in *My Name is Jahanara*, wherein different homes inhabit a past that is marked by trauma, displacement and 'othering'.

The narration progresses with her recounting the day of the riot. She remembers how villages were burnt down and only Muslim houses were targeted. Recounting the trauma of the event, she said that it made her feel "dizzy" and added, "I had never seen our men like that" (Basumatary, 197). Even in recollecting the traumatic past, she mentions, "our men"; years of living together, the experiences and the relationships stand in dissonance with the mad frenzy of rioters. She then recounted her time in relief camps, the temporary arrangement turning into a semi-permanent home, their constant relocations and inhabitable conditions of these settlements. She asserted that government relief funds and assistance never matched the material necessities. The trauma exists and retains its emotional veracity. She says, "I still feel scared", "my child sometimes cries in his sleep" (Basumatary, 2018, p. 203), she recounts how her husband after visiting the ravished villages broke down unable to acknowledge that all that was familiar was gutted. Their 'homes' became empty spaces. Continued harrowing experiences resulted from neighbours, even non-Bodos who refused cooperation and support.

The narrative does not include allegorical devices or symbolic references in many contexts. However, a persistent visual register is used throughout the narrative—a stylised representation of fire is introduced in the opening pages from the bottom right corner and covers the top part of the next page. It reoccurs in a subsequent page where the entire upper part of the page includes a tin/thatched house that seems to be breaking, dismantled and appears as a free-floating object (Figure 8). The fire rages from the roofs. The fire becomes the anchor for the traumatic past. It is, indeed, presented stylistically, with sharp lines, clear boundaries, and darker colours as a way to navigate what happened around it. The displacement began with the advent of fire.

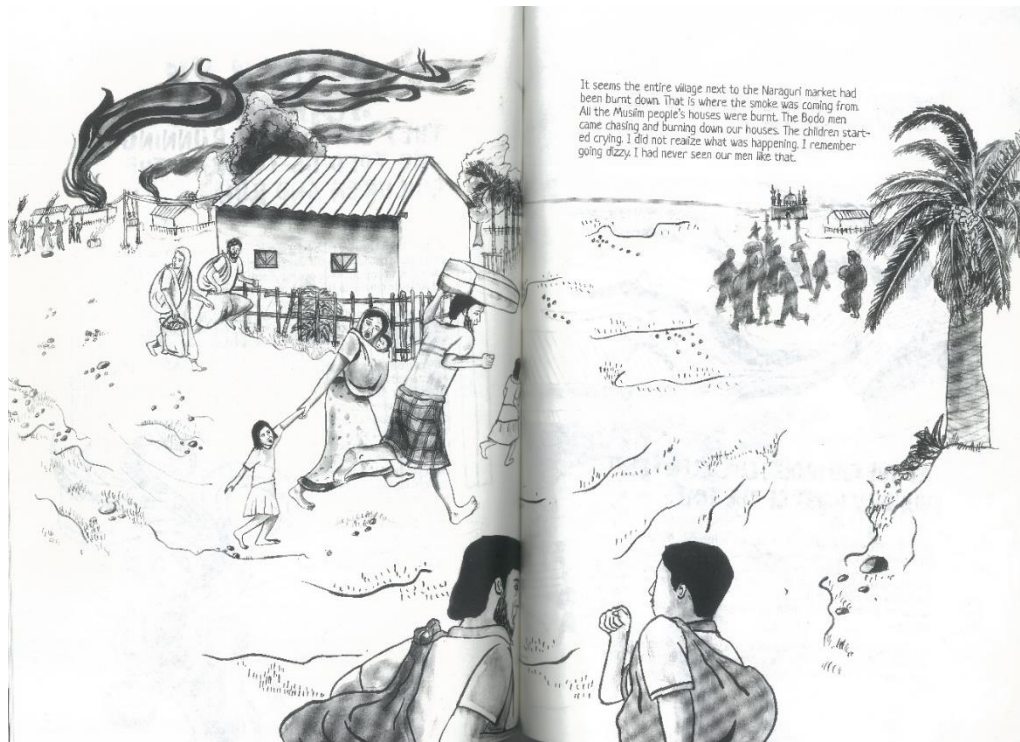


Figure 8 Panel from *My Name is Jahanara* by A Basumatary, 2018, p. 196-197

In one of the pages that depict the school used as a temporary shelter, a single frame presents CRPF men with clear markers of uniform. Though located at the lower end of the page and in the courtyard of the school, by virtue of iconicity, literally and metaphorically, as will be obvious in the textual narrative, they gain centrality. The next panel presents the image of the other people moving to distant areas, carrying their belongings, figures drooping with the weight of the luggage they are carrying. The sky is overcast with monsoon winds. The reader remains unsure of the temporality of the events. This page is her recollection of the experience during the monsoon, presenting visually and textually the narrative about the inhospitable conditions in the camps. Thick, sharp lines indicating rain run across the page, jarring the visual scape and indicating the force, impact and persistence of its occurrence in their lives. They had to negotiate the harsh natural realities with meagre resources. The inescapability of the situation can be inferred from the netting and grid-like form of the rain, entrapping individuals in the face of riots, inter-ethnic conflicts, lack of adequate governmental assistance and impending threats of the monsoon. In the narrative, there is a page that documents the hurried and frenzied movements of people who are seen running clasping their children and holding their belongings. On another page, small images of humans, albeit hazy, are located in space, little beyond the centre of the page and in the distant horizon; the mosque, albeit small in scale, stands as a metonymic device to articulate the identity of people running that underline the violent history and its massive scale. The iconostasis makes us focus on the small images of the humans, in their hurried disposition to run and move, locating the victims and their situation in the larger narrative of the riots and displacement.

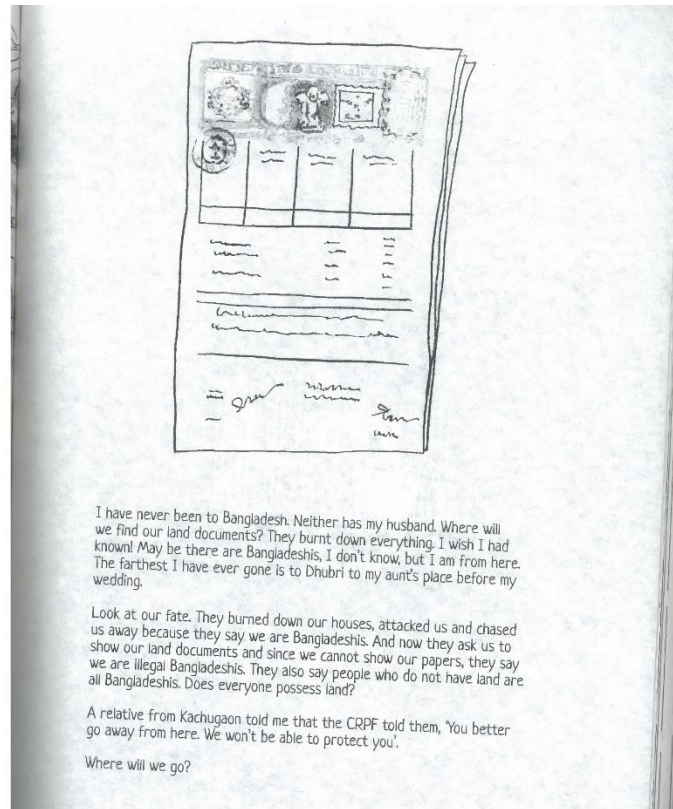


Figure 9 Panel from *My Name is Jahanara* by A Basumatary, 2018, p. 205

In another page, an image of a document, indicative of an official document with the state emblem of India validating the citizenship of people is located in the centre of the page with nothing else permeating the entire frame. The text below has Jahanara's narration, "My husband told me that the BTC government was asking our people for land papers. Otherwise, they will kick us out of the country. They tell us to go to Bangladesh. They think we are all Bangladeshis. I have never been to Bangladesh. Neither has my husband. Where will we find our documents? They burnt down everything. I wish I had known" (Basumatary, 2018, p. 205). She adds, "they also say people who do not have land are all Bangladeshis. Does everyone possess land?" (Basumatary, 2018, p. 205). These narratives challenge the "fictions of equality and citizenship predicated by the postcolonial state" (Marino, 2017). It is the uncertainty centring citizenship that is brought forth effectively in the image of the document that does not reveal any details. The image is emblematic. The document erases human presence. In this narrative, the contested and volatile relationship between the nation and the ethnic communities become explicit. She recounts how CRPF told them, "You better go away from here. We won't be able to protect you" (Basumatary, 2018, p. 205). While *A Market Story* uses the first-person pronoun, both *A Lonely Courtyard* and *My Name is Jahanara* uses the term, "we", possibly referring to the fact that while the narrative is emerging from an individual, the experiences are shared by people who witnessed and survived the trauma. It is the individual in a community and the community at large whose stories are being told through the first person narrations. Both these narratives make assertions and raise questions.

They ask, "Where will we go?" (*My Name is Jahanara*) and in *The Lonely Courtyard*, Birola says, "If you give us more time, we will talk all night long. There are so many stories".

Conclusion

History is archived in different ways. Personal narratives reclaim the erasures in the official histories. Graphic narratives are a powerful medium that uncovers the affective discourses underlying such narratives. This article demonstrates how these narratives humanise the archives through textualization and visualisation; it examines how, in contrast to the archives that store and emplot data from surveys and interviews, especially of the communities that have witnessed trauma and ethnic violence, the graphic narratives bring forth a sense of orality, restoring the voice to the dislocated. These narratives, using polyphonic speech registers, invocation of the testimonies, choice of panelling and framing, use of visual idioms, textual indices, present a mode of rewriting of history that is indicative of "individual dimensions of the larger social process" (Nayar, 2016 a, p. 14). The narratives through textualization and visualisation help us understand how communities remember their past, survive the traumatic present and negotiate their volatile existence vis-à-vis the nation-state through everyday encounters.

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