The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique
Pramod K. Nayar
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What makes a graphic representation more eloquent and telling than its equivalent in words? Perhaps the fact that we are born audio-visual, while alphabetization and literacy come later (if they come at all) and at a certain cost—the cost of learning, but also of losing part of our early, pre-literate, visual proficiency. So today, despite the visual dominance affecting our lives—or because of it—we are far less literate in this regard than our modern or premodern ancestors. As a matter of fact, visual proficiency, as the ability to "read" and understand images, is an important aspect of literacy—indeed, it is the first step toward the acquisition of reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. The relationship between visual and critical literacy lies at the heart of Pramod Nayar's timely, thorough, and perceptive exploration of what he calls the "graphic turn in Indian writing in English" (3), involving a literary genre (and medium) that, while relatively new to the Subcontinent, has already produced a substantial body of meaningful work.

The Indian graphic novel (or narrative, a term Nayar prefers as it is more inclusive and representative of an essentially hybrid genre) is largely an offshoot of the country's economic liberalization and its discontents. One of the first—and, to this day, best—examples, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994), appeared only three years after the first round of economic reforms. The book depicts the cultural aftermath of a large dam project, and many, if not most, of Indian graphic narratives published since grapple with the cultural, social, psychological, and environmental consequences of these reforms. Ten years separate *The River of Stories* from the other fifteen or sixteen titles discussed in the book, all published between 2004 and 2016. The selection is comprehensive and includes all major titles published during this period, featuring such established authors as Sarnath Banerjee, Amruta Patil, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, and Appupen, as well as a few milestone anthologies: *The Obliterary Journal*, vols. 1 (2012) and 2 (2013), *Pao: The Anthology of Comics* (2012), *This Side / That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013), and *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back!* (2015). (Another important anthology edited by Orijit Sen and Vidyun Sabhaney, *First Hand: Graphic Non-Fiction from India* (2016) came out when the book was already in print.)

The limited timeframe and number of titles covered by *The Indian Graphic Novel* are crucial, as they allow the author to critically define a subject that is still developing into a full-fledged literary genre, thus laying the foundation for future studies that, necessarily, will have to deal with a larger and more diversified body of work. Furthermore, the

scope of the book is aptly narrowed by its focus on the representation of history, the thematics of space (especially urban space), and the "cultural legibility of contentious social issues" (9), such as social and gender discrimination, child labor, or sexual exploitation.

Nayar, who heads the English Department at the University of Hyderabad, in southern India, and has written extensively on postcolonial themes, popular culture, and posthumanism, is particularly qualified for a task of this kind, combining what he thought was "a now-dead interest in a medium that fascinated me in childhood: comics" with the tools and techniques of an accomplished scholar. Not being an art critic, he stays clear of hardcore iconography and visual analysis, but his close readings of individual works show a remarkable understanding of the dialectical relationship between visual and verbal content, and how it underlies any critical discussion of graphic literature. In this complex relationship, involving the disjunctive complementarity of visual and verbal content, Nayar identifies the distinctive feature of the graphic narrative genre, and the one which differentiates it epistemologically from other forms of literary expression, as well as from communication based exclusively on visual language. In fact, his statement about "the contest, conflict and conflation of visual and verbal texts" generating critical literacy (13) may be broadened to say that, by using a popular medium and a demotic register and imagery, the graphic narrative *simultaneously* generates visual literacy and converts it into critical literacy. The techniques may vary but the overall strategy involves what Nayar calls "graphic dissonance," or "the mode through which the incongruities between ideologies, discourses and official languages of the nation and the lives of marginal or oppressed people enter the visual-verbal field so that a uniform narrative of the nations is never possible" (130). Some of the techniques more commonly employed have been part of Western figurative art and iconography since the Renaissance at least. For example, the "foregrounding … of silent witnesses or 'minor' actors on the stage of history" (90-91) has a direct antecedent in the "mediating figures" recommended by Alberti in his 1435 treatise on painting. Others, like the eloquent contradiction between text and images, or the allusive interplay of verbal text and visual subtext, may be traced back to the evolution of illustration, advertising, and comic art.

The contradictions through which the graphic narrative generates critical literacy and achieves meaning are inherent to the genre itself, which combines low and high art, using a popular medium to produce works of complex and sophisticated artistry. In India, where a demotic form of communication is largely aimed at, and consumed by, the English-educated, urban middle class, the genre seems to perform a sort of ongoing, collective self-analysis through the exploration, exposure, and sublimation of historically, socially, and culturally traumatic events and conditions. Given this emphasis, one is not surprised to read that Art Spiegelman's "graphic trauma" narratives or Joe Sacco's graphic journalism are major influences. The only other works mentioned in the book are Marjane Satrapi's graphic

autobiography, *Persepolis*, and Alan Moore's and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (which is mistakenly attributed to the American Frank Miller). At the same time, Nayar reminds us, "[t]he Indian graphic narrative must be seen as a part of [a] global 'graphic turn' to stories of disaster, disease, deprivation and displacement, stories that constitute the foundational texts of global campaigns for rights, equality and an end to suffering" (196-197).

As Nayar acknowledges right from the start, "[w]hether the medium has literary respectability or not is a question that cannot be answered as yet in India at least" (6). Nevertheless, his book goes a long way toward laying the critical foundation for such a literary respectability in India. It would have gone even farther had the bibliography and the index been more thorough and accurate. In the first chapter, Nayar dedicates an entire section (33-38) to the concept of "indigent sublime," which he borrows from "the work of David Lloyd on representations of Irish hunger (2005)" (33), a work he then fails to list in the bibliography. And the same happens with references to Nicholas Mirzoeff, Tamara Wagner, Jacques Lacan, and Giorgio Agamben (quoted on pages 70, 77, 148, and 171, respectively). As for the index, it is simplified to the point of being simplistic, which makes it hardly representative of the scope and depth of this remarkable book.