

Dissecting Graphic Fiction: A Study of the Hybrid Form of the 21st Century

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Abstract: “Comic art does possess the potential for the most serious and sophisticated literary and artistic expression, and we can only hope that future artists will bring the art form to full fruition” (176), prophesied Lawrence Abbott in 1986. It became true when Graphic Fiction emerged as a hybrid genre and entered into the academia. It is a meaningful interaction of words, image panels, and typography. They have a long history dating back to cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphics. Though there are “more genetic similarities between the comic book and the graphic novel” (Sardesai 28), Graphic Novel has a unique approach to plot, narration, and theme. This new genre combines visual and verbal rhetoric and thus offers a hybrid form of reading. The use of blank spaces between image panels provides “imaginative interactivity” (Tabachnick 25), as the reader tends to fill in these blanks, imagining a good deal of action. Text boxes, speech bubbles, and thought bubbles streamline the narration and create a sense of interactivity in a reader. This paper records the history of Graphic Novel and makes an anatomy of it. It also enlists recent Graphic novels and major techniques employed in them.

Keywords: Graphic Fiction / Novel / Narrative, Comics, Manga Novel

Sequences of spectacular image panels, textboxes progressively unfolding the plot, characters showing all kinds of quizzical expressions, speech bubbles loaded with dialogues and thought bubbles with words spoken as aside, and the autographic typography – these indispensable ingredients define a comic-book or graphic narrative. But graphic fiction is much more than these.

Eddie Campbell, a Scottish comics artist and cartoonist who published his graphic novel *The Lovely Horrible Stuff* in July 2012, says that there are “four different and mutually exclusive ways” in which the term graphic novel is used. He, in the March 2007 issue of *World Literature Today*, wrote:

First, it is used simply as a synonym for comic books Second, it is used to classify a format – for example, a bound book of comics either in soft- or hardcover – in contrast to the old-fashioned stapled comic magazine. Third, it means, more specifically, a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel. Finally, others employ it to indicate a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its ambition – indeed, a new medium altogether. (13)

Though the genetic similarities between the comic book and the graphic novel lead to confusion, graphic novel – reaching for a new rubric – is “an emerging new literature of our times in which word, picture, and typography interact meaningfully” (13), writes Campbell.

The long-range pictorial reading is not the only mark that distinguishes graphic novel from comic books. It is “the depth and density of characters, the fleeting and sustained evocation of moods, the mode of addressing a theme or a topic and, most crucially, the lightness or heaviness of the atmospheric ecologies produced by sequential narratives” (29), enlists Abhay Sardesai in his 2012 essay “The Rising Graph of Graphic Book”.

The Evolution of Graphic Fiction:

The graphic narratives have their origin in pre-historic cave paintings which depict scenes of animal hunting, communal dancing, and women. The paintings are just juxtaposed images that visually narrate the common episodes from the lives of cave inhabitants without exploiting any word (Fernandes 427).

The advancements in printing technology have been strong factors in the increase of graphic narratives. The first few decades of the twentieth century witnessed the popularity of woodcut novel, a forerunner to graphic novel. Popularised by Lynd Ward (1905–1985), an American artist, woodcut novels were wordless image sequences typically executed in wood engraving technique. Lynda Ward’s first woodcut novel, *God’s Man* (1929), was a best seller despite the fact that it was published during the 1929 stock market crash. The novel, written in five parts, deals with a painter’s encounter with the material world. The beauty of the novel emanates at the end of the novel which tragically makes use of Faustian bargain motif. Lacking words, the effect of the novel is something like a silent film.

The depression era, followed by the 1929 stock market crash, created umpteen number of superheroes who would maintain a secret identity with extraordinary powers and abilities and would involve in unbelievable adventures to rescue the humanity in trouble:

Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Ironman, The Hulk, He-man, Hellboy, Professor X, and so on. These heroes were mentalists, teleporters, healers, and speedsters. By the middle of the twentieth century, comic books in magazine format have flourished and became a part of the mass culture.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the general public gradually started believing in that they themselves could become superheroes with the aid of technological advancements. They were not in need of any superheroes to rescue them.

At such a time, evolved a new genre, Graphic Fiction, an offshoot of comics and mainstream fiction. The gradual and steady rise of graphic fiction can be ascribed to the profound impact the electronic media on readers. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the electronic media such as film, television, and internet became more interactive and influential. They held sway over many readers in such a way that they got used to electronic perception; they wanted a quick reading rather than thick texts; and they were anxious to experience plot, characters, and places with all their five senses. Consequently, bulky texts were replaced with impressive image panels and epigrammatic texts. Graphic novels incline readers to imagine much as they show visual representations of what they are to describe verbally. Thus, Graphic Fiction evolved as “a new hybrid form of reading that combines visual and verbal rhetoric” (Tabachnick 25).

The Anatomy of Graphic Fiction:

Graphic Fiction is anatomically similar to comics. But their exceptionality lies in “the depth and density of characters, the fleeting and sustained evocation of moods, the mode of addressing a theme or topic and, most crucially, the lightness and heaviness of the atmospheric ecologies produced by sequential narratives” (29), Abhay Saradesai highlights in his essay “The Rising Graph of the Graphic Book”. Sequential image panels form the basis of Graphic Fiction. They are accompanied with words in textboxes, speech bubbles, and thought bubbles. Text boxes develop the plot of Graphic Fiction as the timeline of narration is spread out in them. Speech bubbles, conceived of words uttered by characters, are arranged vertically to show the order of conversation. They are either rectangular or oval in shape with a tail pointing towards the character that speaks them. Meanwhile, thought bubbles act as “aside” – an element in classical drama – and accommodates the thoughts of a character. They are circular in shape with spiral border.

The most striking feature of Graphic Fiction is the mark of handwriting in it. The typography of all texts – be it in textbox, or in speech bubble, or in thought bubble – resembles handwriting. Such typography creates an impact in the minds of the readers that the entire graphic novel is a manuscript written by the author exclusively for the reader. Thus, it evokes a sense of intimacy between the reader and the text. In their essay “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” in 2006, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, professors of English correspondingly at the University of Chicago and the State University of New Jersey, consider the mark of handwriting as “an important part of the rich extra semantic information a reader receives” (767).

The meaning, language, narration, mood, theme, and syntax of Graphic Fiction spring primarily through the bond between image panels rather than words. While mainstream novelists – especially Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, and Austen – write pages after pages describing a location or a character, a graphic novelist cannot waste words and image panels. The inclusion of even a single needless image panel would cause much damage to the unity of a graphic novel.

The blank spaces between image panels incline readers to fill in the blanks, visualising a great deal of action. This “imaginative interactivity” (“Of Maus and Memory” 25), as Stephen E. Tabachnick terms it, encourages interactivity in the minds of readers. So, a reader constantly interacts with a graphic novel and builds meaning out of it. Here, it must be noted that no two readers may interact in a similar way with a graphic medium. Thus, they get individualised reading experience while flipping through the pages of a graphic novel.

Literariness of Graphic Fiction:

Many critics still wonder whether Graphic Fiction is literature in any way. While some have vehemently opposed the inclusion of Graphic Fiction in mainstream literature, the reality that the popularity, readership, and its acceptance in the literary circle are gaining momentum is undeniable. Lawrence Abbott, in his essay “Comic Art” that appeared in the *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1986, claims, “Comic arts does possess the potential for the most serious and sophisticated literary and artistic expression” and he also hopes, “future artists will bring the art form to full fruition” (176). The momentous point in the history of Graphic Fiction occurred when Art Spiegelman, an American Graphic novelist, won the most prestigious Pulitzer Prize for his graphic novel *Maus* in 1992. Exploiting post modern techniques, the novel *Maus* illustrates the experiences of Art Spiegelman’s father as a Polish

Jew and holocaust survivor. It is the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize. Similarly, Chris Ware won the 2001 Guardian First Book Award for *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. In 2012, Mary Talbot's *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* was named as the winner of the biography section in Costa Book Awards in 2012. The book is the true and tragic story of James Joyce's daughter Lucia. In his 2007 essay, "A Comic Book World", Stephen E. Tabachnick, professor of English at the University of Memphis, affirms that he had been teaching graphic novels at his university for the past fifteen years ("A Comic Book World" 28).

Graphic novels have manifested their excellence and literariness on par with mainstream fiction. They deal with serious themes, everyday life situations, postmodern techniques, unlike their precursor, Comics. Arts Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, a 9/11 holocaust memoir, is a case in point. It deals with Spiegelman's memory of the post-September-11 trauma. Other graphic novels deal with themes like memory, racism, disease, human relationships, history, and love. The graphic narrative has also been utilised in all genres: history, memoir, biography, fiction, poetry, and non-fiction.

Manga, a sibling of Graphic Fiction, has gained worldwide popularity in recent years. It is a form of comics created in Japan with the late 19th century Japanese style. Conventionally, manga stories run from top to bottom and from right to left. Therefore a Manga reader would start reading the book from its back cover. With the publication of Yukichi Yamamatsu's *Stupid Guy Goes to India* in 2012, Manga have begun a new revolution in India.

Many classic works from mainstream literature have been rendered in graphic narrative: George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1996) by Ralph Steadman, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (2004) by Peter Kuper, Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (2004) by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2008) by John McDonald, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2009) by Jason Copley, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (2009) by David Zane Mairowitz and Alain Korkos, Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (2010) by Seymour Chwast, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (2011) by Robert Berry.

To understand graphic narratives and Graphic Fiction better and to grasp their essence, I recommend the following graphic novels and narratives including biographies and non-fiction.

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (1993) by Scott McCloud is the most influential 215-page comics essay about comics. The book defines comics; traces its

historical development; describes the inner workings of the medium; and explains its fundamental vocabulary. It also theoretically discusses comics as an art form and a communication medium. The book was praised as “one of the most insightful books about designing graphic user interfaces ever written” (“Understanding Comics”).

Maus: A Survivor's Tale (1991) by Art Spiegelman is a 296-page graphic novel that presents Spiegelman interviewing his father about his experiences as a Polish Jew and holocaust survivor. It depicts human races as different kinds of animals – with Jews as mice, Germans as cats and non-Jewish Poles as pigs. *Maus* is a mix of genres – memoir, biography, history, fiction, and autobiography – and uses a minimalist drawing style. Its innovation is in its page and panel layouts, pacing, and structure. The book bagged 12 various awards including the Pulitzer.

In the Shadow of No Towers (2004) by Art Spiegelman is a 42-page comic memoir – originally serialized as a comic strip in a German newspaper from 2002 until 2004. The book is about Spiegelman's reaction to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001.

Berlin: City of Stones (2000) by Jason Lutes is a 209 pages historical fiction. The novel covers eight months in Weimar-era Berlin, from September 1928 to May 1929, carefully documenting the hopes and struggles of its inhabitants as their future is darkened by a glowing shadow. The book also deals with the rise of Nazi Germany.

Epileptic (2005) by David is a 368-page autobiographical graphic novel. The book narrates the story of the novelist's early childhood and adolescence, focusing on his relationship with his brother. His brother develops epilepsy, causing the family to seek a variety of solutions from alternative medicine to a commune based on macrobiotic principles. As the epileptic brother loses control of his own life, the novelist develops solitary obsessions with cartoons, mythology, and war.

Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth (2000) by Chris Ware is a 380-page graphic novel – Jimmy Corrigan, a meek lonely middle-aged man, meets his father for the first time in a Michigan town. He attempts to escape his unhappiness via an active imagination that gets him into awkward situations. Another storyline shows Jimmy as a lonesome child of divorce, suggesting that this was Jimmy's real childhood, while his Smartest Kid on Earth adventures are probably his fantasies. The novel uses numerous flashback scenes and parallel storylines. Many pages are devoid of text, and some contain complex iconic diagrams.

Louis Riel (2006) by Chester Brown is a 260-page historical biography. The book documents the life of Louis Riel, the charismatic, and perhaps insane, nineteenth-century Metis leader. It also tells the violent rebellion on the Canadian prairie led by Riel.

Dotter of Her Father's Eyes (2012) by Mary Talbot is a 96-page part memoir, and part biography of Lucia Joyce, daughter of the modernist writer James Joyce. The book juxtaposes Talbot's childhood with Lucia Joyce's. Mary Talbot recounts her childhood, focussing upon her relationship with her father, Joycean scholar James S. Atherton.

The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers (2007) by Sarnath Banerjee is a 280-page graphic novel. The novel reinvents the legend of the Wandering Jew. In the 18th century Kolkata, a Jewish merchant called Abravanel records the scandalous affairs of its British administrators in a book called "*The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*". The novel centres on the narrator's quest to find the "Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers" which his grandfather Pablo Chatterjee found at an old Jewish trinket shop in Paris in the 1950s. Pablo's wife gave away the book upon his death.

The Harappa Files (2011) by Sarnath Banerjee is a 215-page graphic novel. The Greater Harappa Rehabilitation, Reclamation and Redevelopment Committee (GHRRC) conducts a gigantic survey of the current ethnography and urban mythology of a country on the brink of great hormonal changes. And now, the decade-long findings are finally going to be made public by Sarnath Banerjee, who has created the Harappa Files, a series of graphic commentaries that analyse the cracks in post liberalized India. Banerjee is worried that the consequence of his project will be the release of the dreaded Harappa recommendations, making it mandatory for all citizens to sign the draconian, ultrainvasive Form 28B, giving the government the power to decide the fate of every single citizen.

Stupid Guy Goes to India (2012) by Yukichi Yamamatsu is a 230-page autobiographical manga novel. The novel unfolds the firsthand account of Yukichi Yamamatsu's experiences in a foreign country, India. Yukichi Yamamatsu, a 56-year-old Japanese manga artist, travels to India to sell his manga comics in India. The book has been written in Japanese, Yamamatsu's native language. It is also in the traditional format of Manga comics: it needs to be read in a back to front, right to left manner.

The twenty first century has witnessed great paradigm shifts in every area of life – science, technology, communication, medicine, education, etc. The publishing industry too has undergone a drastic change – from printed page to ebooks. Gone are the days when readers flipped through books. Now they click and read. Now the questions lingering in my

minds are: Will Graphic Fiction ever replace or displace the mainstream fiction? Is the mainstream literary fiction vulnerable to Graphic Fiction? Maybe, things would fall apart and the centre might not hold.

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