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Reading of Two Indian Graphic Novels by Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* & Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* as The Significant Contribution to Historical Trauma Literature

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Abstract:

The graphic novel genre gained prominence after the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, by combining textual narratives with graphic representations. Indian graphic novels, notably Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*, followed by others, have emerged, depicting significant historical events and portrayal of trauma. The paper focuses on two Indian graphic novels, *River of Stories* and *Delhi Calm*, examining their portrayal of traumatic historical periods such as the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and the Emergency era. By comparing these Indian graphic novels with 'Maus' the paper highlights their unique contributions to the genre of Historical Trauma Literature.

Keywords: Historical Trauma Literature – Performative Memorialisation

The Collective Experience of Trauma and Revisiting History:

The graphic novel has made its mark in the Indian literary landscape in 1990s. 'River of Stories', the inaugural graphic novel in the country, paved the way for this artistic form, inspiring a wave of graphic artists to craft their own narrative-rich works. Both Sen and Ghosh's novels delve into historical periods, capturing the struggles of ordinary citizens against governmental oppression. These works reflect on a time when citizens faced significant trauma due to their own government's actions.

“In the stillness of that summer night, everything froze. In shock, not awe. Even the mosquitoes behaved themselves and restricted their nightly activities to south and west Delhi. All India Radio had finished the day's transmission, there was no point in waking up the announcer. However, the announcement was ready and approved by Moon herself. Gearing up for the morning, she sat alone like in the old days and reflected her starlit journey, doubts about democracy. Just like The Prophet, her secret yearning for a revolution. Moon had changed things forever.”

- *Delhi Calm*, Vishwajyoti Ghosh.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh's masterwork delves into a pivotal chapter of India's political history. Titled *Delhi Calm*, the graphic novel ironically portrays a time of upheaval rather than calmness. Ghosh skilfully depicts the tumultuous 21-month Emergency period in India from 1975 to 1977. Through his adept graphic artistry, Ghosh vividly captures the chaotic socio-political landscape of the era, providing a glimpse into the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens.



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This portrayal encompasses the sudden deprivation of civil rights, job loss, and economic instability, along with the suppression of dissenting voices and protests, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety among the populace. The government wielded supreme power, employing drastic measures in the name of urbanization and development. Ghosh employs satire to depict political leaders of the era, such as Indira Gandhi as 'Mother Moon', Sanjay Gandhi as 'The Prince', and JP Narayan as 'The Prophet'. Through satire, Ghosh exposes the ruthless decisions of Indira and Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency, which plunged the nation into one of its darkest periods post-Independence. Ghosh vividly portrays the dire circumstances faced by the impoverished when their slums are demolished by the government, leaving them without alternative shelter. Through detailed illustrations, the traumatic experience of slum dwellers is depicted as bulldozers raze their only place of residence. Throughout the book, images of despairing individuals contrast with those of "smiling survivors," government-appointed agents tasked with surveilling citizens, suppressing dissent, and executing government initiatives, including slum demolitions and population control measures like sterilization. By characterizing these agents with smiles, the author symbolically underscores the malevolent power wielded by the government.

In his book, Vishwajyoti Ghosh delves into the nationwide experience during the Emergency period, portraying it with a sepia tone and dark brown patches symbolizing blood marks and the torment endured by vulnerable citizens. Ghosh's narrative extends beyond urban settings like 'Delhi Powerpolis' shedding light on the dire conditions in rural areas as well. The 'portrayal of trauma' depicted in his novel bridges the gap between rural and urban populations. Characters like Parvez Alam, Vibhuti Prasad, and Masterji strive for a 'Total Revolution', forming the 'Naya Savera' band and traversing from cities to remote villages. However, Ghosh exposes the realities behind such idealistic movements, revealing ruptures within the group and the eventual disillusionment with their revolutionary ideals due to harsh political realities. By intertwining personal and collective experiences of trauma, Ghosh offers a nuanced portrayal of the era.

River of Stories is another graphic novel that delves into the collective experience of a tribal community residing in the village of Jamli, situated near the Narmada River. Similar to Vishwajyoti Ghosh's work, this novel centres around a critical historical period, focusing on the struggles faced by the tribal community and a group of social activists. Written and published by Orijit Sen in 1994, *River of Stories* supports the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a mass movement protesting the government's plan to construct a dam on the Narmada River. Sen explores the lives of the tribal community in Jamli and neighbouring villages, aiming to document the injustices inflicted upon them by the government. In its pursuit of constructing the



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Narmada dam, the government disregarded the challenges the villagers would encounter once the dam was erected. The lands of the impoverished tribal people were seized, and they frequently faced violence from the police and hired thugs for protesting against this exploitation. The novel juxtaposes two narratives: one portraying the experiences of the indigenous people and the other offering a broader perspective of the modern world. It provides insight into the suffering endured by the native population and juxtaposes it with the opinions and views of urban dwellers. In addition to recreating the milieu of the affected areas and their inhabitants, Orijit Sen incorporates real voices of protest from the movement in the form of newspaper articles. One of such protesters is Khursheo, “a tribal peasant from Umargaon” who has said,

“Our village will be submerged forever....The government says they will resettle us. But our community will be broken up. For countless generations, uncles, cousins, clan relations have lived close to each other....When they shift us to different places, we will all be cut off from each other. Our ancestors and spirits, who reside in the forests and hills, will be abandoned. Our music, our festivals, our gatherings, will all come to an end. Will there be any point in continuing to live after that?”

Another protester, named ‘Buribai’, expresses concern about the ‘bazarias’. She usually visits villages to incite trouble, assault men, and harass women. But surprisingly even she questions the government's expectation for villagers to relocate and live among these troublesome situations. Additionally, the novel reveals that the issues extend beyond land loss to encompass health and economic concerns for the villagers.

On one hand, Orijit Sen portrays the narrative of the indigenous community; while on the other hand, he provides a glimpse into the city life where speech bubbles depict contrasting mentalities among residents: the cynical and the supportive. The latter group, comprising those who back the movement, perceive that something "wrong" is occurring and warrants scrutiny. Amongst those speech bubbles there are some conversations which are filled with sceptical questions, like:

“Do you think these environmentalists really care about tribals? They’re in it to make a name for themselves. Anyway, why ask questions that have no answer?”

“... But if they stop development projects, how are we to progress? Obviously, a few people have to suffer for the good of the majority...surely these environmentalists don’t expect us to go back to the Middle Ages, do they? What’s the point of writing such negative articles?”



Impact and legacy:

The graphic novel owes a debt of gratitude to Art Spiegelman for introducing the portrayal of trauma. His Pulitzer Prize-winning works, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale - My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and *And Here My Troubles Began* (1991), vividly depict the horrors of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's influence is evident in the works of aspiring graphic storytellers like Vishwajyoti Ghosh and Orijit Sen, reflecting his significant impact on the genre. This can be corroborated by a confession of Orijit Sen himself, where he states:

“As a student in the 1980s, at the *National Institute of Design*, Ahmedabad, I read whatever underground comics I could get my hands on. These included Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman. I was blown away by Spiegelman's *Maus*, which had just been published by a major mainstream publisher, and won a Pulitzer prize. I always liked to draw and make comics, but it was not considered the regular thing to do. *Maus* came as a great validation of my artistic convictions! It gave me a huge impetus to pursue my interest in drawing and making comics.”

Delhi Calm and *River of Stories* exhibit a discernible influence of Art Spiegelman's writing in various aspects. One notable impact is evident in the characterization of the books, which adopt a satirical and humorous approach. Sen and Ghosh skillfully record historical events with journalistic precision, reflecting a style reminiscent of Joe Sacco, yet bearing similarities to Spiegelman's narrative and character composition. Just as Spiegelman depicts Jews as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs in *Maus*, Vishwajyoti Ghosh sarcastically names figures like Indira Gandhi as ‘Mother Moon’, Rajiv Gandhi as ‘the Pilot’, and Sanjay Gandhi as ‘the Prince’. Similarly, Orijit Sen injects wit into his narrative, exemplified by a comedic scene where an opportunistic politician debates the ‘fruits of progresses’ with a village singer. While these elements contribute to the novels' engaging nature, their true significance lies in their poignant recollection of a troubling past.

The retelling of traumatic experiences from a specific historical era is a fundamental aspect of both *River of Stories* and *Delhi Calm*. Lisa A. Costello refers to this retrospective portrayal in *Maus* as ‘performative memorialization’, a characteristic that is also evident in both *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories*. She elucidates ‘performative memorialisation’ as,

“To call the reader into the story is to force an active rather than a passive participation. For instance, the temporal jumps or fragmented narratives typical of postmodern writing do not allow the reader to



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simply absorb information. Readers must engage with texts in order to understand them. But even subjectively re-experiencing the suffering of the Holocaust at an emotional level can be only a fraction of the reality. Marianne Hirsch and Dominick LaCapra have noted aspects of working through Holocaust trauma in this way, where an emotional response can be productive.”

Conclusion:

In both *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories*, audience’s engagement with history is imperative. These narratives not only present significant periods from the past but also compel the audience to immerse themselves in the experience of trauma. Marianne Hirsch, in her work “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Post memory”, discusses how graphic representations of traumatic experiences embody ‘post memory’. This form of memory is powerful because it connects to its source through representation, projection, and creation, often through silence rather than speech. This concept is evident in *Delhi Calm* through the use of blotched colours representing blood marks, and in Sen and Ghosh's artwork, where unvoiced graphics convey the suppressed pain of exploited victims. Hirsch further adjoins,

“...this form of remembrance need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be more broadly available.”

Therefore, an illustrative depiction of the traumatic past proves to be beneficial, as both *Delhi Calm* and *River of Stories* extend beyond a mere historical account. Orijit Sen and Vishwajyoti Ghosh emphasize the individual and intimate conscience within collective experiences through their graphic novels. Metaphorically speaking, they have woven a *river of stories* that will continue to flow from one generation to the next, enlightening each one about a historic era when people were oppressed by the government. The ‘portrayal of trauma’ depicted in their graphic novels will be revisited time and again, serving as a poignant reminder of the hardships endured.

Delhi Calm by Vishwajyoti Ghosh depicts the tumultuous period of the Emergency in India, employing satire to reflect on the oppressive political climate and its impact on ordinary citizens. *River of Stories* by Orijit Sen documents the struggles of tribal communities affected by government policies, particularly focusing on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Both Sen and Ghosh acknowledge the influence of Art Spiegelman's work, particularly in their satirical approach to characterization and depiction of historical



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trauma.

At the end this paper can extract the concept of ‘per formative memorialisation’ as a crucial interpretation depicted through these two Indian graphic novels of Sen and Ghosh which not only document historical events but also encourage ongoing engagement with the traumatic past, contributing to the collective memory of society’ where readers actively engage with the traumatic historical experiences portrayed.



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