

From *In&Oz* to *Corridor*: Representation of Postmodern Self through Language and Image

Ms. Purnima Sarsar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, India
Assistant Professor (English), Jaipur National University, Jaipur Email:
purnima.sarsar@outlook.com Mobile: +91 9511524242

Dr. Arun Kumar Poonia

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, India
Email: arunkumar.poonia@jaipur.manipal.edu
Mobile: +91 9929113568

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Abstract:

Postmodernism, as we understand, does not hold any single definition, there are so many versions of it. In a postmodern world, people define this term according to their ever-changing and dynamic contexts. Moreover, authors like Steve Tomasula and Sarnath Banerjee have come with modernity which we can ocularize. In recent years, graphics and image-text novels have taken an upper hand in the literary market and with Man Booker longlisting of *Sabrina*, a graphic novel by Nick Darnsu, it has been accepted as a genre in literature. In this paper, a common theme has been discussed which is the idea of representation that runs across most of the multimodal works. To analyze a graphic novel and an image-text novel, the researcher has employed Panel Analysis which is a methodology that uses historical context, macro analysis, and microanalysis to examine various characteristics of the genre. These authors are ideally painting postmodern self in the discrete panels of a graphic novel and the images used in an image-text novel.

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Graphic Novel, Language, Image-Text, Panel Analysis, Micro Analysis*

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, if we go back to the time when comics and graphic narratives were marginalized from mainstream literature and academics, even academicians and educators considered the very genre complex and unacceptable in educational settings. Yang notes, ‘The educational potential of comics has yet to be fully realized. While other media such as film, theatre, and music have found their place within the American educational establishment, comics have not’ (“Comics in Education”). Comics has flourished in the year 1980s and into the 1990s – Frank Miller’s reinvigoration of Batman, the burgeon of graphic novels through Watchmen and Maus following the substantial work of Will Eisner – helped glimmered a revived acknowledgment for comics as a medium and credible of instruction in the classroom. Coming back to present, graphic novels and image-text novels that are super innovative has gained its popularity rapidly in the market and in academic libraries too. In this effectual and highly technologically advanced post-modern world, many innovative writers are emerging with their ingenious works which are creating a positive impression among young readers of graphic narrative and image-text novels.

To quote Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey:

...the graphic novel, as an idea and a publishing phenomenon, has endured and has had a significant impact on comics, literature, film, and many other media besides. ...Today, the graphic novel has escaped the cultural exclusion of much of the comics’ universe and has gained great respect... (Baetens and Frey 2)

A graphic narrative can be defined as a full-length story that is presented in a comic strip format, which contains some common themes like an identity crisis, war, issues of race, global conflict with some humor in it. The two novels that have been discussed in this paper, deals with

mundane realities of human existence and exposing radically changed postmodern periods. In Corridor and IN&OZ, by employing the prism of graphics, we can observe that there's a very strong thread of how the worlds we create out of words (stories) create the world we inhabit. Entwined language and image in an image-text novel gives seriousness of novel as wells as texturizes it with graphical insights. In this paper, an effort has been made to see how image and text by working together can project the conflicting self with the continuously changing postmodern world where cultural erosion and fragmented identities are concealing itself beneath the modern face of humanity.

Moreover, the Panel Analysis¹ methodology is a rhetorical approach towards the aesthetics of graphic novel and comic art forms. Just like critical theories were formulated to analyze novels, poetry, and movies, panel analysis is a critical approach that attempts to examine various concepts of these art forms by employing psychological, historical, and sociological dimensions. Also, techniques and devices used by graphic novel writers have been discussed under panel analysis.

A. IN&OZ–

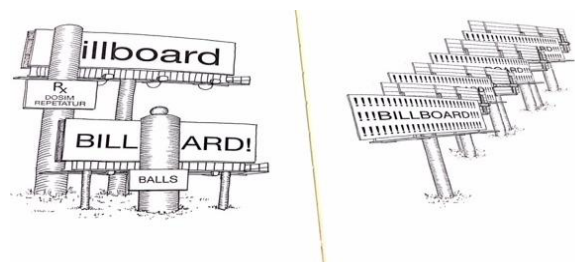


Figure 1. An inside page of IN&OZ, here Billboards representing the uselessness of language

A novel that is innovatively written by Steve Tomasula is a little different from its genre called

¹ Panel Analysis is a method of rhetorical criticism, formulated by Prof. Ralph Randolph Duncan II for the comic book medium.

novel. It employs images, illustration, 6 pages full of “\$1” phrase (Fig: 1), which somewhere brings you close to the reality of the modern world enclosed in the form of a book. In the words of Byer Sylvie, “it is a poetic meditation on art”. It’s a thought-provoking allegory that represents the value of mankind. This novel is dealing with a lot of issues right from the role of an artist in a society where the language is declared useless and the mode of communication is through billboards. Two places IN and OZ are represented as completely contradictory to each other. Former deals with the junk and represent the center of mass production whereas the latter deals with sophistication and refinement. The characters are named by their categories, not by their actual names (Mechanic, Designer, Poet/Sculptor, Composer, and Photographer) which represent an identity crisis. The concept of utilitarianism can be observed as this novel is making a progress on the ‘feeding the stream function’ which means that people, products, animals, or anything that resides there hold value, only if they are contributing or adding a certain value to the productivity of the two places. Value is determined only by the concepts of selling and buying. The language of the place is reduced to figures (\$1) and it seems that language is just present to fill the void of the world (Fig.1). The silent language of billboards imposing the language of commerce and where no words are needed, what needed is their representation and the purpose is best served.

Although IN&OZ is the relative departure of the author from his other works like VAS, Once Human Stories, TOC: a new media novel in which artwork, diagrams, and illustrations are more prevalent. In fact, in this novel as well, he used some techniques to keep his readers reminded that they are streaming in one of his works by using billboard designs and pages covered with so many languages. The last chapters as shown in Fig.2 uses so many languages which include Sign language, Hindi, Sanskrit, Chinese, Braille,

Indonesian and so many more that for once a reader is unable to understand its relevance in the text. Despite this, IN&OZ has emerged out as a take on traditional aesthetics and is famous for its prose playfulness and attention to language which is open to interpretations.

II. USE OF IMAGES, SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS – PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH UNDER PANEL ANALYSIS

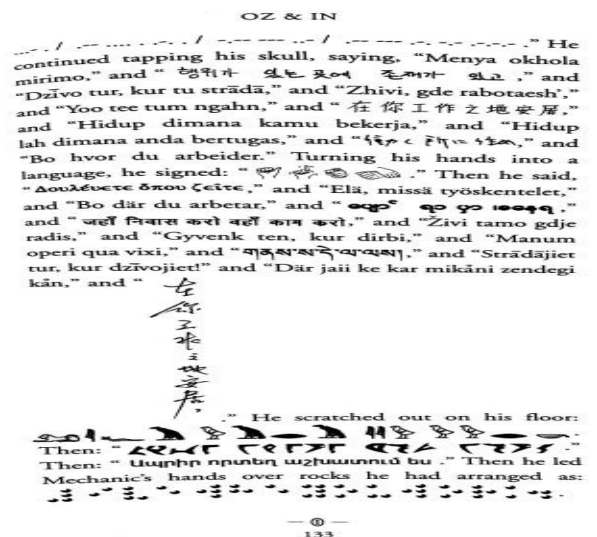


Figure 2: The usage of several different languages

The psychoanalytical approach under panel analysis enables us to examine the symbols, myths, and motifs incorporated into the images used in a graphic novel or comic book form. IN&OZ, though less enriched with illustration in comparison to the author’s previous works, still reminds us about the author’s innovative narrative which is accomplishing its unrelenting materiality through his fiction. Signs (letters, pictographs), signs for signs (Morse code, Braille), languages (Chinese, Hindi, Sanskrit, Indonesian, and many more) representing embeddedness of materiality (Fig. 2), demonstrating art forms, their meanings, functions and the way they are represented. Starting with the billboard drawings in chapter 12 (Fig: 1), the author is trying to bring its readers close to reality and pacing them away from the

materiality. Billboards imposing the language of commerce,

...the pro-billboard faction began to wage their public relations campaign, erecting even more billboards to beautify the countryside with mountain-sized pictures of autumn in Vermont or Niagara Falls or ☺s that would cheer people, make them feel good about themselves, and of course, about billboards. (Tomasula 39)

The fragmented reality of urban life, erasure of human beings, mass production, ens realissimum are some of the recurring ideas and prominent motifs are hidden beneath the portrayal of characters of the novel. Mechanic, for instance, remained dormant until the day he had an epiphany while repairing a car which transformed him from a mechanic into an artist.

Though he had seen gears like this thousands of times before, it had never once occurred to him how eloquently their polished metal teeth explained his life: their mesh and power and power ratios may as well have been engineers, and foundry men, all on a shaft, with machinists, and mechanics, as his father had been, and the farmers and cooks, as his mother had been, who fed the factory workers, and highway builders who made it possible for everyone to get to jobs that brought into existence the need for marvels such as cars which needed transmission which needed gears which needed him. (Tomasula 19)

Right from him being a son of a generous mechanic and a mother who was not only responsible for feeding her family but also the factory workers and highway builders to comparing himself to a fish who was ignorant of the sea until this time. Everything all at once came to him after this sudden realization and he starts repairing (deconstructing) the machines according to his artistic instincts, mounting wheels to the roof, and fixing the roof at the place of wheels.

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Photographer and his friend Composer who later befriended Mechanic were impressed by his work, as they both were doing the pretty much same thing. The composer was onto the wordless music and music less, it only plays in his mind. According to Composer, music should not misconstrue, and it should play within one's mind only. Composer dogmatizes by the statement, "aesthetics decisions have real-world consequences" (74). There are a lot of motifs used by the author which are skinned under these characters in the novel. Designer converts function into fashion as she comforted herself in the world of art by commodifying her art. On the other hand, the photographer through his technique of filming the pictures and capturing them without using any real film in his camera is trying to put his mental pictures in the frame and at the same time is happy and relaxed.

All these symbols and motifs take us underneath the multiple hidden meaning of life and reality of this world, which at some point is the materiality of things and shallowness of society. Steve Tomasula has brought the face of an artist and the journey of making its identity in a world where people have commodified their desires and put on a mask of happiness.

B. Corridor–

Written and illustrated by Sarnath Banerjee, Corridor is the first of its kind graphic novel ever produced in India and published in 2004 by Penguin India and HarperCollins. Though the claim of it being the first GN is not true as Orijit Sen's 'River of Stories' was published almost a decade before, in 1994. But due to its limited release, we can take the claim to be true that Corridor is somewhat first of its kind of graphic novel. Corridor is full of collages, sundry characters, magazine cover cuts, movie posters, newspaper cuttings, photographic images, all of them mixed up and stories have no definite beginnings and endings, full of repetitions and elisions which is no less than experiencing a

drama or T.V soap. Corridor travels through the canons of postmodernism and it succeeded in portraying a new version of India, which we can call as ‘New India’, or we can also call it ‘post-modern India’. Corridor is a portrait of old Lutyens’ Delhi where there are five characters, all are dealing with some confusion in their lives, except Jehangir Rangoonwala, who owns a second-hand bookstall in the heart of Delhi, which is Connaught Place and according to him he is at the center of the universe because it is a circle-shaped metro station and biggest of all in Delhi.

Other characters include the narrator Brighu Sen, who is a young Bengali man, who is addictively engaged in collecting different old and antique things. He thinks of himself as a postmodern Ibn Battuta. He is in search of a book by James Watson. He arrives at Rangoonwala’s bookshop where Rangoon Walla is found deliberating on chess moves and recapitulating the eccentricities of his customers. Rangoonwala tells the story of Digital Dutta who is a colorful persona with a girlfriend, apparently whose father does not approve of him although he is a C++ professional at Aptech. Dutta who lives mostly inside Rangoonwala’s brain then narrates how newly married Shintu is in quest of the perfect aphrodisiac to heighten his sexual escapades with his wife, Dolly. Banerjee takes the readers through seedy by-lanes of quack sexologists with Shintu looking for his sande-ka-tel of some sort to have superhuman vigor in bed. Rangoonwala then shifts to Brighu who is seen going through a break-up with his live-in girlfriend, Kali, and finds his next amatory intended in Gauri in Calcutta’s underground tube rail Through a recurrent theme of public places, spaces devoid of belonging and spaces marked by place-lessness, Banerjee portrays the fragmented urbanity in contemporary Delhi. The narrative closes with Brighu, an illustrator and graphic designer, deliberating upon forging a pattern of sustainable relationship in the

midst of the crowd of alienated people he meets around.

III. USAGE OF SYMBOLS UNDER PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH OF PANEL ANALYSIS

Psychoanalytical analysis discovers the relationship between a message and its audience. In this analysis apart from the symbols which analyzed in psychoanalytical analysis, we will discover some other symbols and motifs as well. Wolfgang J. Fuchs and Reinhold Reitberger in their book Comics; Anatomy of a Mass Medium, remarks that, “of all the mass media, comics mirror the American Collective Subconscious most faithfully,” and that “comics, in turn, manipulate and exploit the subconscious.”

Meaning perceived by the reader from the symbols and motifs used in the comic book form can be dependent on his or her subconscious reactions towards them.

A. *Stone*: One of the parameters in symbol analysis is the symbol of stone used in many graphic narratives. M. L. von Franz postulates on the strange attraction humankind has for such forms:

For while the human being is as different as possible from a stone, yet man’s innermost centre is in a strange and special way akin to it (perhaps because the stone symbolizes mere existence at the farthest remove from the emotions, feelings, fantasies, and discursive thinking of ego-consciousness). In this sense the stone symbolizes what is perhaps the simplest and deepest experience – the experience of something eternal that man can have in those moments when he feels immortal and unalterable. (Franz 209)

On the very first page of *Corridor*, there are panels in which you can endure the immortal beauty of old Lutyen’s Delhi, beautiful pillars of Connaught place with people headed over by the hot summers. There are so many illustrations of Old Delhi, in which there is Jama Masjid, people

playing games like ‘chosar’ in the parts of North Daryaganj, images of public parks, small vendors earning their livelihood in front of masjid’s front gate, etc., Stones on one hand immortalizes the human existence and on the other, it also represents its vulnerability. Banerjee tries to illustrate the monumental past of India and attempts to evoke the nostalgic feeling among its Indian readership. Running parallel is the ‘New India’ and which is providing a contrast between the old and new India, evident of the changes that have come in the past few decades in India.



Figure 3. Page no.46 and 47 respectively

B. Circle: Rangoonwala’s shop at the outer circle of Connaught Place, which he considers as the center of the universe is the main plot of the story and is also interconnected with all the other characters. The circle here represented as a center around which everything revolves around where Rangoonwala is always circumvented with people giving them advice and sipping his tea. According to Jaffe,

The circle is a symbol of the psyche [even Plato described the psyche as a sphere]. The square [and often the rectangle] is a symbol of earthbound matter, of the body and reality. In most modern art, the

connection between these two primary forms is either non-existent, or loose and casual. Their separation is another symbolic expression of the psychic state of 20th-century man: his soul has lost its roots and he is threatened by dissociation. (Jaffe 232)

Sitting at the center of Connaught Place metro station of Delhi, Rangoonwala is one enlightened bookseller who is ready to enlighten others with his words of wisdom and advice. After experiencing days of hard work right from his being in forty jobs, his living on a ‘bhurjee pao’, to his days of boxing at college, he was thrashed into the city and there he had this, “brilliant moment of clarity”, in the elevator of a skyscraper when he was on his way to an interview (Banerjee 18). As if his kundalini was activated and he realized “such as only alcoholics do” the reason for his existence.

IV. CONCLUSION

Finally considering both the text mentioned above, it is quite clear that graphic novels or comics are much more than just being superhero stories. Sarnath Banerjee has done his job quite deftly by giving faces to these middle-class faceless emotions which are quite relatable in modern India. Whether it is a western society or a society in India, people are suffering from one complex or the other. Steve Tomasula in his dystopian image-text novel IN and OZ, has designed some interesting and innovative pictures which are depicting the role of an artist in a society driven by materialism. IN, here and now a down-alley; and OZ, which represents the search for a better place somewhere. The men and women who inhabit Tomasula's world fervently hope over a variety of media to fill a gap in their existences: music, speech, dirt, light, and automobiles. When the plot unfolds, the story of IN citizens and their counterparts at OZ intersects. Furthermore, the methodology by Randy Duncan has helped to understand various peculiarities of

the genre and is very important for the researchers who are working on graphic novels, image-text novels, and experimental literature.

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