

Negotiating Disability Studies and Trauma Through Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel *Mai* by Sriram Jagannath

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Abstract

The social construction of disability is an issue that needs to be analysed and examined in order to arrive at a proper understanding of the discipline. Disability studies from the beginning of its journey has undergone many changes of perspectives, from a medically determined categorisation to a social model of disability, thereby leading to a distinction between impairment and disability. In spite of these transitions, society still fails to possess a more sensitive attitude. Among different categories of reservation among government policies, we come across a category called “PWD” which means Persons with Disabilities. Although this categorisation is supposed to provide more opportunities to differently abled people but the nomenclature itself is derogatory. The objective of this paper is to analyse a Graphic novel *Mai* by Sriram Jagannath to find out how the issue of disability is received by the society and the efficacy of the graphic medium to bring about a change in perspective regarding people with disabilities.

Keywords: disability, normative anticipation, virtual social identity, barrier-free spaces, Graphic novel

Introduction

The prefix “dis-” according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary means: 1. deprive of, 2. exclude from and 3. absence of, all of which bears a negative connotation. Disability studies has undergone a number of rectifications and alterations since its inception. The very fact that such modifications were felt to be necessary inadvertently implies that it is an issue that needs to be approached with utmost sensitivity and responsiveness. The social construction of disability is an

issue that needs to be analysed and examined in order to arrive at a proper understanding of the discipline. Disability studies from the beginning of its journey has undergone many changes of perspectives, from a medically determined categorisation to a social model of disability and a distinction between impairment and disability. In spite of these transitions, society still fails to possess a more sensitive attitude towards disability and the disabled. Among different categories of reservation in government policies, we come across a category called “PWD” which means Persons with Disabilities. Although this categorisation is supposed to provide more opportunities to differently abled people, but the nomenclature itself is derogatory and requires some rephrasing.

C. Raghava Reddy in an article “From Impairment to Disability and Beyond: Critical Exploration in Disability Studies” (2011) remarks that:

...the term disability here does not refer to the biological condition located within the individual, but to the act of repudiation of ability by the society. Thus, ‘dis’ connotes a particular social arrangement that signifies the act of exclusion perpetrated by the society on the individual. (289)

The distinction between ability and disability is an arbitrary one. Not all of us are able to master all disciplines and are inept at certain tasks. However, that does not equate us as being disabled. Physical disability can be a hindrance but never an impediment. Disability has also been treated as synonymous to a defect/lack pertaining to the human body. In medical terminology, the body has often been treated as an object, and bodies with defects are treated as deviants or dangerous, according to Barnes and Mercer in *Disability* (2003). These people were treated as threats to society, mutants and deviants that requires segregation. However, such a discourse posits society at the centre, and the emphasis is not on the “biological condition” but rejection by the society. It is significant that whenever a person is labelled as disabled, the question remains whether the obstacles hinder the person’s participation in social activities or hamper his/her daily activities? Simi Linton, in “Disability Studies/Not Disability Studies,” opines “individuals whose differences do not significantly affect daily life and those who do not present themselves to the world as disabled persons cannot be called disabled” (289).

Erving Goffman, in *Stigma: Some Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), talks about the exclusionary practices in the context of persons with disabilities and focuses on

“normative expectations to demands” and “virtual social identity.” There are certain demands on the individual imposed on an individual by society, and it is expected that the individuals fulfil those expectations and demands. It is seen as a norm and any inability to comply brand them as deviants, and they are socially excluded. Thus, individuals are forced to build up a virtual identity in addition to their actual identity. Certain benchmarks are identified by the society classifying people into desirable and not so desirable. Closely associated with these classifications is the notion of stigma, and it is the impaired who have to adjust to the expectations of the society. However, Goffman’s treatise has come in for criticism as it was believed that it represented the values and judgements of dominant groups. There seems to be an urgent need to mediate reductionist theorisation of disability and disabled individuals who are relegated to the margins and are segregated, excluded by the society.

A literary genre that has been similarly relegated to the marginalia is that of the Graphic novel. Graphic novels are also a recent addition to Indian English Writing, but it is a genre with immense possibilities. The combination of words and pictures gives it a dual advantage and can be very helpful in promoting visual and verbal literacy. A host of publishers have come up with Graphic novels on every conceivable subject. The Graphic novel in India has charted a very relevant and serious journey. Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories* deals with serious environmental issues. *Corridor* deals with the changing mindscape of urban India, and *Harrappa Files* is a study of the various artefacts, images, and concepts that have become a part of India’s cultural milieu. *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers* presents a study of India or rather Bengal and Kolkata under British Raj. It provides us with an alternate form of history and reveals many untold tales. Similarly, *Delhi Calm* also looks at the Emergency but with a new perspective, telling the readers about facts and issues that seldom finds a place in the annals of history. *Kari* is perhaps the most revolutionary of them all addressing a subject that is still a taboo in Indian society-homosexuality. Thus, this particular genre has been instrumental in delineating issues that are sensitive and needs to be treated with empathy and care. Graphic novels written in India can be read as valuable documents for understanding Indian culture and society. They have focused not only on urban culture but also on themes dealing with the history of modern as well as ancient India. Novels like *Corridor* and *Kari* focus on the changing scenario of the Indian topos. Novels like *Adi Parva* and *Sita’s Ramayana* present myths and epics in graphic and

succinct form. Graphic novels are also an important genre of postmodern literature. Postmodernism with its emphasis on plurality and constant innovation has made local narrative very important, and this can be very effective in studying local cultures and art forms. These novels have been engaged in promoting local forms of painting and art forms. Many traditional art-forms like Gond, Maithali, and Patua have been featured, and thus the novels have a dual function representing indigenous themes and traditional art forms. Focus on culture has moved to a focus on the everyday, and it is no longer an elitist concern. Graphic novels deal with the everyday, and in novels like *Harappa Files* and sections of *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Caper*, we find snippets of Indian life and life in the cities of Delhi and old Calcutta. An analysis of the major writers of the genre and their views regarding the future and prospects of Graphic novels reveals that the genre has been a non-traditional one and can teach other writers a lot of new techniques. There is also an emphasis on many styles being used to voice many voices. Graphic novels have become part of the Indian narrative and have made brave choices like Narmada Dam, queer tendencies, sex, caste, Emergency, and politics. There is however a need to keep the bar high and the standards high. The Indian Graphic novel has performed a lot of functions from satirising contemporary India, examining critical and sensitive issues, and offering political commentary. It also offers cultural analysis of issues such as sexuality, gender, caste, and urban life. In fact, Pramod K. Nayar identifies Graphic novels as an important contribution that defines the cultural practices of the Indian nation and society: "How do we create questions, vocabularies, and concepts that sufficiently capture the complexity of forces, technologies, and struggles operating in the midst of numerous struggles over, and transitions among different visions and formations of possible modernities and alternatives to modernity" (Nayar 8). He believes that:

It is within an entirely new medium (the graphic narrative), representational modes (image texts) and burgeoning experimental genres (comics journalism, graphic medicine or autopathographies and graphic biographies) that we can create these questions and vocabularies. The critical literacy that the graphic narrative forces us to acquire goes a considerable way in offering new social and cultural imageries within which we rethink the present and the future, especially in terms of aspirations, social injustices, human rights, cultural identity and

national belonging. Opening up history, cultural identity, modernity, Indian political systems and processes and consumer capitalism to examination, satire and critique, the graphic narrative, if we are attentive to the form, makes us ask the questions traditional Literature and Literacy Studies have always provoked us into asking. (Nayar 8–9)

Indian Graphic novels thus offer us fresh perspectives on myths, history, and politics, and its manner of representation. Since the medium has the dual advantage of words and images and at the same time is present in such a succinct manner that it is capable of attracting a substantial readership. The merging of “personal and political, documentation and aesthetics, memory and memorabilia” makes this form of narrative a very powerful one. From focusing on “alternate histories, counter stories and discontent around the ideas of nation, family, ambition or urbanism of modern and contemporary India,” Graphic novels have achieved a remarkable feat. Only if it can overcome the stigma of juvenile fiction or comics with a better look and longer story, can the Graphic novel realize its full potential and make significant contribution towards visual literacy and sensitizing readers about pertinent issues as well as being a reflection of Indian society and culture. However, the genre still remains elitist in terms of readership and the early death of Phantomville, the publication house which was meant to cater to the publication of Graphic novels portends a disturbing unease about the future of the genre unless they receive due commendation and support from writers, researchers and readers.

Discussion

Mai: A Graphic novel (2018) by Sriram Jagannath is a Graphic novel based on a true incident. At 13 years of age, Malavika Iyer had lost both her hands in 2002, but she went on become a disability rights activist and was awarded the Nari Shakti Puraskar in 2018, which is the Highest Civilian Honour for Women and was presented by Ram Nath Kovind, the then President of India. In an interview “Spreading Inclusive Love” by Nishtha Kanal, published in Deccan Chronicle on 18 April 2018, Iyer was surprised by the reactions of the people around her:

That kind of shocked me. I wondered what—in their minds—was wrong with me ... I realized we had to target the young people, to tell them what disability first meant and to make it a part of society. How would these youngsters, on growing

up, think of people with disabilities in terms of marriage and unemployment?
(Kanal “Interview”)

Mai is the nickname of Malvika, an energetic 13-year-old girl who enjoyed living a full life, climbing trees, hunting for kites, painting, and enjoying a nap in her favourite pair of jeans. She was very creative with a great fashion sense, wanting to be the centre of attraction. She is treated like any other ordinary Indian girl trying to fit into the stereotypes of an Indian beauty with long silky hair, applying a mixture of henna and eggs, a traditional remedy for luxurious tresses. In an attempt to repair the jeans, Malavika uses an adhesive and unable to locate the hammer, she picks up a cylindrical object from the garage. The narrative is suddenly disrupted, and it seems to be a deliberate strategy on the part of the writer to build up an image of Malavika prior to her accident. She lived in Bikaner along with her mother and her sister Kadambari. Her father Krishnan used to visit them on weekends as he had to be away as part of his job. Her mother Hema would accompany the girls to the movies and fast-food joints. Malvika was popular among the kids and would accompany them on kite hunting expeditions. She was fond of outdoor activities but on that fateful day she had decided to stay back home. She uses the cylindrical object from the garage and smashes it on the ground, however the writer further delays the depiction of the outcome of Malvika’s employment of the mysterious cylindrical object. The writer depicts the creative impulse of Malvika as she was always the first choice for any creative activity assigned in school. She was an accomplished dancer and was also an enthusiast in multimedia. She dreamt of becoming a designer, but her dreams were shattered when the grenade exploded with a “Boom” (Jagannath 30). The impact of the blast was so powerful that the images of the people in the first panel on Page 31 are seen to be thrown out of their seats, bombarded with powerful sound waves as an aftermath. The shock experienced by the family of Malvika could not be expressed by words, and the panel is a wordless one with only the shocked expressions of the family members expressing their trauma. The realisation that something horrifying had happened to her is conveyed by the reactions and comments of the people around Malvika. As mentioned earlier, Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Some Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) explains the role of society in determining the nuances of ability and disability. An individual’s social identity is often determined by the anticipations of the “social actors” (qtd in Reddy 289), and these anticipations change into demands and gets

established into norms. These demands are transformed virtual social identity and can vary across the cultures. The norms for a girl child born in a middle-class family are education and active participation in co-curricular activities such as art, dance, music etc. Prior to the accident, Malvika fulfilled all these roles or expectations. When the mother looked at the bruised and hurt body of her daughter, a host of disadvantages Malvika would face comes to her mind and included activities enjoyed by Malvika and also the anticipations of her mother “How did it come to this? All my dreams and hopes for her...” (Jagannath 56). These hopes and dreams are in a way a reflection of the normative anticipations of society, excellence in academics and co-curricular activities. Any failure to adhere to these norms would label a person as disabled.

The accident was caused by an irresponsible action of the army depot in Bikaner. A freak fire outbreak blew up the ammunition store which led to grenades and shells to be shattered in the vicinity. Some of them were collected but a few stray ones remained untraced. One such grenade landed up in the neighbourhood of Malvika and was found by a domestic help who handed it over to Malvika’s father. Her father kept it as “an interesting find” (Jagannath 37). She was immediately taken to the hospital, and it was followed by a period of intense suffering and pain. Malvika was affected by a sense of numbness but the trauma was felt belatedly by Malvika. A phenomenon that has been coined as “belatedness” in trauma studies. Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* tells that trauma refers to a wound not physical but is inflicted on the mind.

...the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor (Caruth 3–4)

Malvika is wrecked with terrible guilt and apologises to her mother and insists that she should not have done it, but it is ironic that it was an accident and not something she had done willingly. When her relatives came to visit her, Malvika could discern the pity behind their tight smiles. She withdraws into a shell and asks her mother to cover her eyes as she could not bear the light but she was only making an attempt to hide her tears. Although her legs were saved from amputation, she had lost her hands and had to go through a painful process of rehabilitation.

When her doctor cheerfully asks her “Hello! Good morning. How are you today?” (Jagannath 54), Malvika felt that it was a trick question as her mornings were not “good” neither could she decide what was she really feeling. Her family was shattered literally as her father had to go back to his place of work and her younger sister Kadambari was sent to Chennai to complete her studies, staying with her aunt and grandmother. Malvika was so guilt-stricken that she constantly begs for forgiveness from her mother. She falls into depression and is resuscitated after being administered oxygen and IV fluids. The doctor treats her wound only as physical and makes light of the situation by neglecting the psychological impact of the incident. He tells the mother: “It’s nothing serious. Don’t worry. It’s weakness, probably due to depression” (Jagannath 59). This remark shows a great lacuna in the healthcare facilities in India that treats only physical injuries, totally disregarding the mental health of the person. Persons who are born healthy but are physically impaired after an accident need a lot of courage to adopt a new lifestyle and requires psychological counselling, which is not available in many healthcare centres.

After bearing painful skin-graft operations when Malvika is allowed to go home, she is heartily welcomed by her neighbours. Moving back home reminded her of that fateful day that changed her life, and she could not stop thinking about that particular day. Malvika visited her school on the annual day, but felt depressed when she saw her friends on stage, while she was confined to a wheelchair. The visits to the hospital were worse as people openly stared at her and made pitiful comments. The insensitive stares and probing questions drove the family into a shell, and they stopped stepping out of their homes. It is the society’s intrusive attitude that drives the family into a form of social exclusion where the family deliberately avoided getting into interactions with the members of the society. However, the mother realises that such a form of exclusion is not healthy. and they “...had placed constraints on their lives” (Jagannath 75). Although the mother takes the onus of exclusion upon herself, the question remains who created an environment that drove them to it? What had motivated other people to behave in the manner that they did? Herein comes the normative expectations of the society and the virtual social identity which is established and is an epitome of perfection and wholeness. Malvika’s mother decides to continue her treatment in Chennai, and the journey from Bikaner to Chennai highlights another lack or rather a defect in public utilities which is an utter disregard for the problems of the elderly and the disabled: “After 48 hours, a thousand stares, changing trains—

which meant carrying Malvika through the doors of the Indian Railways coach. Four times....” (Jagannath 78). Public facilities are still outdated and do not cater to the special needs of the disabled, and the writer brings in this issue but an illustration would have been more effective which is missing in the text. The writer’s intention was to focus on the tale of courage of a young girl, but texts like *Mai* that are categorised under Young Adult Fiction in bookshops and digital marketing platforms should address more issues of this kind which can provide an impetus to a change in government policies and mindset of government officials.

An interesting observation was made by Malvika and her mother while visiting the hospitals in Chennai. People did not stare at them as they did in Rajasthan. This cannot be interpreted as a difference in culture but can be related to the level of literacy in both the states. Although the literacy level of a state is not directly proportional to the awareness or sensitivity of the people towards disability, nevertheless it might be one of the determining factors. According to India Census Rajasthan is one of the least literate Indian states with a literacy rate of 66.1% whereas Tamil Nadu’s literacy rate is 80.09 %.

The rest of the Graphic novel charts the success story of Malvika as she learns the basic life skills with the help of myoelectric limbs, and she is also determined to pick up the threads of her life. She excels academically after receiving private coaching but another haunting image that the writer has again failed to highlight is the accessibility of public buildings for persons with disabilities. This is conveyed by a panel in which a long flight of stairs to “Arul’s Coaching Centre” and the mother carrying a 15-year-old girl up those stairs. There has been an element of valorisation of the courage of the mother–daughter and a glossing over of lack of amenities in public life for the disabled. Every text has a particular function to perform and gives a certain message to the society, and this Graphic novel tells a tale of courage but has failed at places to focus on the society’s disregard towards the issues of the disabled and impaired.

The government of India has implemented the Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation. (PWD) Act in 1995 and has also signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities (CRPD) in 2008. The latter is a more inclusive Act which defines disability as impairments and barriers that acts as a hindrance to “effective participation in society” (CPWD Guidelines). The use of the word “effective” is significant as there are no clear indicators as to what constitutes effective participation. Three guidelines, Central Public Works

Department (CPWD) Guidelines, National Building Code and Manual by the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (MSJE) were combined. and “Guidelines and Space Standards for Barrier Free Built Environment for Disabled and Elderly Persons, 1998” with the UNCRPD was accepted. The Ministry of Urban Development has recommended these guidelines to be followed while constructing public spaces. The rights are acknowledged and Acts are formulated, but there seems to be a gap between formulation and execution. This Graphic novel *Mai* brings in two instances of such discrimination, once in the form of the text as words and once through a visual, but both of them fail to address the issue in a coherent and prominent manner. Pramod K. Nayar in *The Indian Graphic novel: Nation, History and Critique*. (2016) speaks of:

... a greater freedom in speaking of trauma, social evils and dogma because the visual adds a layer to the social commentary, where the author can even dispense with words to convey the critique. For this freedom of representation, for taking the process of critique into a medium associated with just entertainment, for its insistence on tackling more complex social commentary and cultural critique of the nation’s and society’s lacune and flaws. (Nayar 8)

Conclusion

However, in *Mai*, Sriram Jagannath has failed to address certain contentious issues related to government policies and the societal expectations and attitudes. He has adopted the form of the Graphic novel to tell an inspirational tale of courage. but has failed to realise the essence of a Graphic novel. He dwells extensively on the medical procedures, but fails to realise that not all wounds are external or physical. The mental anxiety or trauma is reflected sparingly in the Graphic novel, but this text could have become a manifesto for disability studies in the graphic medium but has failed to rise up to that mark. Certain pertinent questions such as the responsibility of the Army and the government in ensuring that all the grenades that went missing after the fire were collected or at least a public warning should have been issued are not dealt with. This would have created awareness among the people that such dangerous objects should be reported and can cause bodily harm. The lack of barrier-free infrastructure in public

spaces is another issue which could have been elaborately discussed. Lack of psychological counselling and support to victims of trauma in medical facilities has also been overlooked.

The Graphic novel ends with Malvika's visit to meet the President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and her father-in-law congratulating Malvika on obtaining her Ph.D. This congratulatory gesture has a significant subtext, it tells us that Malvika was eventually married. It might imply that people had developed enough sensitivity to choose a person with a certain disability as a partner in marriage. It might also mean that Malvika's success story was still determined by the normative anticipations and a virtual social identity. A girl is considered to be normal and successful only after she is married and has a family. Malvika had attained academic success and also got married, thus fulfilling the anticipations of the society. This Graphic novel can be an inspirational one for many people battling it out with their impairments and disabilities, but it could have functioned as a clarion call for the government and the youth to be more empathetic towards the plight of the disabled. Merely creating a reservation in the category of PWD is mere tokenism and is not enough. There is a need to change the people's attitudes towards people with disabilities, not treating them as outcasts, ostracised and objectified. The discriminatory gaze of the people almost dehumanises such people and they are seen as freaks. This sensitivity can be developed and made an intrinsic part of human nature if we develop a literature around them which is accessible and understood by the general public. Moreover, the trauma that is experienced by disabled people also needs to be voiced. If we turn towards trauma studies, early practitioners of this form like Cathy Caruth opines that trauma is not specific to a particular event but is related to the mental experiencing of the traumatic event thus constituting psychological trauma. Moreover, this trauma cannot be communicated in a straight forward and easy manner. Trauma cannot be narrativized. In "Recapturing the Past: Introduction" (1995), Caruth remarks that a kind of speech is required that can communicate all that could be understood as well as that is incomprehensible. It is literature which can perform this function. In *Trauma* (2020) by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, Caruth's formulations have been summarised in the following manner:

Trauma defies representation: it calls into question simple models of referentiality that hold that the signifier is a transparent vehicle for the signified. The same is

true of literature as conceived by deconstructionists: unlike other forms of language, literary language is free of the fallacy of unmediated expression. It acknowledges and exploits the divergence between signifier and signified by flaunting its linguistic particularities. It is this feature, according to Caruth and like-minded critics, that makes literature eminently suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma. (Craps 59)

Even within literature, the Graphic novel is one such form that is apt for discussing sensitive issues. With its dual medium of representation, both words and images, the Graphic novel can be utilised as a medium of instruction as well as a tool for creating awareness. The introduction of the Graphic novel *Bhimayana* by Srividya Natarajan in the CBCS syllabus for undergraduates is a commendable step. It creates an awareness among young readers about the evil of caste system and at the same deals with certain aspects of Indian history that are not published in school text books. The theme of disability has been explored with sensitivity in movies like *Black*, *Margarita with a Straw*, and *Taare Zameen Par*. However, apart from the last movie, the others were critically acclaimed but did not meet with commercial success. This trend shows how the Indian audience and common Indian public are still not sensitised regarding the issue of disability and impairment. There is still some reservation regarding persons with disabilities, and people consider it as a curse or misfortune resulting from sins committed in their previous life. Therefore, there is an immediate necessity for educating the general public that would make them empathetic towards the plight of the disabled individuals. The Graphic novel has the potential to be a medium that would reach out to a greater number of people, especially the young adults who would be instrumental in bringing about a change in society.

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Bionote:

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