The Case of *Bhimayana* and the Search for a New Dalit Aesthetic

Shweta Khilnani

Abstract:

The search for a new form of Dalit aesthetic is as old as the Dalit movement itself. Several critics of Dalit writing have spoken of the need to coin a separate, autonomous sphere of Dalit aesthetics which can shape the contours of this literature of social protest and reform. This paper argues that the visual narrative form of *Bhimayana* has certain elements which have the potential to subvert dominant ideologies. It studies the dynamics of this visual form vis-à-vis traditional regimes of representation and discusses the former's significance within the backdrop of Dalit aesthetics and politics.

Key words: *Bhimayana*, Dalit literature, Dalit aesthetic, visual narrative, realism, visual form,

Bhim Rao Ambedkar, visual biography, graphic book, graphic novel

For a large part of its history, the comic medium has been popularly associated with entertainment. Within this understanding, the subject matter of comic books consists of themes related to superheroes or fantastical lands, catering to their primary audience i.e. children. Over the last few decades, the revitalised genre of the graphic novel has staked its claim to literary novelty with the publications of works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* among others. While *Maus* narrates the experiences of a Holocaust survivor, *Persepolis* is an autobiographical account of a girl child growing up in Iran amidst dire political strife. In *Palestine* and other works, Joe Sacco combines reportage with the graphic medium to produce what is now commonly known as 'comic journalism'. The common element within all these works is how they employ the aesthetics of the comic medium to achieve or hint at distinct political ends. The attributes of a pictorial text are used to encapsulate and represent a historical reality characterised by political and socio-cultural turmoil.

Bhimayana, a 'graphic book', recounts incidents from the life of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Dalit icon and popularly known as the father of Indian constitution. *Bhimayana* can be considered an example of yet another visual narrative which attempts to negotiate a sensitive political and cultural issue within the Indian domain i.e. the history of subjugation of the Dalit community owing to the draconian caste system and its continuing ramifications in contemporary times. The story of *Bhimayana* has been authored by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand while the artwork is provided by Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. As

opposed to traditional sequential artwork commonly used in graphic novels and comic books, the Vyams create a new style of visual storytelling derived from Gondi art, the cultural heritage of the Gond tribal community of central India. By doing so, the book raises some important questions about the aesthetics of Dalit literature, the fraught relationship between literary form and Dalit ideology, and the position occupied by realism within this paradigm, a literary form usually associated with literatures concerned with social reform.

The Artwork of *Bhimayana*

The first thing that strikes any reader of *Bhimayana* is the sheer magnificence of its artwork. Through the use of Gondi tribal art and *dignas*, the Vyams have truly created a style of visual storytelling where text and image interact in a unique way. Since there are no rectilinear panels or boxes, the narrative is dispersed over a whole page and unilinear flow is replaced by a more diffused and open narrative mode. The Vyams are equivocal about their decision of using Gondi art when they say, "We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in opens spaces. Our art is *khulla* (open) where there's space for all to breathe" (Vyam et al. 110).

Besides the fluid form of storytelling, the artwork is also characterised by the presence of animal imagery. Time and again, the Vyams contextualise a situation by establishing an analogy with bestial figures. For instance, in the first section titled 'Water', Ambedkar as a child is prohibited from drinking water from the same sources as his other classmates in school. Here, his corporeal frame is fused with the image of a fish, referring to the intense thirst that he feels even in the presence of ample water (Fig. 1).
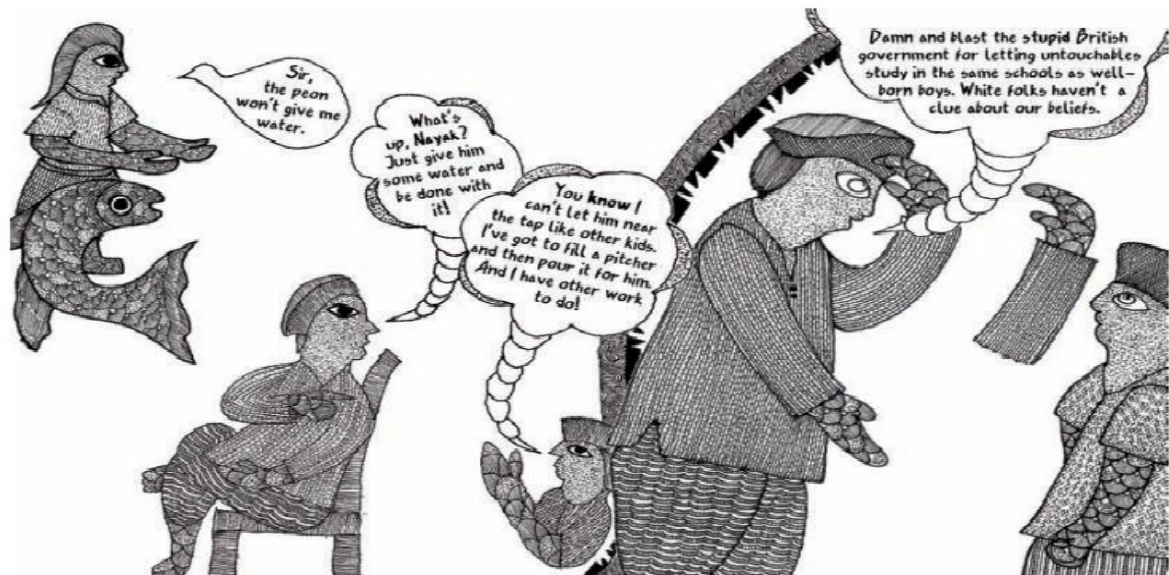
Figure 1. *Bhimayana*, pp 21.

A few pages later, the despicable state of affairs is highlighted as the text narrates how even beasts are allowed to "drink till they burst" but a Dalit can't quench his thirst by drinking water from the same pool. Similarly, there are brushes available to trim a beast's hair but no barber will cut a Mahar's hair in the village. The image that accompanies this text features a huge beast with scissors running through his body and a bunch of cows and buffaloes drinking water from a pond (Fig. 2). Besides evoking an extremely poignant reaction, the visual literalisation of the metaphor serves a far more important function of capturing and directing the reader/viewer's attention towards the supreme irony.
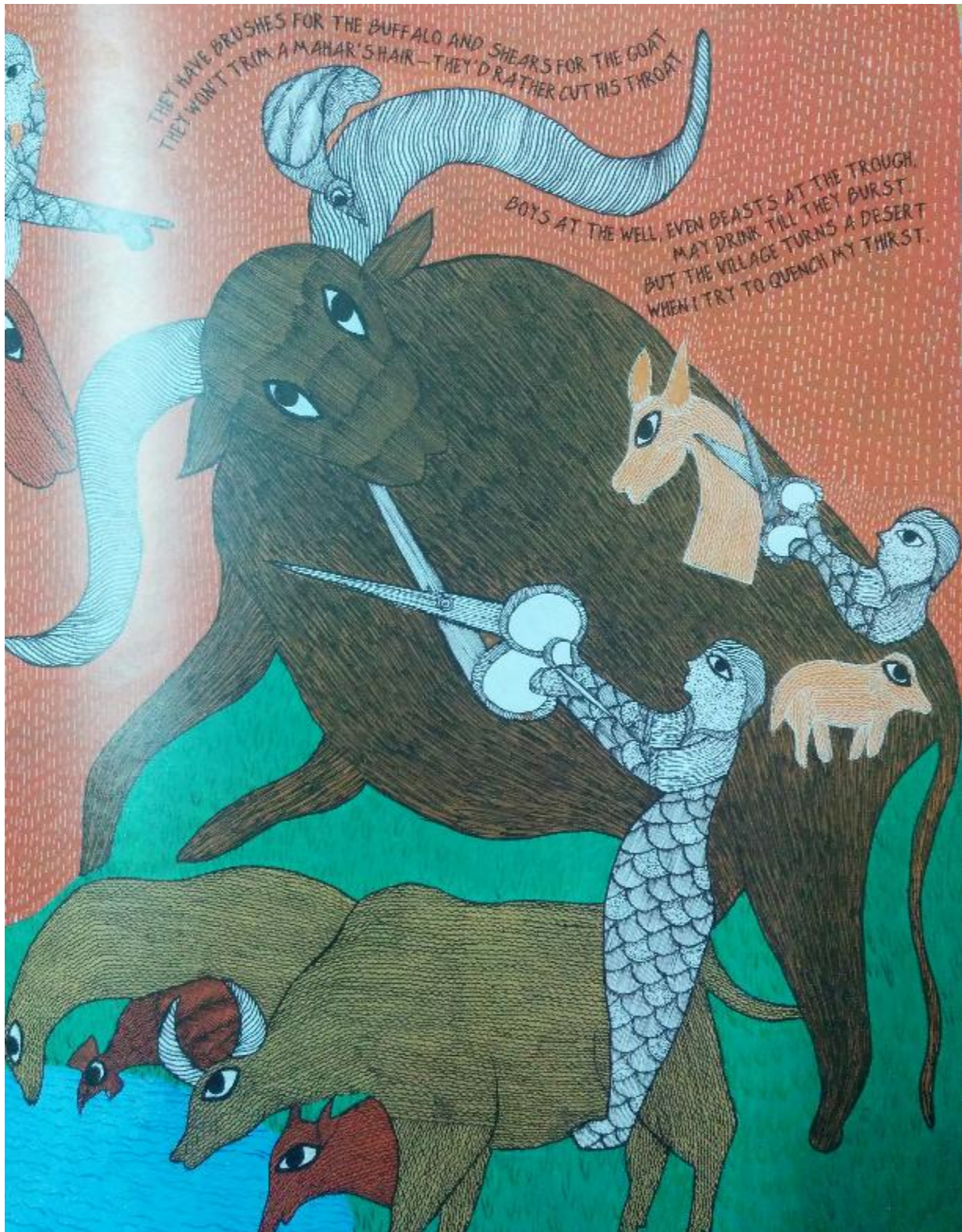
Figure 2. *Bhimayana*, pp 23.

In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman draws Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, referring to the cat-mouse paradigm of oppression. This technique also alludes to the anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew being regarded as vermin, or occupying a position inferior to human beings. While it might look like Spiegelman is guilty of racial and anti-Semitic propaganda, this internalisation of stereotypes is actually devised as a subversive tool. At several instances in the graphic novel, he invites the readers to question the absurdity of such propaganda. He punctures the veracity of these stereotypes by likening the animal faces to expendable masks. Thus, this quality of self-reflexivity has the potential to generate critical questions regarding the subjugation of an entire race to a sub-human status. In a similar vein, the repeated use of animal imagery to contextualise a narrative trope in *Bhimayana* invites readers to ponder over the abhorrent and preposterous nature of caste divide.

At the same time, the artwork of *Bhimayana* also carves out a new regime of representation. The book is firmly based in history and narrates events from the life of B. R. Ambedkar. Within this purview, it would be productive to study the representational techniques through which this reality is constructed in this graphic book. Toral Jatin Gajrawala argues that Dalit literature is invested in refashioning the term 'realist'. Perhaps, the visual form of *Bhimayana* is an example of this refashioning, of a constant search for a form that is free from the hegemonic hold of Brahmin culture and a form that can harness the political potential of a text on its own terms.

How successful is *Bhimayana* in this endeavour? To begin with, the choice of using Gondi art can be understood as a means of asserting independence from any art form which has been associated with dominant culture. This is part of an attempt to reclaim or rebuild an

alternate version of cultural memory for the Dalit community. D.R. Nagaraj elucidates the different ways in which the Dalit community reacted to the problematic issue of cultural memory. One mode of response was that of radical revival "which concentrates on the possibility of bringing marginal structures to the centre" (151). This approach "tries to bring to the existing symbols of humiliation and insult a new kind of dignity and defiance" (Nagaraj154). Contrary to this is the mode of "alternative memory" which makes a case for total denial of existing tradition (Nagaraj158). According to the latter approach, the only way to construct an alternative model of cultural memory is to accept the paradigm of Western, modern development.

The graphic book in question here has self-consciously tried to create or reclaim a space of culture memory which is not stained by humiliation or pollution. The very title "Bhimayana" stands in opposition to the dominant Brahiminical epic *Ramayana* which translates to the story of Rama. Vasvi Oza believes that Bhimayana "subverts the commonsensical nationalist narrative of what constitutes an epic" (353). A significant portion of this subversion is negotiated through formal tropes. The mode of storytelling combines subjective and objective dimensions; while the artwork, with its fluid and *khulla* form entertains subjective and affective dimensions, the presence of news report and speech excerpts by Ambedkar contributes to the objectivity of the work.

The use of tribal Gond art is an extremely significant aspect of the text's political potential. In her review of this book, Nandini Chandra states that the tribal community is "able to flaunt an alternate holistic structure" through the use of Gondi art (22). She argues that this form of art provides a more suitable realm of imagination than the realist ethos of social reform which will always be articulated through the language of the colonial masters. Based on this, one can argue that the folktale, mythic dimension of the text creates a space where a new iconography

can be coined to signify different elements of the caste system. This iconography is not burdened by the weight of history or colonial ancestry and, hence, it has more room to evolve as a visual form. For instance, the difference in the portrayal of the Brahmin and the Dalit is not constituted by colour. Even as they are painted in the same hues, the difference is articulated through exaggerating certain features. For instance, Brahminical figures are often shown carrying a stick in their hands, alluding to the violence inherent in the caste system. On the other hand, Ambedkar's physiognomy is often fused with the larger collective of the Dalit community. His body is inseparable from the movement itself; in one instance, a bus that is carrying Ambedkar's Dalit friends has Ambedkar's face as its forefront (Fig. 3). Through the use of such subtle visual metaphors, the text rearticulates the symbols conventionally used to signify Brahmins and Dalits.
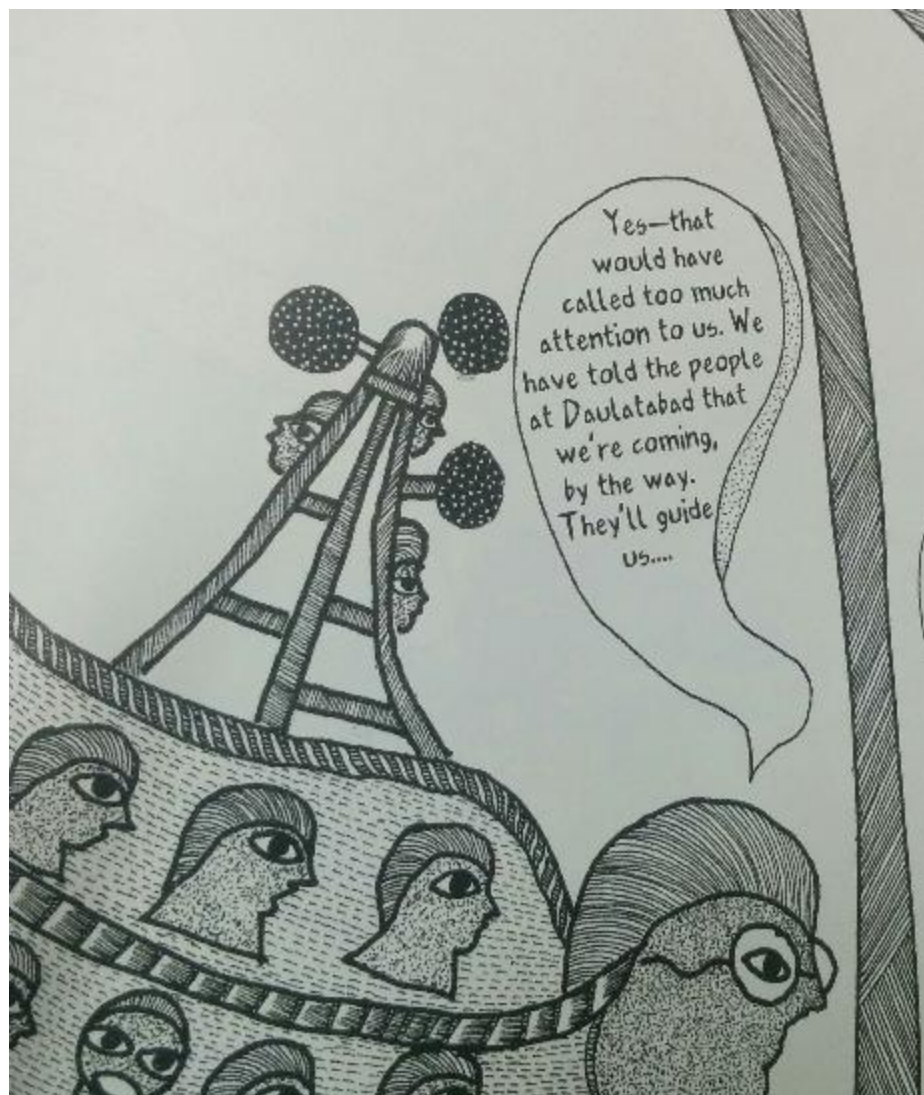
Figure 3. *Bhimayana*, pp 71.

At the same time, the text is interspaced with contemporary newspaper reports that detail the nature of injustice against the Dalit community still prevalent in India. These reports refute the claim that the country, or at least its urban centres, have been cured of castist sentiments by a wave of cultural modernity. The abundance of such news reports proves that unequal treatment is still meted out to people from the Dalit community both in rural and urban areas. Pramod K. Nayar believes that the montage of newspaper accounts, official letters and speeches made by

Ambedkar "maps a continuum from late nineteenth-early twentieth-century India to the present" (11). The continuance of this phenomenon also necessitates the search for a form which can refashion erstwhile genres to negotiate the current state of social inequality.

Additionally, the presence of the genre of reportage and journalism also points towards an atavistic belief in traditional forms of realist representation. On the one hand, *Bhimayana* marks the emergence of a new visual iconography while on the other hand, it supplements this enterprise with a customary dose of realism. How does one understand this hybrid genre in terms of an attempt at reclaiming cultural memory? What is the form best suited for this endeavour? To answer these questions succinctly, one needs to conduct a thorough study of the association between literary/aesthetic genres and Dalit literature.

Dalit Aesthetics and Realism

The realist novel of the nineteenth century was characterised by its intimate relationship to socio-cultural reality. In Britain, Russia and France, novels written by authors like George Eliot, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Honoré de Balzac sprung from within the social dynamics of the age. George Lukács upheld the realist novel as a literary form that had the radical potential to reveal the totality of the social whole, to explore the relationship between the surface and what lay beneath it. One is obviously tempted to ask the following questions - Could realism function in the same way within the realm of the Dalit movement? Could the realist novel expose the social totality of caste in India?

The literary genre of realism has its philosophical roots in the tenets of rationality, empiricism and the ability of the individual to cognitively perceive the world around him. It

rejected erstwhile modes of cognition and was informed by a distinctly rational and secular worldview. One can perhaps argue that the above mentioned philosophical principles of this genre would lend themselves suitably to a body of literature which seeks to break free from the clutches of a traditional caste system. B.R. Ambedkar strongly believed in the potential of rationality and Western paradigms of modernity. He argued repeatedly that the upheaval of the Dalit community was contingent on a total denial of the traditional caste system and a simultaneous acceptance of modern development. One can see why the realist novel or the genre of realism would have a certain appeal for writers of the Dalit movement. The genre's substantial reliance on scientific rationality was perceived as a useful weapon for raising a new consciousness that could challenge the obstinacy of the reactionary caste system which seemed to have a mystical hold over the whole country.

Having said that, critics like D.R. Nagaraj assert that realism is incapable of accommodating lower-caste cosmologies. He believes that the monolithic worldview of realism is suitable only for historical and verifiable subject matter and therefore, ignores certain mystical traditions which might defy scientific reason. In fact, the excessive importance placed by Ambedkar on complete denial of tradition has also led to the excision of certain cultural forms of art. Gajarawala postulates that "the relentless modernism of the Ambedkarite project required the culling of certain stigmatised social practices, but also, crucially, productive cultural forms" (199). He is referring to art forms belonging to the realm of folklore and vernacular cultural practices. Owing to this phenomenon, the Dalit community has been deprived of cultural, 'casteized' art forms which could have had the potential to express the community's collective search for identity.

Therefore, the task at hand is to reconfigure the coordinates of realism, or imagine an alternate form of Dalit aesthetics. Not only must this form accommodate cultural practices organic to the life of a community, it must also attempt to negotiate the dialectic between the real and the ideal. One must remember that Dalit literature deals with an issue which has never been represented before, it tries to reconstruct an alternate version of history and cultural memory that has never existed in reality. Pieces of this history have to be excavated from the body of the Hindu caste system which has vilified the Dalit community for ages together. This imagined utopic vision is ironically constituted by a Dalit's real-life experiences from his or her daily life. The lost history can be reclaimed by the development of what critics call 'Dalit chetna' i.e. a model of Dalit consciousness that informs the production of Dalit literature (Breuck 65). Laura Breuck asserts that "Dalit literature relies on the idea of Dalit chetna as the ideal for all Dalit literature….It is a principle of Dalit consciousness that writings are made authentic only through real-life experience of Dalit identity" (65). Ironically then, this utopic realm is premised on the 'real' itself. Any form of artistic expression that hopes to successfully represent the politics of Dalit identity has to be attentive to this curious dialectic between the real and the ideal. It also has to take into the account the role played by imagination in bridging the gap between these two categories.

Now that we have contextualised the ongoing search for an optimal model of Dalit aesthetics, it would be fruitful to study the case of *Bhimayana* as a small step in that direction. It is well known that Dalit literature, and Dalit ideology at large, rest on the rejection of canonical literature and its accompanying model of aesthetics. This rejection is premised on the belief that the central tenets of canonical literature are ill suited to the aims of Dalit writing and hence, there

is a concomitant need to create a separate realm of Dalit aesthetics. As has been mentioned earlier, the visual form of *Bhimayana* departs from the conventional style of comics which consists of rectilinear panels and boxes. The Vyams are of the opinion that such devices stifle their characters and thus, they need to think outside the *box* (pun intended). At no point in the graphic book do the Vyams feel the need to pay lip service to the dominant style of comic writing and this sense of comfort with their art form is visible in the brilliance of the final product. The use of Gondi art, an indigenous cultural form organic to a tribal community, also brings back the folk or mythic dimension, which might have been expunged in certain forms of Dalit writing due to a stringent rejection of existing traditional forms. Unlike realism which bears the burden of being a legacy of our colonial masters, such art forms are endemic to certain communities and might be better suited to express their cosmologies. Since they are relatively free of certain hegemonic discourses, they have unrealised potential of subverting the dominant ideology.

More importantly, *Bhimayana* can be understood as an attempt to forge a new dynamic of realism which combines several modes of representation without becoming a mere pastiche in Frederic Jameson's terms. As has been mentioned earlier, a collection of newspaper reports, fractions from Ambedkar's historical speeches and excerpts from monumental texts like the Constitution of India strengthen *Bhimayana's* claim to objectivity and historical verifiability. This is a more conventional way of understanding the current state of caste inequality in the country. At the same time, the graphic book also introduces a more subjective and affective dimension through the use of visual metaphors and a fluid narrative style. This part of the text moves beyond the concerns of authentic representation and carves a new iconography which can accommodate the newness of Dalit literature discussed above.

In the book titled *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, Gajarawala raises several significant questions pertaining to the position of literary realism within a literature of social protest, particularly Dalit literature. After exploring the problematics of this relationship, he asks the following question in the Epilogue – "Are other forms of realism possible?" (201). Quite obviously, this is a difficult question to answer but at the same time, a very important one. This paper has argued that *Bhimayana*, with its distinct style of visual narrative, its evolving model of iconography and its delicate balance between the objective and the subjective dimension, could be read as a small but significant step in the coining of a new Dalit aesthetic. There is always the danger that the 'newness' of this art form will become too mainstream and lose its subversive potential or that tribal art will be fetishized and divorced from its cultural context. Notwithstanding these dangers, one has to admit that *Bhimayana* hints towards the possibility of the creation of an alternate dynamic form of Dalit realism.

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