Visual Stories of Resilience: Gender Violence and Trauma in *Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back*

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Abstract

Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back (2015) is a collection of visual stories representing the trauma inflicted due to gender-based violence and discrimination, as experienced by fourteen young women. This feminist visual narrative, written after the gang rape of a student in Delhi in December 2012, consists of stories of trauma experienced due to widespread harassment, patriarchal suffocation as well as the aftermath of violence against women . This paper interrogates the different ways in which the pain, wounds, suffering and trauma of female characters have been visually represented in the graphic narrative, Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back (2015). In the last few years, there has been a surge in the number of graphic novels produced, especially in India. With the acceptance and acknowledgment of comics as a respectable form of art, the subject matter has started moving from mythology and war to more intimate stories that delve into the mental psyche of the characters. Modern graphic novels frequently employ a testimonial approach to explore and comprehend the origins and impacts of personal trauma and shared suffering.This paper examines the diverse methodologies employed for the visual portrayal of anguish, injuries, distress and trauma experienced by female characters within the graphic narrative.

Keywords: Gender; Graphic Novel; Trauma; Violence; Women's Writing.

Introduction

Literature has a significant influence over the human experience, having the ability to display the inner world of the complex human mind and

serving as a conduit to articulate the intricacies of the human psyche. It gives a space for memories and remembrances that are coloured by pain, wounds and trauma. In the current era of literature, graphic novels often adopt a testimonial style to understand the causes and consequences of personal and collective hardships. Graphic novels of trauma combine visual images and written texts to portray the complexities of trauma, which are not always representable in written form alone. Graphic novels often employ visual symbolism, metaphorical imagery and artistic techniques to delve into the inner workings of trauma. The combination of visuals and words allows for a multi-layered representation of the psychological and emotional impact of trauma on individuals and communities. This unique approach enables artists and writers to convey not only the external events but also the internal struggles, fragmented memories and the ongoing psychological aftermath of trauma. Additionally, graphic novels and comics provide a space for exploring collective trauma, where the shared experiences of communities, cultures or historical events are brought to life. Such is the case as depicted in the anthology, Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back (2015). These stories illuminate the effects of collective trauma and the healing and resilience processes that ensue.

Published in 2015, Drawing the Line is a compilation of graphical narratives that portray instances of gender-based violence and/or harassment encountered by fourteen young women. Emerging as a product of feminist visual artistry, the compilation was crafted in the wake of the 2012 Delhi gang rape incident that had garnered widespread attention. The graphic novel effectively acquaints the audience with the intricate psychological trauma that arises from various forms of abuse. While some of the narratives are depicted solely through visual panels, devoid of accompanying textual elements, this stylistic choice serves to immerse the reader in an experiential understanding of the nuanced trauma. Over the past few years, the genre of graphic narratives has experienced a notable resurgence, particularly within the context of India. This resurgence has not only led to a broader acceptance and recognition of graphic novels as a legitimate form of artistic expression, but has also facilitated a shift in the thematic focus from traditional subjects such as mythology and warfare, to more introspective narratives that delve into the intricate

nuances of characters' psychological landscapes. One significant outcome of this evolution is the creation of works that address the profound impact of trauma, both individual and collective, on the lives of characters. This paper examines the diverse methodologies employed for the visual portrayal of anguish, injuries, distress and trauma experienced by female characters within the chosen graphic narrative.

Gender Violence and Trauma

Gender violence refers to any harmful or abusive actions or behaviours that are directed at an individual or a group, based on their gender or on perceived gender roles. It is a form of discrimination and violence that disproportionately affects individuals based on their gender identity or expression. Gender violence can manifest in various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence resulting in trauma. Gender violence is often linked to societal norms, cultural practices and structural inequalities that perpetuate harmful attitudes and behaviours. Psychologists describe two kinds of trauma – direct trauma and secondary trauma. Direct Trauma refers to the initial impact of a traumatic event on an individual's psyche. It involves the overwhelming experience of an event that exceeds the person's capacity to comprehend or process it at the time of its occurrence. In literary terms, direct trauma is often portrayed through fragmented narratives, disjointed language and vivid, sensory descriptions that attempt to capture the disorienting nature of the traumatic experience itself. Secondary Trauma pertains to the way trauma is transmitted through narrations and communication, particularly when one person bears witness to another's traumatic experience. It is the trauma experienced by those who hear or read about another person's traumatic encounter. In literature, this can be depicted through characters who are affected by someone else's trauma, even if they did not directly experience the event themselves. An important work of Cathy Caruth, titled Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, says that the experience of trauma is frequently one of being haunted by the past as it resurfaces unexpectedly in the present (7). She goes on to define psychic trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur but return later in

repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other respective phenomena" (91). Anne Whitehead affirms what Caruth says in Trauma : Explorations in Memory as in that "the event is not experienced as it occurs but is fully evident only when connected with another place and involving another time" (12). Caruth says that, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5).

The role that literature has in helping people understand traumatic memories is crucial. An effective way of helping sufferers cope with their traumatic memories is through the creation of films, plays and literary narratives. Narration can be used as a therapeutic strategy to help trauma survivors overcome a common feeling of isolation by helping them identify echoes of their experiences in the book. Writing and reading are known to be effective therapeutic practices. We establish and form our identities through the power of stories—the ones we make up and tell to ourselves and others, as well as the ones we read. Trauma differs according to the society to which we belong. Traumatic instances can vary across cultures. Jeffrey C. Alexander has labelled 'cultural trauma' as "something that occurs when members of a collective group, feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways " (Alexander 1).

Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back can be said to have emerged as a result of a cultural trauma that resulted in a set of women wanting to voice their traumatic ordeal to society, after the brutal gang rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi. This is an attempt on the part of these women to bring about a change by talking about the incidents of sexual assault and their traumatic states. Priya Kurien says in her afterword says: "There is something very different and truthful when women articulate issues that matter to their own gender, themselves, in their own words(and pictures in this case)(160)."

It is often trauma from the past and such traumatic memories that affect the characters and their minds, causing confusion and insecurity. There are many causes of trauma that are dealt with in this graphic narrative and some of them are employment discrimination, sexual abuse, police

brutality, bullying, domestic violence and certain instances of childhood trauma and experiences.

In the book under discussion, each of the fourteen narratives features a female protagonist who has undergone varying degrees of trauma. The nature and origins of their distress differ across the stories, encompassing both physical afflictions and psychological distress. These female characters grapple with the pervasive influence of patriarchal dominance. A feminist critique is done to scrutinise the societal subjugation of women, addressing both their systematic oppression and the emotional turmoil they endure. Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back serves as a narrative vehicle that chronicles the experiences of marginalised and disadvantaged segments of society. The central female protagonists within this graphic narrative, rather than acquiescing to prescribed traditional gender roles, actively endeavour to establish alternative value systems and instigate changes in societal perspectives, particularly among their male counterparts. The author employs depictions of traumatic incidents with a dual purpose: first, to elevate women to a position of paramount importance within the discourse, and second, to unveil society's complicity in the perpetuation of their traumatic encounters.

In Moses and Monotheism, Freud discusses the "period of latency," suggesting that a childhood trauma might be quickly followed by a neurotic episode, known as infantile neurosis. Infantile neurosis can persist for a long time, leading to significant disturbances, but it may also remain dormant and go unnoticed. As Caruth defines it, the period of latency is "the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (1995, 7). Freud explains that victims of trauma often do not become aware of their trauma or the effect it has had on them, until a similar shock reminds the mind of the fragments of the earlier trauma that had been repressed into the unconscious.

In the inaugural narrative titled "That's not Fair" (5), the central theme revolves around the mother's enduring torment stemming from her own complexion, which has subjected her to a lifetime of derisive remarks. The societal inclination to demand a higher dowry for brides lacking a fair complexion compounds the anguish of parents, constituting a source of

profound distress. Fuelled by an imperative to shield her unborn daughter from an analogous fate, the mother diligently engages in various measures, including the consumption of orange juice and the application of skin creams, with the aspiration of modifying her child's skin tone. Meanwhile, the foetus, unperturbed by these efforts, readies itself to confront the world, irrespective of its complexion, as evidenced by its assertive declaration, "I'm coming out, bitches"(8). The mother, profoundly marked by a history of personal trauma inflicted by societal prejudices against darker skin, endeavours vigorously to forestall her daughter from encountering a similar fate. This narrative encapsulates the mother's suppressed anguish, which originated from her own traumatic experiences in her past, particularly the distress she endured due to her darker skin tone. The resurfacing of her repressed trauma is precipitated by her anticipation of her daughter potentially enduring similar tribulations. In this graphic narrative, the mother's erstwhile trauma is abruptly rekindled, ushering in a resurgence of the very affliction she had once grappled with.

The graphic narrative "Asha Now" (109) is a striking portrayal of sexual abuse that takes place inside a secure environment. "Rape or sexual abuse, when committed by a stranger, is often reported by the victim, and she is far more likely to be treated sympathetically. Sexual abuse within the family is far less reported, and a victim of incest is rarely heard and even more rarely gets justice," says author Hemavathy Guha in her introduction (110) to the book. Family-based sexual assault is much less commonly reported and incest victims hardly ever receive justice. The first illustration in the graphic narrative depicts Asha awakening from a nightmare in which she experiences "someone touching her, pinning her down"(111). The trauma that Asha endured as a child as a result of her brother's advances is described in the next few pages. "She wakes up in the middle of the night. Instinctively, she touches her shirt and finds the buttons open. Her eldest brother is lying beside her, his hand on her breast. Horrified, she pushes him away" (Fig 1). The next page shows a visual of her brother walking in on her taking a shower – "She screams and shuts the door, weeping with humiliation" (113).

As she lies down again, her mind wanders back to her school days...
She is lying on the mattress. She wakes up in the middle of the night. Instinctively,
she touches her shirt and finds the buttons open. Her eldest brother is lying beside
her, his hand on her breast. Horrified, she pushes him away. She buttons her shirt
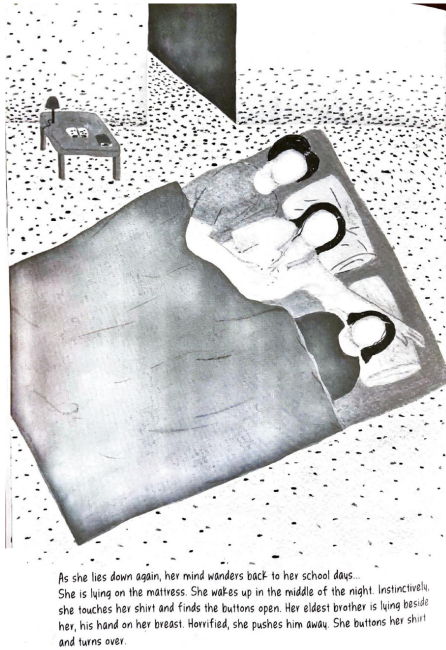and turns over.

Fig. 1 (112)

Sexual abuse inside the family is a taboo topic that is frequently kept under wraps out of fear of embarrassment, and this aspect of secrecy is brought to light by Hemavathy Guha. The protagonist continues to encounter frequent nightmares even after leaving her parents' home and starting a new life, due to the profound emotional wounds inflicted by the traumatic events during her younger years. She experiences a strong feeling of maternal protectiveness towards her daughter, taking proactive steps to protect her daughter from her brother, whom she still views with apprehension. The protagonist's overall mental and emotional state, as well as her parental instincts, have been detrimentally influenced by these harrowing occurrences.

Gender-based employment discrimination is a pervasive issue confronted by women globally, transcending geographical boundaries, with India being no exception. While Western nations have enacted stringent legislative measures to address such disparities, the problem remains ubiq-

uitous. Within the context of the novel "Ladies Please Excuse" (139), the protagonist, Jenny, becomes a victim of workplace discrimination. This is exemplified during her interview process, wherein the focus veers away from her educational background and professional experience, and delves into inquiries about her personal life and prospective marital intentions instead. A poignant conversation with a friend unveils an additional dimension of this predicament, underscoring the dearth of adequate restroom facilities for women within many workplaces.

Consequently, the narrative culminates in a striking juxtaposition with Jenny's sibling, Johnny, who effortlessly secures employment despite lacking comparable qualifications. This incongruity is highlighted by Jenny's lament: "Look at Johnny! Good job, no great qualifications. Here I am with a slew of degrees answering questions about my ovulation cycle" (145). Tragically exacerbating her ordeal, Jenny's anguish is further compounded by her brother's failure to empathise. His query—regarding the correlation between restroom provisions and occupational opportunities—fails to acknowledge the deeply entrenched trauma that arises from such discriminatory experiences.

Bullying in the form of eve-teasing is something that women in India face daily—on the bus, in the metro on the streets and in cinema halls. "Someday"(147), illustrated by Samidha Gunjal, chronicles the experiences of a young urban woman ensnared in the distressing occurrence commonly labelled as 'eve-teasing.' Rather than employing explicit verbal portrayals, the narrative employs a subtler approach, a sequence of visual panels in black and white that tell the unfortunate events that encompass eve-teasing.

Instead of succumbing to trepidation amidst the harassment, the protagonist derives strength from her womanhood and undergoes a transformation into the formidable deities Durga and Kali (Fig. 2) and drives the lecherous men away. As noted by Claire Stocks, "trauma divides identity and creates a multiplication of the self" (72). With four arms, bulging eyes and her protruding tongue, she intimidates and repels the men who engage in eve-teasing(155). Notably, she even beheads one of the perpetrators with an axe and prepares to place the severed head on a plate (157).

The concluding page (158) depicts the potent Kali, assuming a contemplative stance, openly exposed yet empowered, savouring a cup of tea and indulging in a cigarette post her confrontation with the predatory men. The visualisation underscores a mode of resistance against maltreatment and the patriarchal conventions entrenched in society.

Fig. 2 (157)

This narrative inherently underscores the profound theme of trauma as a catalyst for transformation. The protagonist's response to the traumatic experience of eve-teasing is symbolic of the internal splintering of identity, yet paradoxically, this division births a reconstituted and potent self. The evolution into divine personas, Durga or Kali, symbolises a fusion of resilience and empowerment springing from adversity. This metamorphosis, despite its gruesome manifestations, stands as an assertion against the trauma-inflicting machinations of societal norms, embodying a poignant testament to the strength that can arise from confronting and transcending traumatic experiences.

The story "Basic Space?" written/visualised/narrated by Kaveri Gopalkrishnan portrays how women modify their behaviour and even their non-verbal cues in public environments to ensure their safety and in order to define their personal boundaries. This is often traumatic for women since every time they step out, they need to take precautionary measures: keep a "stern face, straight back, stiff arms, battle stance, bag over chest" (121). These adjustments symbolise metaphorical barriers that women construct to safeguard and affirm their individuality and personal space, which are

frequently encroached upon by men. The narrative also highlights how these symbolic boundaries function as forms of defiance against societal limitations that contribute to the marginalised position of women. "Basic Space?" echoes the intertwined relationship between trauma, the defence of personal space and the assertion of autonomy—a narrative intricately woven with the threads of resilience, empowerment and the unwavering demand for equality.

Trauma associated with gender discrimination is the narrative brought to life in Soumya Menon's "An Ideal Girl" (35) . The author takes a dig at the concept of the 'ideal girl'. The 'ideal girl' is what society wants her to be, based on the conditions stipulated by society. Preference is always given to the boy child and sacrifices must be made for the sake of a daughter's brother. Even if a girl/woman is as capable as her male counterpart, she is always treated as secondary. At the end of the story, the protagonist is seen driving away into oblivion, tired of having to be the 'ideal girl'. Some critics in trauma studies argue that individuals may experience trauma simply by being born into a society that compels them to see the world in a particular way and to shape their sense of self, based on the society's shared traumas. Greg Forter points out that certain traumas "are so chronic and cumulative, so woven into the fabric of our societies, that they cannot count as shocks," and therefore become "systemic practices and patterns of behaviour" (260). "An Ideal Girl" adeptly navigates the theme of trauma linked to gender bias. The narrative critique of the 'ideal girl' concept underscores the societal strain that women experience in adhering to such patriarchal expectations.

The traumatised women in this anthology try to make a bold attempt to change the society around them and to teach their perpetrators a lesson. In "The Prey"(53), the protagonist shows the predator his place when she traps the eagle that has caught her chicks. In one of the panels, a prospective lecherous man is seen glaring at her. Her move to kill whoever intrudes into her space surprises her mother, who says, 'Oh girls these days!'(64). In "Ladies, Please Excuse", Jenny tries to get her brother to understand the trauma that women face in society.

When analysing post-millennial graphic narratives, it can be seen that there is a revival of the use of black panels to depict mental states of repression, abuse and trauma. In Drawing the Line, the black panel symbolises the suppression of emotions that are central to the women's experiences and their traumatised states. Similar to Marjane Satrapi's stark style, which is monochromatic, Priya Kurien et al. also employ flat black-and-white panels. Chute in Graphic Women : Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics, says, "The minimalist play of black and white is part of Satrapi's stated aim, as with avant-garde tradition, to present events with a pointed degree of abstraction in order to call attention to the horror of history by re-representing endemic images, either imagined or reproduced, of violence" (145). Drawing the Line also calls the reader's attention to the brutal gang rape of a Delhi student by using black-and-white panels. Some of the stories, like "Ever After" use only graphics and no text to depict the emotions of the characters.

Each century has its unique methods of addressing trauma, that are shaped by the resilience of both the community and the individual and this is portrayed in the graphic narrative.

The intersection of comics, trauma and the utilisation of the black-and-white format as a visual medium holds significant implications for conveying the emotional experiences and narratives of distress. This connection is particularly evident in graphic novels that explore themes of trauma, as the choice of visual elements like the black-and-white colour scheme can enhance the portrayal of psychological states and traumatic events. The use of the colours, black and white, in comics holds profound symbolic and emotional significance, particularly when portraying trauma. The contrast between these two colours encapsulates the complexity of trauma, with black representing pain and white signifying healing. This absence of colour intensifies the emotional impact, focusing on essential narrative elements. Through using black and white, artists can convey the subjective experience of trauma, abstract its nature and evoke a quality of timelessness, making it especially apt for historical trauma narratives.

Conclusion

This paper, thus investigates the varied approaches utilised in visually depicting gender violence and trauma undergone by female characters within the graphic anthology, Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back (2015). Graphic novels have the capacity to capture the disjointed and fragmented nature of traumatic memories. The non-linear storytelling and juxtaposition of images can mirror the disorienting and fragmented recollections that often accompany trauma. This artistic form can simulate the way in which traumatic experiences can invade a person's consciousness in unpredictable and unsettling ways.

Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back stands as a poignant testament to the power of graphic narratives in exploring and portraying the depths of trauma and gender-based violence. Through a combination of visual artistry and written text, the anthology captures the multifaceted nature of pain and suffering experienced by its female characters. This compilation exemplifies the evolution of graphic novels into a platform that delves into the complexities of the human psyche, allowing for a more intimate and immersive examination of individual and collective trauma. As graphic novels gain recognition as a legitimate and impactful form of storytelling, works like these push boundaries, shedding light on the lasting repercussions of violence and oppression while also underscoring the resilience and strength of those affected. Drawing the Line exemplifies how this art form can effectively bridge the gap between representation and experience, inviting readers to engage empathetically with narratives of trauma and, in turn, fostering a deeper understanding of the human condition.

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