

**Voicing Resistance Through Graphic Novels: Looking at Orijit Sen's A*****Travancore Tale*****Kusumika Mitra**

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Graphic novels can be defined as a hybrid of words and images that neither overlap or stand to replace each other. While comics and graphic novels have more often than not been seen as interchangeable, Chute states that “in graphic narrative, the substantial length implied by novel remains intact, but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction. A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics” (Chute 453). Therefore, while comics essentially revolves around the fictional genre, graphic novels or narratives are known to experiment with other genres as well while using the comic medium for expression. The verbal-visual mode that is used by graphic novelists makes them a more popular and interesting read as readers are allowed to engage with the narrative visually. Thus, graphic novels use strategies popularly associated with the comic medium like panelling, framing, speech bubbles, and so on to create a plot that can be fictional or based on non-fictional events and incidents.

So, how did Graphic novels emerge? The ‘graphic’ aspect of the Graphic novel can be traced to the comic strips gaining popularity in America in the 1950s (Ghosal). These comic strips were attempting to capture and highlight the cultural shifts that were taking place in the United States of America in between the two world wars. Besides this, the graphic novels

were also influenced by the underground 'comix movement' in America (Hatfield ix). The artists of this underground movement dealt with issues that were considered taboos by the American society and therefore were never addressed by the mainstream media. This gave rise to the 'adult comic'. The modern graphic novel was inspired by the former's urge to re-politicise and represent issues that were never paid heed to and were not heard of so far.

"Underground comics, a reaction to the censorious content code that debilitated the mainstream society, were an influential cultural vehicle, challenging and arresting because they mediated on the violation of taboos" (Chute 456).

In the Indian context, graphic novels owe their origin to Indrajal Comics (1964). This was followed by *Amar Chitra Katha* (Nayar 4). This laid the foundation of the comic culture in India with more and more people taking an interest in this form of story-telling. It was only in 2004 however, when Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* made way as the country's first graphic novel. With more and more graphic novels being published and circulated across the world like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1991), *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (1996), and many more, Indian publishing houses became keen on printing such narratives and this paved the way for the graphic novel culture in India.

Graphic novels revolve around various themes and offer a large spectrum to readers. They can be classified broadly into fictional or non-fictional. In fictional Graphic novels, the story is imaginative and does not intentionally echo any resemblance to reality. Many have experimented with the genre of science fiction (*Zita, the Spacegirl*), others have tried their hands on horror and mystery (*From Hell, A Dame to Kill for*) and so on. On the other hand, in non-fiction Graphic novels, plots are spun around stories or events from the real world. The non-fictional Graphic novel can be further divided into sub-sections like the Autobiographical Graphic novel (*Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* by Malik Sajad), the

Medicine Graphic novel (*Mom's Cancer* by Brian Fies), Biographies (*Louis Riel* by Chester Brown), Journalistic Graphic novel (*River of Stories* by Orijit Sen) and so on.

The Indian graphic novels too follow the above classification. While there are many that are fictional in nature, there are other graphic narratives that deal with socio-political themes and attempt to make their readers aware of their surroundings. As Hatfield points out, graphic novels have been known to experiment with “autobiography, reportage, and historical fiction”

*A Travancore Tale* by Orijit Sen is a graphic representation of the story of Nangeli and her daring feat. She belonged to the 19<sup>th</sup> century clan of Ezhava women, who lived in what is now known as Travancore in Kerala. Women here were doubly ostracised. On one level, while they were discriminated on the basis of their caste, on another level, they were ill-treated because they were women. Nangeli was a headstrong woman who resisted this double oppression and broke free by cutting off both her breasts. Lower caste women were not allowed to cover their breasts. This was seen as paying homage to the upper caste. In case the lower caste women wanted to cover their breasts, they had to pay a tax called the ‘breast tax’. The amount of the tax depended on the size of the breasts, the larger the breasts, the higher were the taxes. The tax was determined after an examination of the breasts by the village officer or the ‘pravathiyar’. Orijit Sen represents this tale of Nangeli and her act of resistance through the graphic medium.

The story unfolds across a few panels. While the first and the last panel of the tale is set in the current time frame, the rest of the panels in the middle seem to go back in past. The narrator, an old lady, a successor of Nangeli, is introduced in the first panel and Sen unfolds the story of Nangeli through her (see fig. 1.).

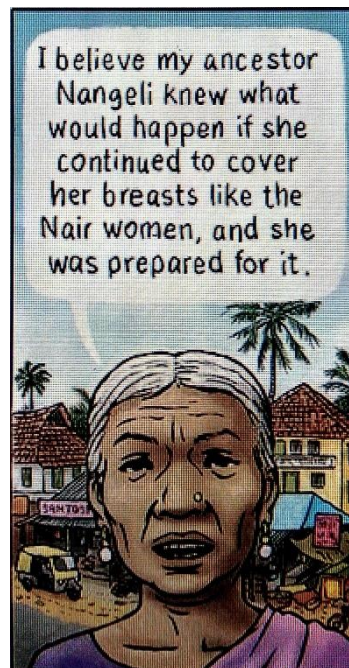


Fig. 1. A Travancore Tale by Orijit Sen

A close analysis of the tale reveals the act of Nangeli as an act of resistance on multiple levels. According to the norms of the village, lower caste women were not allowed to cover their breasts thereby paying homage to the upper caste. The speech bubble in the third panel of the tale states that women had to pay the ‘Mulakkaram’ or the breast tax, ‘if they dared to cover their breasts’. The phrase, ‘dared to’ can be seen to hint at a voice of power against a possible outrageous act. By not conforming to this norm and deciding to cover her breasts, Nangeli marks her first act of resistance (see fig. 2)

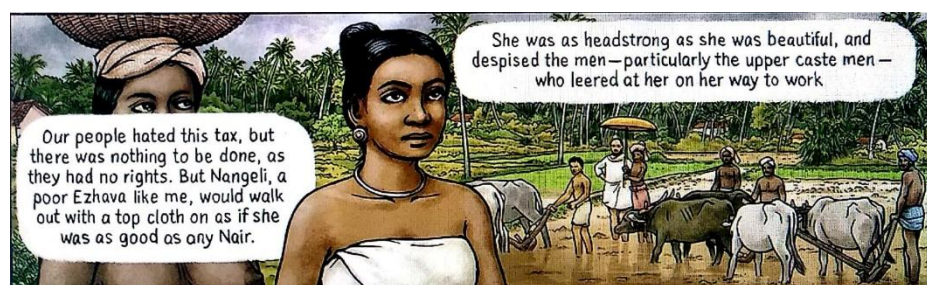


Fig.2. A Travancore Tale by Orijit Sen

Her second act of resistance can be observed when the village officer comes to calculate the dues and collect the 'breast tax'. The village officer is seen coming with a group of other men. Nangeli had made up her mind by then to cut off her breasts. However, that didn't stop her from revealing her bosom to the group (see fig. 3). For all this time, she had covered her breasts with a white cloth but by removing the white cloth and allowing the men to look at her, she let her choice dominate. Therefore, it will not be too wrong to conclude that Nangeli was neither shy or ashamed of her femininity. For her, her choice mattered. Be it when she decided to cover her breasts and go against the set norm or when she decided to bare herself to the men. Thus, it can be said that Nangeli revolted against the voicelessness of the lower caste especially women being harassed and through her act highlighted the importance of choice of every individual.



Fig. 3. *A Travancore Tale* by Orijit Sen

Nangeli marked her last act of resistance by cutting off her breasts and offering them on plantain leaves on which she was expected to put rice as 'breast tax' (see fig. 4). By chopping off her breasts and bleeding to death, she decides to not bow down to caste system, feudalism, and misogyny.

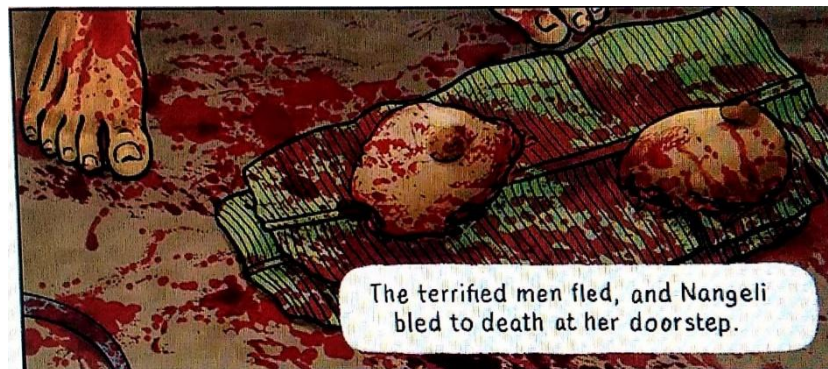


Fig. 4. *A Travancore Tale* by Orijit Sen

Her act shows extreme power against casteism as well as discrimination against women. The last panel reveals how her heroic sacrifice doesn't go in vain. Later, shaken by her gruesome death followed by her husband's (who was so grief-stricken that he decided to jump into the funeral pyre of his wife), the tax was annulled. By raising voice against patriarchy and its ill-effects, Nangeli saved her community from life-long ostracisation.

Through *A Travancore Tale*, Orijit Sen not only makes readers aware of an unsung hero of 19<sup>th</sup> century India but also reminds us that resisting evils and protesting against them is the only way to fight injustice. Talking about his intentions behind creating this graphic tale, Sen says, "by retelling this story, my basic intention was to make people think about the violence of casteism and Brahmanism. My primary interest is to question certain ideas and ideologies that live within our society" (Benu). Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost two centuries apart, we see how socio-political conditions in the country have not undergone much change. With women having to face the brunt of patriarchy almost every day and being a part of a dysfunctional society to citizens being marginalised on the basis of caste, creed and religion, the relevance of Nangeli's tale is noteworthy.

Like Orijit Sen, many other graphic novelists have used the graphic medium to voice out resistance. Be it Malik Sajad, Amruta Patil, or Vishwajyoti Ghosh, more and more Indian graphic novelists are employing this medium to talk about social issues and through it highlights the importance of resistance and dissent. So, what is it about the graphic medium that makes it so popular with non-fictional graphic novelists? The most obvious answer would be the visual appeal of the medium. The impact of the illustrations on the readers is far greater than the written word. It is this visual literacy that helps readers engage with the narrative at a deeper level and allows discourses on cultures, alternative points of view and ideologies to flourish. Further, the flexibility that the medium offers can also be another reason attributed to its popularity. From the choice of panels and frames to colours and artistic techniques, the graphic novelists have the freedom to arrange the plot the way they like. Yet another reason for the choice of this medium can be the target audience. Comics are generally read and enjoyed by the youth. Therefore, providing social narratives through the comic medium not only promotes awareness in youth but also makes reading more interesting and engaging. To conclude, it will not be wrong to say that the graphic medium provides a platform to artists to not only experiment with their plot and artistic techniques but also help in voicing out resistance hoping to stir the conscience of readers and bring about a social change.

(Images have been taken from “The Story of Nangeli” by Orijit Sen in Raiot: Challenging the consensus. <https://www.raiot.in/the-story-of-nangeli/>. Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> December 2019.)

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