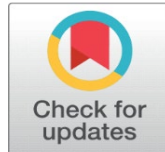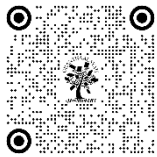# 'EXHAUSTION --- APPARENT ON MY FACE'[1]: FICTIONALIZATION, GRAPHIC HISTORIOGRAPHY AND DATA VISUALIZATION OF WOMEN'S EXCLUSION IN VIDYUN SABHANEY AND SHOHEI EMURA'S 'HARD TIMES'

Anirban Guha Thakurta [1] ✉ iD

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Serampore College, Hooghly, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

Deviating from commonplace comicbook superheroisms, recent comicbook graphic narrations of historical and statistical data promise to produce a humanization and visualization that apart from informing the audience about social realities of past and present manage also to stimulate an aesthetic response and emotionally attached sensitization. Based on statistical data provided in *Indian Exclusion Report*, 2015, 'Hard Times' by Vidyun Sabhaney and Shohei Emura is a comic that utilizes graphic language in order to voice concerns about struggles of working-class women and their exclusions. While it directly presents a literary and fictional narrative involving a young, widowed woman forced to work in the garments' factory in the city and the challenges she faces in her workplace, it acts as a prologue to a graphic historical survey and data visualization of the general condition of women at workplaces and their position in the society at large. The present paper is a study of the ideologies and visual stylistics of graphic history and data visualization available in the fictional narrative in 'Hard Times' directed towards an attempt at identifying the processes of de-elitization of the comicbook narration and its ability to visualize multiple layers of personal and public history, historical and statistical data, the women's spoken, unspoken, marginalized and unspeakable experiences, which often deviate from officially, academically and alphabetically mediated histories and statistics.

Keywords: Comic Book, Graphic Historiography, Data Visualization, Humanization, Women's Exclusion, Working Class Women

1. INTRODUCTION

'Hard Times' is a comic, a graphic narrative. It deals with working-class women. It opens with a fictional graphic narration involving the personal history of a widowed working class girl called Meena which can be understood as a graphic fiction supplementing historical and statistical data about women's exclusion from just conditions of work and their marginalization in the Indian societies at large.

---

[1] The phrase is taken from 'Hard Times' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 102) and is suggestive of Meena's helpless plight. This exhaustion connects her story with those women that she typifies.

Additionally, it can be further identified as an alternative history that conflates women history, labor history, personal history and public history that verbalizes and visualizes such historical narrations by making use of the graphic language. However, though we can alternatively identify this text as graphic data visualization, as comicbook history or as a graphic narrative or a blend of all such variables, it is important to underline that 'Hard Times' is different, both materially and ideologically, from regular comicbook adventurism involving superheroic feats of heroes and heroines.

2. OBJECTIVES AND RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

It is in this context that I must first mention the objectives and their relevance with regard to this research paper. Data visualization can enable statistical surveys involving various social evils to adequately humanize issues so that the audience can adequately identify and sensitize themselves with such issues. In this context we must also acknowledge that serious social issues and problems, especially concerning women --- keeping in mind the overarching presence of patriarchal governance of socio-cultural, economic, and familial institutions and the various forms of unspoken and unspeakable violence committed against women --- cannot be always expressed following exclusively academic methodologies like historical and statistical narrations. In this regard, often the unspeakable lived experience of the female victims demands a visual vocabulary beyond the regular alphabetic one and also a fictionalization of the real historical and statistically available data. However, it is often understood relevant to ask whether comics which is most normatively associated with juvenile entertainment and popular literature, can perform the task of such serious data humanization/ visualization. The present research paper's objective is to highlight how the multimodal language of comics can actually perform the task by amalgamating such practices of data visualization, graphic historiography and fictionalization. Another research objective of the present article is to highlight how literary aesthetics, especially narrations in graphic language, can be utilized in humanizing the historical and statistically presented data. Thus, in the context of comics' marginality in academic circles, its identification as merely a form of 'popular' literature rather than the 'serious' one and the rising need of discovering more probing and enriching verbal and visual vocabulary to voice the often unspoken and unspeakable stories and histories of women by blending history, statistics and literary mimesis, the present research remains relevant.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As we begin situating the narration of women's issues in 'Hard Times' within the context of appearances of women characters in comicbooks it is useful to outline the history of comicbook heroines in the world and also in India. It was only in 1941 that Wonder Woman first came out at a time when 'mainstream American comic books were dominated by superheroes like Superman and Captain America who engaged in amazing feats of strength as they fought for the American way and who gained a predominantly male readership' (McLain (2009), p. 53). While Marston's comicbook superheroine surfaced much later compared to her male counterparts, in India, Anant Pai with his desire 'to develop a cast of male and female archetypal Indian heroes and heroines' rejected 'Greek mythology and American superheroes and heroines who wore star-spangled costumes and fought for the American way' and 'turned instead to classical Indian sources to teach children mythology and

reinforce Indian values' (McLain (2009), p. 53). And thus, comic book 'heroines' that personify 'Indian' values were pretty much part of the *Amar Chitra Katha* (hereafter ACK) gallery that resolved to defeat the Western influence on Indian children and reroute them towards their cultural roots. Beginning with Shakuntala the long procession of Indian heroines was selected from Indian mythology and history; and their inclusions and representations definitely reflect ACK's various attitudes towards Indian pasts, women, man/woman relationship. However, largely there are certain evident commonalities. The historical women that ACK largely deals with (with few exceptions here and there) are drawn from a select group of heroines already given prominence in elitist and academically written history. In this way, there is a tendency of hero-worship and unlayered hagiographic narration of the historical figures in question with a graphic exaggeration of the beauty --- both without and within --- and virtues of such historical characters. It is evident that the messianic agency of exceptional men and women in Indian history is glorified, while there is very little space allotted to a narration of a history from below.

ACK's brand of graphic historiography spontaneously conflates the normative comic-book adventurism, glorification of native past and celebration of the heroic and messianic agency of great men and women in order to retell the glorious heritage of India and to present before contemporary Indian children imitable ideals through idealized heroes and heroines drawn from Indian pasts. However, this brand of historiography that ACK successfully typifies, for its strong commitment towards a cause of glorification of native past and emplotment of the past events and characters in order to reproduce a canon of great heroes and heroines, often remains an inadequate reservoir of past. This practice of popularizing and legitimizing this kind of a version of past remains inadequate as per concerns raised by Issa G Shivji, according to whom:

> We would end with the singularly useless 'history', celebrating individuals, narrating their biographies and heroic acts or, at the most, erecting monuments of valiant tribes. These would leave the large mass of our people out of history, without history. (As cited in Bhattacharya (1983), p. 3)

It is here that we must first situate Vidyun Sabhaney and Shohei Emura's 'Hard Times'. 'Hard Times' amounts to be a graphic history besides being a graphic fiction. 'Hard Times' belongs to the long list of graphic narratives originating from India that reflect Indian societies --- their pasts, presents and traceable/imaginable futures --- deviating from the normalized comic-book visualization of the 'heroic' and 'messianic' agency of great men and women. It naturally conflates an ideological commitment towards the need of unsettling the prevailing elitist graphic history and humanization of data available about working class women in India.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

'Hard Times' must first be contextualized within the material and ideological scope of its own publication history. 'Hard Times' is a representative text in the *First-Hand* Graphic Narratives form India that in its present volume edited by Vidyun Sabhaney deals with the theme of 'Exclusion'. Mander mentions that the graphic artists who engineered the volume 'worked with essays about exclusion and inequality to produce this rare and special book' (Mander (2018), p. 7). In this connection, it is important to record what the editor had in mind while designing the book and using graphic language for critical and aesthetic articulation. Sabhaney writes in the 'Preface':

India is a staggeringly unequal nation, in which exclusion continues to rise from the unconscionable fault-lines of caste, gender-based discrimination, communalism, economic disparity, to name just a few. At times his is as explicit as a map, and at others it is hiding just under the surface....

First Hand 2: Exclusion is a contribution towards a visual register of inequality and exclusion. It has been produced with the hope that a visual register will make such phenomena easier to identify, critique, and fight. (Sabhaney (2018), p. 8)

She also mentions that the volume was 'commissioned by' and 'based on the 2015 edition of the India Exclusion Report' (Sabhaney (2018), p. 8). Before arriving at the issue involving the use of the graphic medium in the volume in general and 'Hard Times' in particular, it is necessary to underline the fact that the present volume is primarily devoted to the cause of visualization/ humanization of available data on various means of exclusion and marginalization which in effect may produce a graphic historiography about the excluded classes, sexes, and masses. It is important here to understand that this kind of critical enquiry that 'Hard Times' as well as the entire volume that contains it proposed to perform could only have been made possible by adhering to an inter-disciplinary approach, a conflation of the raw statistical data, historiography, and literary mimesis of the 'real', 'historical' and 'statistical'.

Inevitably, 'Hard Times' is an attempt at data visualization using comics as a communicative tool since Sabhaney explicitly states that the graphic narratives contained in *First Hand 2: Exclusion*, including 'Hard Times' is based on data derived from *India Exclusion Report 2015*. However, if we closely observe the narrative strategy of such data visualization in the entire volume, we can understand that Sabhaney and Emura are not interested in merely presenting a graphic delineation of historical and statistical data. 'Hard Times' presents also a fictional tale attached as a prologue to the actual graphic data visualization done in the volume concerning 'Women's Exclusions from Just Conditions of Work, and the Role of the State' that even uses excerpts from *India Exclusion Report 2015*. Such an attempt at data visualization naturally presents a history of the working-class women. 'Hard Times' thus amounts to be a graphic fiction that uses fictitious/ real-life-like characters and circumstances as a literary/ historical emplotment of the statistical data in the form of a graphic literary mimesis of the historically and statistically 'real'.

As the introductory passage with regard to 'Hard Times' available in *First Hand* Volume 2 makes clear:

This comic is based on primary research by the writer on garment workers in Bangalore, Delhi, and Gurgaon, as well as relevant fact-finding reports and articles. This story uses fictional characters to portray events and narratives that are true-to-life.

It is based on a thousand-strong protest against the changing of rules about the withdrawal of Employees Provident Fund; the protest took place across garment producing hubs in Bangalore on 18 and 19 April 2016....

This comic is based on the event but is not a journalistic representation of it. Rather, it tells the story of a young woman's experience of work in contemporary India. (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 100)

The changing of rules about the withdrawal of EPF and the protest against it are templates from recent socio-economic history of India and primarily concerns the working class. However, in this graphic narration, the same --- which connects the

protagonist with the greater mass of the population she partially represents --- serves as a backdrop that stimulates her towards self-reliance and emancipation in a patriarchal and suffocating world of gender-based marginalization, silencing and objectification. The narrative becomes a portrait of what Rodolfo Stavenhagen termed as 'de-elitization' (as cited in Bhattacharya (1983), p. 3) of historical narration where the apparently fictional characters representing the real history-less mass bring forward the patriarchal dystopia of injustice that they inhabit and narrate from the perspective of a subaltern the machinery of oppression that marginalizes through various apparatus --- like economic exploitation of the women workforce, the stigmatization of protest against sexual objectification, the oppressive stranglehold of societal customs that act as agents of patriarchy and so on. The female subjects in question are not the overtly glamourized figures belonging to the elite list of celebrated heroines but are the anonymous and muted ones that are often kept outside historiography and their stories reflect their muted agency and psychic ramifications of remaining ostracized. Contrasting the 'colourful' panels of ACK, they appear in grayscale and black-and-white pencil shaded panels, much in tune with their muted and shadowy existence in reality involving their colourlessly marginalized subjecthood.

Having introduced the framework of commitments towards graphic storytelling, historical narration and visualization of statistical data, it is important to introduce the advantages, nature and scope of graphic language used in 'Hard Times' in order to understand how the comicbook graphic language may help a successful realization of the said commitments. In this connection it is useful to mention that comics, that according to McCloud is 'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer' (McCloud (1994), p. 9) as a form of graphic language is often identified as a just means of historical narration. The power of comicbook graphic language lies in its ability to promote a visualization of raw historical and statistical data. Academically mediated historical writing employs often a partly imaginative explanation and emplotment of fragmented archival and historical data; however, it is not treated or defined normatively as a work of imagination, and is characterized as a scientific narration of past. On the other hand, a comicbook history or fiction modeled on historical past firstly promotes a humanization and visualization of past and raw historical and statistical data in order to inform as well as emotionally affect the audience. According to Ben Lander, 'comic histories tend to revel in the minute personal details of everyday life' (Lander (2005), p. 117), and in Clark's view comicbook histories can guarantee a greater humanization of history (Clark (2013), p. 498). Moreover, the multimodality of comics promotes a multi-layered and multi-dimensional historical narration and data-analysis. Academically mediated statistical data and histories tend to develop an objective and scientific mediation of the material and factual that hardly humanizes data and rarely pushes the audience to a cathartic recognition of and self-identification with the mediated fact. Lupton analyses how mechanisms can be developed to ensure 'greater opportunities for people to "feel" their data in ways which make sense in the context of their own lives' (Lupton (2017), p. 15). On the other hand,

> graphic works allow us to expand representations of personhood beyond traditional statistical ways of symbolizing people in data visualizations. Engaging with data comics to visualize information can humanize personal narratives behind the numbers. (Alamalhodaei et al. (2020), p. 362)

Thus, for Emura and Sabhaney, the graphic medium presents immense opportunities since in comics 'We see images as part of a story, in which tools of

sequence, composition and texture also do the heavy lifting towards articulating experience' (Sabhaney (2018), p. 8). Thus, for the authors the primary aim is not to merely mediate and analyze historical and statistical data concerning women's exclusions or even humanize data but to also stimulate in the audience a critical self-identification with the crisis which can be perhaps best produced by an amalgamation of the literary, historical, and statistical arenas narrated in comicbook graphic language.

'Hard Times' negotiates with the theme of marginalization of the female subjects using various layers of narration with a skilful handling of visualization of unspeakable subjugation and trauma utilizing, and often transcending, the regular grammar of comic-book narration. In 'Hard Times', the protagonist is Meena, a migrant female worker forced to move out of her household and work in the city, because she was a widow. As the graphic narrative opens, we come across almost a half-page grid of democratic panels slowing down the pace of narration after Meena, after the usual day of work and exhaustion, returns to her staff-hostel room. There is a slow progress of time narrating the passage of Meena's body and mind from the outside world to the interior world of contemplation, memory, and trauma. The grid begins with an extreme longshot of shabby staff-quarters standing on a darkling landscape where darkness reigns as a visual symbol for barrenness and ignominy. This barrenness is a visual indicator of the fact that the women workers have not yet returned to their respective hostel-rooms after the hard day of work. There is a mark of regularity of such affairs as the particular day for Meena was 'the same as always' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 102), and this points to the fact that women are forced to work for longer periods and there is apparent normalization of this unnatural stretching of workload. In the next panel, the sole alteration made is by the arrival of a dim light in the room with Meena's silhouette standing and looking out of the open window. The dimly lighted room again becomes a vicious visual symbol for the untidy living conditions of the poor female workforce. The light is feeble, unable to brighten the pathway outside. This, coupled with the silhouetted figure of Meena, is suggestive of her muted agency and unspoken and unspeakable history that never manages to break free from the stranglehold of patriarchal oppression and the state's ignorance. As panels slowly move, Meena, in the dim lighted room takes 'note of the souvenirs of the day' in the form of exhaustion (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 102) while looking at the mirror. The panel locates her bended body towards the mirror, her portrait reflected on the mirror's surface and a staff identity card hanging by the nail beside the mirror. This card does not belong to Meena. As the next panel shows in an extreme-close-up as Meena faces the mirror, the lifeless passport-sized photo pasted on the identity card trans-realistically mouths: 'How was your day?' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 102). This is the voice of Meena's deceased colleague and friend Payal, and it is clear that she speaks through Meena's subconscious as she returns to the staff-hostel exhausted, contemplates about her life in loneliness and debates with her alter-ego suppressed in the forced robotics that the workload of the garment factory has unethically imposed upon her. Meena appears not merely exhausted, but traumatized. Her suppressed rebellious alter-ego symbolized by Payal asks her 'to do something about that supervisor' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 102). However, lacking self-reliance and confidence to voice her angst, as a natural product of unnatural repression, she decides to remain caged and ostracized.

'Hard Times' uses personal histories/stories of Meena and Payal as representatives of the female workforce in garment industries in India and to reflect the working-class women's struggle at large which includes regular issues like

inequality of wages, long working hours, sexual harassment at workplace and so on. However, in dealing with these themes, 'Hard Times' does not only visualize the workplace of these women. As statistical data, history of women's struggles and poor conditions and violence against women indicate, the issues involving women's exclusions with regard to their workplaces cannot be seen as an exclusive phenomenon isolated from the issue of women's role in the family and society at large. It is deeply interconnected with the normalization of patriarchy available in the Indian societies that often strategically or unconsciously validates subjugation of women. For example, discussing the issue of sexual harassment of women at workplace in India and the ineffectuality of the legal apparatus that lacks the aid of awareness and internalization of the laws among the masses and fruitful implementation, Sheba Tejani writes that:

> The upshot is that sexual harassment is rooted in cultural practices and is only exacerbated by power relations at the workplace. Unless there is enough emphasis on sensitization, awareness and prevention at the workplace, legal changes are hardly likely to be successful. (Tejani (2004), p. 4493-94)

Moreover, the fact that exclusion of women from just conditions of work cannot be separated from various pre-existing cultural prejudices against special categories of women is further reinforced by data visualization strategies and narrations of excerpts from *India Exclusion Report 2015* by Emura and Shabhaney when it is mentioned that:

> Widows… are considered inauspicious…. A stereotype associated with widows is the one of a white saree clad old, widowed woman, who roams the earth as an evil spirit killing men, especially husbands. This myth is particularly damaging, and by equating widows with witches it has often resulted in violence being inflicted upon them. (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 137)

As *India Exclusion Report 2015* further narrates how widows are usually 'abandoned' and are often silenced or eliminated by the superstitious evil practices like witch-hunting. 'Women are publicly tortured by the community till they breakdown and are forced to admit to being a witch' (170). 'Hard Times', while attempting to humanize these historical facts and data places Meena as a young, widowed woman forced to move out of her house and work in the garments' factory. Since the graphic narrative is a literary mimesis and imaginative emplotment of raw historical and statistical data concerning various forms of exclusions faced by women in India and is aimed at affecting the audience emotionally so that that information delineation and sensitizing is made possible, Meena's past life as a young widow in her paternal house among her 'own' people is naturally linked to her objectification and exclusion as a female labourer working in the garments' factory.

Thus, following the routes of a cyclical narrative, the graphic narration moves deep into the past life of Meena and visualizes her life before her present position as a female labourer in the garment factory of the city. She was never a rebel, and her life made her this way. She is a young widow. As the panels narrating her past life show, she was always dependent on others to learn her 'womanly' duties like stitching a ripped sari (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 103). At that point of time, she heavily relied on Kajal, her cousin-sister. As she sits by Kajal who unconditionally helps her learning to stitch a sari, a group of other girls laughs at her enterprise. Their laughter is an indicator of the stigmatized life of a young widow. They laugh as an extension of patriarchy at the portrait of a widow learning 'womanly' duties after the death of her husband when ironically her newly-learnt tricks can hardly 'serve' the household of her in-laws. 'It's been like this, since he [Meena's husband]

died' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 103), and Meena being stationed at her parental house clearly reflects the fact that she must have been disposed of as useless material and burden after the death of her husband. Her plight connects herself with other young widows in Indian societies at large.

However, it was not that Meena was leading a life of plentitude or at least a life of honour and safety even in her parental house. Kajal's mother never quite liked Kajal having negotiations with a young widow like Meena (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 104). As the expression of urgency in Kajal's posture as her mother calls her to rush into the house suggests, Meena was perhaps identified as a negative influence on Kajal and was often defined as a woman responsible for the untimely death of a husband. Meena's father was terrified by the fact that 'near Ramgarh, a woman was hanged for being a witch' while 'she wasn't actually a witch' but 'was just... a widow...' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 105). Her father harbors the plan of sending Meena to the city. When Meena's mother first learns this from her husband, she becomes suspicious. She fears if her husband wants to sell off their widowed daughter (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 105). This suspicion clearly reflects the living conditions of girls --- married, unmarried or widowed --- in poor families where they are sold as objects of pleasure to the wealthy waiting to satisfy their lust and aggressively pounce on the victimized girls. However, the father's strategy was different. Quite wisely, he did not consider Meena's life inside his house a safe one especially after he learns how a widow was hanged after she was identified as a witch --- an incident that typifies common reports on such subjects that we learn from newspapers on a regular basis reflecting the stranglehold of patriarchal machinations against women, especially in rural India[2]. He therefore wanted her to be sent as a female worker in a factory situated in the city. Living under the protection of the father, Meena, though she was critical of his judgment and skeptical about her ability of coping with the new living conditions available in the city, had no agency to revolt against this alteration brought on her life. Her muted agency is again reflected by a large full-width rectangular panel containing the extreme longshot of a bus moving with all its motorized mobility and sound towards the city while traveling by the empty road towards the city (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 107). There is natural accommodation of narrative polyphony that remains available in graphic narration[3]. Evidently this longshot tells many stories together. There is definitely immediate focus on the story of Meena. She is moving towards an uncertain future. Her muted agency is reflected by her remaining silent while her journey towards uncertainty is identified as an adventurous one by her cousin and co-passenger inside the bus who will only accompany her till, they reach the railway station wherefrom Meena is supposed to board the train to her uncertain city-life. It is only Kajal, sitting inside the bus, who is given speech balloons as there is no first-hand narration of Meena's plight, who remains shut up as a subaltern unable to voice her own story. Moreover, the motor-vehicle's motion sound is graphically presented in bold and bigger font-size almost stifling the voice of the girls, rendering the panel with a subtext to foreshadow the dominant technocentric life and robotic existence that shall engulf the life of Meena afterwards. Moreover, this specific longshot showcases how the road towards the city remains largely empty and traffic-less. This is a visual suggestion indicating the fact that there is visible scarcity of

---

[2] We come across these stories often while reading the newspaper. For example, as per the article available in The Times of India on 19th February, 2022, in Bihar a woman was torched to death since it was suspected that she practiced witchcraft. (Bihar: Woman Burnt Alive for Alleged Witchcraft. (2022))

[3] Comics and graphic novels utilize a multimodal idiom of narration wherein images, alphabetically written words --- captions, speech balloons, thought balloons that act as linguistic signifiers while allowing their fonts, sizes, shapes to be seen as extension of the imagery --- panels, grid-arrangements, gutters and so on communicate collectively. However, in many cases these constituents of the multimodal language can offer independent suggestions that may be contrary to each other. Thus, many layers and faces of the same narrative can develop naturally, collaboratively and as parallels.

transport towards the city and very few travel back to their native land. This adds to the spectacle of urbanized centre living distanced from native roots --- stretching the divide between the urban metropolis and the financially backward rural. The panel further shows how impossibly difficult it becomes for the poor rural folk to reach the supposed utopia of a comfortable life in the city. The landscape inside the panel seems barren, amounts to a wasteland made infertile by the lack of rain or irrigated water as the cracked earth subversively mimics the much-advertised doctrines of the state's developmentalism.

While Kajal was enthusiastic about Meena's 'adventurous' journey forward, Meena was ostracized by anxious foreboding. Kajal's excitement matched with the other girls inside the passenger-chair compartment of the train who were excited about their mobility which naturally can be identified as a regular symbol of breaking free from the cagedness of domesticity. But Meena's heart sank. Her anxiety is reflected in her stronger grip as she holds the iron bars of the train window looking at Kajal and her father standing on the platform. Though she is unwilling to go, her unwillingness is too weak to alter her fate as the train slowly progresses out of the station and rapidly moves towards the city, breaking and disheveling her image (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 108) --- seen from the point of view of Kajal and Meena's father --- into pieces as a fierce commentary on her muted and helpless life prior to coming to the city and foreshadowing of the untidy, inhuman and marginalizing living conditions that she is supposed to witness and experience afterwards.

The city space validates Meena's anxiety and foreboding. The wisdom of Meena's father in his act of sending his daughter to the 'safe' existence inside the city which is believed to be liberated from patriarchal machinations and superstitions, is thoroughly challenged by the ironical coexistence of the city's developed architectures that reminded Meena about 'an amusement park that had temporarily come up' near their town many years ago --- an amusement park that delighted Meena once --- and the fact that 'unlike that amusement part, it [the real city] seemed to function by the tick of the clock' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 109). As Meena travels into the city, there is a longshot of the city-space contained in an urbordered full-page splash (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 109). Inside the full-page splash, Meena is situated at the left corner, walking towards the right. Her placement at the left corner signifies her muffled and marginalized status amidst the hustle and bustle of the city with its monuments, high-risers, and chimneys [4]. In the next two pages as Meena looks for a job and, in the process, encounters places, people and institutions, the panels are without speech balloons. None of the characters --- the unnamed workforce --- seem to say anything, having their voices stifled by the only loud ringing sound of the sewing machines (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 110-11). The city seems to be Delhi, since we encounter an advertisement that Meena comes across wherein is written 'Female Tailor, Looking for a Job Call: 011-' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 111). However, this particular evidence is of less significance since Meena is a fictional character reflecting the plight of the historically real and regular female workers in all cities across India where the design of capitalistic devaluation of humanity coupled with the regular patriarchal stranglehold objectifies the woman and thus in this case Delhi is a space that reflects all other such spaces that unleash such challenging atmosphere for the women.

---

[4] This physically cornered placement of Meena definitely reminds us of *Bhimayana*, where Ambedkar is made to stand at the margins of the pages and panels (Vyam et al. (2010), p. 21) during the narration of the event of his being denied water in the school in order to evoke a spectacle of unspeakable marginalization as a representation of casteist subjugation of the mass of people that Ambedkar typified.

As she finds a job finally as an intern in a tailoring farm and is about to be trained, Meena first meets Payal who was an excitingly happy soul, much reflecting the happily excited voices of the girls that Meena encountered during her train journey. Payal was the only source of comfort for Meena amidst inhuman working conditions reflective of a panopticon --- where Meena was often most unsympathetically 'shouted at' for her 'poor workmanship' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 114) and where even 'visits to the bathroom were monitored' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 115). Payal was happy to enjoy and earn and was a constant companion, consistently motivating Meena and keeping her comfortable until one day Meena finds Payal's chair at her sewing table beside her empty (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 116). As she rushes back to the hostel room, she finds that Payal has committed suicide by hanging herself (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 117). The unspeakable shock that Meena experiences after witnessing her friend's suicidal death is narrated with her gaped mouth and stifled screams facing the hanging corpse of Payal in a full-page splash with a hawk-eye angling focus on Meena's body frame from the perspective of unseen eyes drooping from Payal's corpse (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 117). 'She [Payal] knew a supervisor. She rejected him constantly. It came out that he threatened her'. The factory sheds off the responsibility by just firing the supervisor (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 118).

Once Payal was gone, even the slightest enkindling of spirit that Meena had undergone vanished. She became more submissive and helpless. She somehow helplessly conformed to the inhuman norms of the factory. The graphic narrative consistently showcases the working conditions of the female workers having their payments delayed till the fifteenth day of the month, having regular suspension of works and zero job and pay security, the unavailability of a leave even when a relative has died, the faulty earplugs that hardly protect the ears and availability of only painkillers as remedy and a supervisor molesting Meena and trying to take advantage of her poverty by presenting the proposal of a promotion in exchange of turning her into a sex-slave (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 119-120). Meena, characteristically weak and ostracized by patriarchy and poverty was struck by the same dilemma that Payal once had suffered:

I want to tell someone but... he's a supervisor!

He could have me fired. Maybe ... maybe I should try to ignore it... (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 121).

The fact that Meena's situation echoes Payal's tragedy that led her to her suicidal death is a signifier for the fact that even after the death of Payal, the factory has taken no valuable steps towards maintenance of woman's safety at the workplace. This workplace can easily be identified with other such organizations in the city and the society at large.

As the cyclical narrative treads back to the present moment of Meena's arrival to the staff-hostel with all her regular exhaustion, anxiety and subjugated soul and body, she hears a crowd of workers roaring on streets. We can identify that this is the evening of 18th April, 2016 when the workers protested against the new EPF rules that stated that 'women could only access their contribution to the provident fund, and the rest when they turned 58'. 'This resulted in one of the biggest and most successful strikes in recent history, largely comprised of women' (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 124). Quite trans-realistically Payal, a reflection of Meena's spirited alter ego stifled under her submissive exterior, pulls Meena to join the strike --- in which women like Lakshmi, Leellama, Suma, Rati whose real conversations are stored inside the two-page spread depicting the strike (Sabhaney & Emura (2018),

p. 124-25) --- finally empowering her to break free. At the end of the narrative, Meena has decided to seek justice and complain against the supervisor (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 127). The winds and energetic waves of a revolt largely mobilized by women against the state machinery and oppressive capitalism that reflects patriarchal machinations have liberated Meena. The graphic narrative personalizes a personal historical narrative of woman emancipation by conflating it with the public history of workers' strike, amalgamating the private and the public, the individual and the societal. It is not that the battle is over by the end of the graphic narrative for these women and Meena, including Meena. Deviating from the normative tradition of evoking the spirit of poetic justice and remaining rooted to the real and historical, the note at the end of the narrative ventilates in the manner of a provocative and ironic epilogue:

> … in the Union budget of 2018, the government has subsidized not workers' but company's contributions to the EPF. It has said that for new workers the employer need not pay the mandatory contribution for the first three years. (Sabhaney & Emura (2018), p. 129)

As informs Philip V. Allingham about Dickens' *Hard Times*:

> This first 'Industrial' Dickens novel appears to be modelled in part on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (published in three volumes in January, 1853), according to Norman Page in the November, 1971, issue of Notes and Queries. Mrs. Gaskell's Bradshaw, for example, corresponds to Dickens's Gradgrind. K. J. Fielding in "The Battle for Preston" suggests that *Hard Times* has its origin in the Preston weavers' strike, which began in October 1853, over the workers' demand for a ten per cent wage increase. The work stoppage idled some 20,000 mill workers for at least thirty-seven weeks. The Preston strike may also be reflected in the industrial novel North and South, which Dickens published for Mrs. Gaskell in Volume Ten of Household Words, immediately upon the conclusion of Hard Times in Volume Nine. (Allingham (n.d.), p. para. 6)

Dickens' *Hard Times* is a critique of Victorian England's industrial greed and its utilitarianism that dehumanized the working class. While its setting is fictional, it appears to be a historical testimony of the contemporary times. As the tale echoes Dickens, Vidyun Sabhaney and Shohei Emura's 'Hard Times' too becomes a reservoir of alternative historiography, deviating from the officially sanctioned state version of history or that history that is normatively mediated from the point of view of the elites. It naturally raises the woman question and definitely provides an elaborate visualization of the history of the movement against the change of EPF rules and celebrates the victory of the working class. At the same time, it conflates the public history concerning women's role in the movement and the private story of self-empowerment of Meena. While the use of the 'fictional' and trans-realistic (which can often be called supernatural) may seem ahistorical with regard to 'history's' supposed commitment to the 'scientific', we must also recognize the fact that being a graphic history [5] the text does not cease to be literary and must be identified as a literary mimesis rather than a product of academically written and officially mediated histories. As writes John Hatcher:

> Creativity and imagination are numbered among the essential tools of the historian's trade, but the explicit use of imaginative reconstructions of the past

---

[5] Graphic history is one of the categories of the Indian Graphic Novel that Nayar discusses in his book (Nayar (2016), p. 13-48). Graphic histories are definitely a literary exercise and utilizing the multimodality and polyphony of graphic narration can often turn out to be useful tools of dissemination, analysis, rethinking and retelling of historical knowledge (See also Thakurta (2022a), p. 95 and Thakurta (2022b), p.523-24). It is useful to note here that Nayar, while citing McLain's analysis, does not recognize ACK to be truly historical because of its overt conflation of the mythical and historical, sacred, and secular. However, though it centralized a narration of 'heroic' subjects, ACK did play its part in mediation of historical knowledge, and as available in ACK *Anant Pai*, did get itself selected as teaching tool in various schools (Chandrasekaran & Kadam (2012), p. 24).

threatens to breach venerable customs regulating how these attributes should be used and how the results of their use should be expressed.

…. Creative writing and the composition of rich dramatic narratives by those who know, and respect history have the potential not merely to provide effective introductions to the past, but also to expose areas of ignorance, bring neglected matters into clearer focus and knit together the fragments of life into which the specialisms of historical research divide it. (Hatcher (2012), p. 22-23)

5. CONCLUSION

Data humanization and visualisation of history are central to mediation of facts that are relevant to academia as well as a truly devoted study of human condition and behaviour pattern. These methods make data, statistical and historical, more accessible, and identifiable which may produce best results since mediation of such data is directed towards inspiring positive changes in our society by developing a mass awareness. Though comics and graphic narratives are often kept at the margins of 'serious' academic enquiries and often placed as 'popular' and artifacts of 'mass culture', a considerable number of comics and graphic narratives in India, especially in the contemporary world, tend to operate as more psychologically revealing and accessible brand of socio-historical survey than the academically and officially mediated histories and statistics for the fact of their uniqueness in the field of data humanization and visualization of history. 'Hard Times' remains a good example in this regard in its blend of fiction, history, and statistical data. Meena's narrative in 'Hard Times' is not an official history and yet is a true-to-life narration of the truth about women, working class, the poor and the down-trodden utilizing creative imagination and the polyphonic multimodal idiom of graphic history. In its way of data-visualization/ humanization, it manages to plant historical and statistical data as not distant academic subjects, but as ones that can be touched, felt, and expected to promote a critical and aesthetic awareness about the probing issue of inequality and exclusion available in the contemporary Indian societies. Thus, through Meena and her near ones, it presents the problem of 'exclusion' as not a removed academic or archival issue, but as a lived experience. It informs its audience about the monstrously exploitative capitalist and patriarchal machinery that subjugates the working class, especially its women, and stimulates the reader to look at various layers of injustice and revolt against it, but remains at the same time rooted to the reality and the commitment of exhibiting the continuity of the 'hard times' rather than acting as the agency of delivering a simplistic poetic justice. The tale clearly shows how a skillfully psychologized graphic literary emplotment and interpretation of historical and statistical data can affect the audience emotionally in order to produce the best results, especially when it comes to producing mass-awareness and sensitization so that inequalities and exclusions can be eradicated. In this way it remains true-to-history, true-to-data, and true-to-creative aesthetics at the same time.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

REFERENCES

Alamalhodaei, A., Alberda, A. P., & Feigenbaum, A. (2020). Humanizing Data Through 'Datacomics' : An Introduction to Graphic Medicine and Graphic Social Science". In M. Engebretsen & H. Kennedy (Eds.), Data Visualization in Society. Amsterdam University Press, 347–366. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzgb8c7.27.

Allingham, P. V. (n.d.). Hard Times for these Times : Dickens at 42. Victorian Web.

Bhattacharya, S. (1983). History from Below. Social Scientist, 11(4), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.2307/3517020.

Bihar : Woman Burnt Alive for Alleged Witchcraft. (2022, February 19). Times of India.

Chandrasekaran, G, & Kadam, D. (2012). Anant Pai. R. I. Puri (Ed.). Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd.

Clark, J. S. (2013). Encounters with Historical Agency : The Value of Nonfiction Graphic Novels in the Classroom. The History Teacher, 46(4), 489–508.

Hatcher, J. (2012). Fiction as History : The Black Death and Beyond. History, 97(1 (325)), 3–23.

India Exclusion Report 2015. (2016). Yoda Press.

Lander, B. (2005). Graphic Novels as History : Representing and Reliving the Past. Left History, 10 (2), 113-125. https://doi.org/10.25071/1913-9632.5683.

Lupton, D. (2017). Feeling Data : Touch and Data Sense. 1-15.

Mander, H. (2018). "Foreword". First Hand Vol. 2. V. Sabhaney (Ed.). Yoda Press, 6-7.

McCloud, S. (1994). Understanding Comics : The Invisible Art. Harper Perennial.

McLain, K. (2009). India's Immortal Comic Books : Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes. Indiana University Press.

Nayar, P. K. (2016). The Indian Graphic Novel : Nation, History and Critique. Routledge.

Sabhaney, V. & Emura. S. (2018). "Hard Times". First Hand Vol. 2. V. Sabhaney (Ed.). Yoda Press, 100-141.

Sabhaney, V. (2018). "Preface". First hand Vol. 2. V. Sabhaney (Ed.). Yoda Press, 8-9.

Tejani, S. (2004). Sexual Harassment at the Workplace : Emerging Problems and Debates. Economic and political weekly, 39(41), 4491–4494.

Thakurta, A. G. (2022a). A Future Containing Past and Present : The Search for River Saraswati in Sarnath Banerjee's all Quiet in Vikaspuri. In P. Mukherjee & K. N. Rao. (Eds.), Dodging Dystopia : Literary Routes, Global Circuits. Authors Press, 89-97.

Thakurta, A. G. (2022b). The Game that Day Was à Tiger : Implications of Tiger-Hunting Episodes in Select Amar Chitra Katha Graphic Historical Biographies Concerning Indian Rulers. ShodhKosh : Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, 3(1), 515–525. https://dx.doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.130.

Vyam, D, Vyam S., Natarajan, S. & Anand. S. (2010). Bhimayana : Experiences of Untouchability. Navayana.